WHIRLPOOL EFFECTS AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES.
A RESPONSE TO GUY G. STROUMSA

Sarah Stroumsa

A respondent, trailing behind the lecturer, has basically two options: the docile option, to uphold the views of the lecturer, or the mean option, to criticize him. The approach suggested by Guy opens for me as a respondent a third way, that of adopting a subversive attitude to the lecture, that is to say: accepting the main thesis of the lecture, but taking it somewhere else. Guy focused mainly on the comparative and phenomenological side of the study of religion, which is, at any given moment, a static study. My response will focus on the dynamic aspects the study of the history of religion, which is, in fact, one aspect of intellectual history.

Professor Jaspert has asked me at first to present, in my response the perspective of Islam, but I have asked to speak more broadly on the medieval world of Islam (in which Jews and Christians were also active participants). Indeed, the intellectual history of the medieval world of Islam seems to be a perfect case study for the approach of this conference, and for the dynamic aspect of the history of religion. In the domains of theology and of polemics, this dynamism has been depicted by the metaphor of a marketplace, where the same coins change hands. This metaphor, however, is misleading, since in the fiscal transaction the coins remain intact and unchanging (except for the usual wear by continuous use). In the medieval intellectual marketplace, on the other hand, ideas and motifs moved from one religious or theological system to another, slightly modifying the system into which they were adopted, and, in the process, undergoing some transformation themselves. Like colored drops falling into a whirlpool, new ideas were immediately carried away by the stream, coloring the whole body of water while changing their own color in the process. In the swift flow of ideas that characterized the Islamic world, it is rarely possible to follow neat trajectories of “influences” or “impacts” that allow us to isolate the source of the influence and to accurately measure the force of its impact. Moreover, when such trajectories are occasionally traced, this may satisfy our detective curiosity, but it does
not necessarily reveal the balance of the full picture. To give just one example: Medieval Jewish discussions of the divine attributes (written in Judaeo-Arabic) bear the marks of medieval Muslim thought. They struggle with the same questions (such as the antinomies of free will or the relations between God’s essence and His attributes), expressed in the same Arabic formulae. A correct analysis of the evidence, however, will necessary take into account the direct influence of pre-Islamic Christian thought, as well as the indirect influence of this same Christian thought, which, filtered through Muslim thought, reached Jewish thinkers through Muslim channels. The inherent complexity of the picture cannot be over-emphasized, and it would be a mistake to simplify it.¹

Another example is the widespread apologetic genre of “signs of prophecy” which appears in Arabic writings of Muslims, Christians and Jews. The prophecy of Muhammad was the main point of contention between Muslims and their Jewish and Christian neighbors, and it can therefore be argued that it was the Muslims who started this genre, and that the others developed their own version of it in response to the Muslims. But in the texts themselves, this neat schema – Muslims first, then Jews and Christian – is impossible to show. The first extant Theological Summa in Arabic (from the first half of the ninth century) happens to be written not by a Muslim but by a Jew, who had been a convert to Christianity. His “signs of prophecy” list bears unmistakable marks of his Christian education, such as typical Christian formulas and terminology. These Christian characteristics, in their turn, seem to have already been transformed by the contact with Islam: the terminology is in Arabic, the formulas reflect familiarity with the Koran.

Tracing influences is often frowned upon in modern scholarship. Many feel that Quellenforschung, which highlights the separate components of a given system, devalues the originality of this system and diverts scholarly attention from contents and ideas to the history of their transmission. When the previous life of ideas must be recognized, scholars nowadays prefer to concentrate on the mechanisms of their appropriation, and the word “influence” is often placed, with a