Human Reason: Liberation or Limitation? Some Notes on *ʿAql* in Classical Islamic Mysticism, with Particular Emphasis on the Andalusī Tradition

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Abstract

The problem of revelation versus reason is a recurrent theme in the religious literature of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For mystics, the problem is exacerbated by their audacious claim to Divine inspiration; if prophecy continues in one form or another, what role does human reason have (if any) in understanding God's message as reflected in the holy scriptures and in creation at large? Muslim mystics during medieval times were caught between two opposing ideals: that of philosophers and theologians, who view man's ability to think and articulate his thought in the language of dialectic or logic as a central tool in the formulation of correct opinions and beliefs; and the mystics' own anti-intellectualist ideal of *ummiyya* ("illiteracy").

In my lecture, I will discuss the various meanings that the term *ʿaql* ("reason", "intellect", "intelligence") acquired in Islamic mystical writings composed between the 3rd/9th and 7th/13th centuries, in an attempt to highlight the tensions and inherent contradictions in the mystics' conceptions of reason. I will pay special attention to Andalusī mystical works, including that of the Jewish author Baḥya b. Paqūda (11th century), which exhibit the impact of both Ṣūfī thought and Neoplatonic philosophy.