

The Myth of Bryson and Economic Thought in Islam

Abdul Azim Islahi

*Islamic Economics Research Center
King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia*

The inspiration for the present note comes primarily from a statement in the old edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. In its volume four on page number 595, Heffening (1934) states that to Helmut Ritter ‘the whole economic literature of Islam can be traced to economics of Neopythagorean Bryson’ (emphasis added). In 1917 the German writer Ritter edited and translated Abu Ja`far al-Dimashqi’s treatise *Kitab al-Isharah ila Mahasin al-Tijarah*. In his introduction of the book he noted the said remark. It is this unqualified statement that we dispute here.

Later in 1928 another German author Plessner tried to show Bryson’s influence on Islamic economic thought by making a review of all the Arab-Muslim literary works that concerned themselves even remotely with Bryson’s text (Heffening 1934, Vol.4, p. 595). His assertion of Bryson’s influence was later taken up by many other writers.

Now who is this Bryson? It is said that he was a Greek philosopher whose personality was ‘unidentified’ and ‘whose work was unknown to the West’ (Spengler, 1964, p. 276 footnote). It may be noted that there is no mention of Bryson in Schumpeter’s encyclopedic work *History of Economics Analysis* which presents minute details of the history of the intellectual efforts ‘from the earliest discernible beginning’ (Schumpeter, 1997, p. 3). Bryson’s name came from an Arabic translation of an unknown manuscript entitled *Kitab Tadbir al-Manzil* (the book of household management). Its author and the translator both are obscure. There is no consensus on the correct form of his name. It is guessed to be a Latin or Greek name such as ‘Barses’, ‘Brasius’, ‘Beresius’, ‘Bersius’,

‘Thrasius’, ‘Tarasius’, ‘Teresius’, ‘Neresius’, ‘Nerses’, ‘Narcissus’, etc. The reason for these differences is the fact that in the manuscript his name is written as برسسيس in which the first Arabic letter is blank, without *nuqtah* (dot) (Shaykhu, 1921, Vol. 19, No.3, p. 161). Further, at the end of the manuscript, his name is written as برولس, again without any dot. We do not know how they changed it to ‘Bryson’?

At the time when Ritter and Plessner gave their sweeping remark about the economic literature of Islam, the modern development of Islamic economics and researches on Islamic economic thought were yet to begin. Obviously they meant the literature known in Islamic history with the name of *tadbir al-manzil*.

Muslim philosophers translated the Greek *oikonomia* as ‘ilm *tadbir al-manzil* (the science of household management). Greek economic ideas were confined to a few aspects of life such as, ‘wants and their satisfactions’, ‘economy of self sufficient households’, ‘division of labour’, ‘barter’, and ‘money’. ‘This – presumably the extract from a large literature that has been lost – constitutes the Greek bequest, so far as economic theory is concerned’ (Schumpeter, 1997, p. 60). Muslim scholars were not confined to only these areas. In addition, they discussed market function and pricing mechanism, production and distribution problems, government economic role and public finance, poverty eradications, and economic development, etc. According to Spengler (1964, p. 304) Muslim scholars extended this branch of knowledge ‘far beyond the household, embracing market, price, monetary, supply, demand phenomena, and hinting at some of the macro-economic relations stressed by Lord Keynes’.

It may be noted that translation of Greek ideas became known to Muslim scholars nearly after the first century Hijrah. The very basic sources of Islam – the Qur’an and Sunnah – contained a number of economic principles and many detailed economic teachings. There was, therefore, no need for Muslims in the beginning to look for alien sources. The early Islamic economic thought was based on its internal sources. Commenting on works of *Kitab al-Kharaj* which were written by Abu Yusuf (d. 182/798), Yahya b. Adam al-Qurashi (d. 203/818) and others, Spengler says that they ‘reflect Islamic thought about 800 A.D. at which time the influence of Greek thought had not yet made itself felt’. (Spengler 1964, p. 270, footnote No. 8). Thus, the major portion of

Islamic economic thought owes its origin to the Qur'an, Sunnah and Muslim scholars' original thinking (*ijtihad*). It may be noted that when Greek ideas became known, they did not fascinate all Muslim scholars equally. They adopted different stands towards these imported ideas. At least three distinct streams can be easily identified:

1. Those who completely rejected all Greek ideas. Scholars in this group maintained that Islamic heritage of knowledge was sufficient for safe and comfortable life. These alien sources would only confuse the people and under their impact they would go stray. This group is generally referred to as 'traditionalist' or '*muhaddithun*'.
2. The second group is one who tried to distinguish between ideas that are beneficial and acceptable and those that are in contravention of Islamic faith and principles. In case of conflict they tried to prove supremacy of Islamic thought over the Greek one or made an attempt to synthesize between the two if possible. They are variously known as Islamic scholastics, scholastic theologians, dialecticians or '*mutakallimun*'.
3. Third group comprises those scholars who were deeply influenced by Greek ideas and philosophy and went too far to support, propound, and propagate them. They did not hesitate to interpret Islamic articles in such a way as to accommodate strange philosophical ideas. This group is referred to as 'Muslim philosophers' or '*hukama*'. They were never considered as representatives of Islam.

Muslim scholars, in the categories of *mutakallimun* and *hukama*, benefited from the Greek translations. But before they got these translations beginning from the second and third centuries Hijrah and subsequent periods, they had already developed a host of economic ideas and policy concerns. The union of these two elements provided impetus to this branch of knowledge. They not only improved and developed Hellenic thought, but they introduced new concepts as well. The elements that are emphasized by Muslim writers are: equity and social justice, *amanah* (trust), *ithar* (sacrifice), *tazkiyah* (self purification), ethics and spirituality, provision of the institutions of *sadaqat* (charity), *hibah* (gift), *waqf* (endowment), *wasiyyah* (will), '*ariyah* (lending without any charge), prohibition of interest, prevention of extravagance

and wastage, condemnation of extreme luxury, disapproval of appropriation of property through wrong means, *etc.* These are the most dominating aspects in economic discussions of Muslim scholars. An overriding concern in works of Muslim scholars has been *maslahah* (social welfare or common good), a concept that encompasses all human affairs, economic and others and which establishes close links between the individual and the society.

Muslim scholars started their intellectual journey equipped with revealed knowledge. Greek philosophy received their first attention. Its impact upon all sections of scholars was not same. Nor had the Greek philosophy answers to every challenge of the time. Muslim scholars were in better position to address the problems of their time and they responded to them excellently.

Thus, Muslim scholars' contribution to economic thought presented a fine combination of existing major intellectual heritage and revealed knowledge having elements of positive and normative economics, applied and theoretical consideration, unity of this life and hereafter, matter and spirit and health and soul. Thrust of the work depended on individual scholar's training background.

There is no denial of the impact of Greek and Persian intellectual heritage on thinking of later Muslim scholars. But this does not mean that on the basis of any resemblance their contribution would be attributed to foreign origin. A mere resemblance between the ideas of two persons, does not necessarily mean that one has borrowed or copied from the other unless enough documentary evidence is available to that effect. History of economic thought has numerous instances when an idea mentioned by some writer in the past re-emerged later with more details and clarity. Moreover, certain ideas were developed simultaneously by different authors at different places without being aware of each other. The idea that 'the bad money drives out good money' known as Gresham's law is a case in point which was mentioned by many scholars like Ibn Taymiyah (d. 1328) Nicole Oresme (d. 1382), *etc.*, much before Thomas Gresham (1519-79) (Islahi 1988, pp. 139, 143). The idea of division of labour is another case which was explained by al-Ghazali (n.d. Vol. 4, p. 119) citing the example of a needle, analogous to Adam Smith's famous pin-factory example seven centuries later. Another example is the theory of rent which was 'developed separately by four

writers ... all published during Feb. 1815, Malthus, Edward West, Ricardo and Robert Torrens. This coincidence is an interesting example of how a pressing contemporary issue can call forth a theory developed independently by different people' (Oser and Blanchfield 1975, pp. 93-94). Again, 'marginalist school developed in several countries and through the efforts of different people working independently by each other at first ..., another interesting case of new ideas arising almost simultaneously in different places and from different people" (*ibid.* p. 220).

It may be noted that Muslim scholars differed from their Greek predecessors when they found that the latter's ideas go against Islamic principles or sound reasoning. For example, Muslims rejected Aristotle's view that trade was a war or robbery (Gordon, 1975, p. 41). They gave high value to the trade and considered it as a source of mutual benefit. They did not take to Greek philosophy and economic ideas without critical assessment. Al-Ghazali criticized the whole Greek philosophy in his work '*Tahafut al-Falasifah*' (Incoherence of Philosophers), although 'he follows Plato in describing how the diverse institutions of mankind... are successively established in order to meet man's ever-increasing needs, and develops on Aristotelian lines Plato's brief remark that money was invented as a token of exchange' (Grice-Hutchinson, 1978, p. 66). To Ibn Khaldun 'the virtuous state of the Greek philosopher and *madinah fadilah* (perfect city) of their Hellenized Muslim disciples, were too far away from the concrete aspirations of humans and offered only an elitist and idealized analysis of social reality' (Baeck, 1964, p. 115).

Both Plato and al-Ghazali discuss 'division of labour'. But Plato's notion is 'casteous'. He does not put emphasis upon 'increase of efficiency that results from division of labour per se...' (Schumpeter, 1997, p. 56), while al-Ghazali (n.d. Vol.4, pp: 91- 92), like Adam Smith, highlights its economic efficiency.

Al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun and many other Muslim scholars hold the view that precious metals are created to serve as money, an idea of Greek origin (Schumpeter, 1997, p. 62), but Ibn Taymiyah (1963, Vol. 19, pp. 250, 251, 248-249) regards it as a matter of convention. He says: 'Gold and silver coins have no natural or Shariah specification. They depend on people, their custom and social consensus', so that any commodity could serve as money. 'Even the coins (token money) in circulation will rule as precious metals in measuring the value of goods' (*ibid.*, Vol. 29, p. 469).

Al-Farabi ‘opened new horizons with his comments on works of practical philosophy like the Republic of Plato and the Ethics of Aristotle’ (Baeck, 1994, p. 108). But he wrote in ‘the historical context of a multinational commonwealth which was quite different from Plato’s Athenian polis’. (*ibid.*, p. 109). Ibn Rushd’s commentaries on Aristotle were also in the line of al-Farabi’s ‘effort to remove the Neo-Platonic influences’ (*ibid.*, p. 111). In his commentary on Plato’s Republic ‘the Andalusian master proves to be more in sympathy with democratic rule than Plato’ (*ibid.*, p. 112). Ibn Rushd’s addition to Greek economic ideas will be more clear if one compares Aristotle’s Greek text and Ibn Rushd’s Latin version of his commentary. One will surely find that ‘the Andalusian scholar exposes Aristotle’s discourse on ethics rather faithfully, but in a more synthetic way than the original’ (*ibid.*).

In 1978 Grice-Hutchinson authored ‘Early Economic Thought in Spain’ in which he extensively wrote how Greek economics was developed and propounded by Muslim scholars and how they transmitted it, along with their own original ideas, to the Christian West (Grice-Hutchinson, pp: 61-80). He observes: ‘The Arabs eagerly absorbed all this Greek learning and carried it into every part of their empire. They were soon able to surpass the true heirs of Greek civilization, the Byzantine, so decidedly that by the eleventh century Arabic works on medicine and other subjects were being translated into Byzantine Greek instead of vice versa’ (*ibid.* p. 65).

In brief, it would be sheer injustice and intellectual recklessness to attribute ‘the whole economic literature of Islam’ to the unheard of Bryson. There is need to distinguish Muslim scholars’ original thought, their additions and improvements from the Greek economic ideas. But this would require a thorough comparative study of Greek economics and contributions of Muslim scholars with reference to their respective original sources. Only then it will be clear to what extent the latter owe to Greek philosophers. It is a full research topic.

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