

IN MEMORIAM

Muhsin Sayyid Mahdi (1926–2007)

Muhsin Sayyid Mahdi, James Richard Jewett Emeritus Professor of Arabic at Harvard University, died on July 9 in Brookline, Massachusetts, after a long series of illnesses.

Universally acclaimed as the doyen of medieval Arabic and Islamic philosophy, Professor Mahdi was born June 21, 1926 in the Shiite pilgrimage city of Kerbala, Iraq, of a father who practiced medicine according to the principles of Galen. He pursued his elementary and early secondary school studies there, but went to Baghdad for the last two years of secondary school. Awarded an Iraqi government scholarship to study business administration at the American University in Beirut, he found himself so attracted to philosophy while there that he fulfilled the requirements for a major in both subjects. After a year as a lecturer in economics at the University of Baghdad (1947–1948), Mahdi won another scholarship – this one to study economics at the University of Chicago.

Not long after his arrival at Chicago in 1948, he began to study with Arnold Bergsträsser, Yves Simon, and, above all, Nabia Abbott and Leo Strauss. Economics gave way to philosophy, especially to the recovery of the history of Arabic and Islamic philosophy, and Mahdi entered the Committee on Social Thought – having as classmates both Seth Benardete and Allan Bloom, the latter becoming a life-long friend. He finished his Ph.D. studies in 1954, submitting a brilliant dissertation that was published shortly afterwards as *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophical Foundation of the Science of Culture*. After an interlude as a visiting lecturer in the Seminar für Wissenschaftliche Politik and in the Orientalisches Seminar at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, Mahdi returned to Baghdad and took up positions in the Law College and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the University of Baghdad.

In 1957, he accepted a position as assistant professor in the Department of Oriental Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago where he remained, rising to the rank of full professor, until 1969. He resisted numerous offers from different institutions during this time, but finally accepted Harvard University's offer of the James Richard Jewett Professorship in Arabic. At Harvard from 1969 until his retirement in 1996, he served as director

of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and also as chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

Professor Mahdi conducted postdoctoral study and research at the University of Paris in addition to the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. He was a Rockefeller Foundation Research Fellow and a Fulbright research scholar in Morocco. He held visiting professorships at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, the American University in Cairo, the Central Institute of Islamic Research in Pakistan, the University of California-Los Angeles, and the University of Bordeaux. Long a member of the Advisory Council for the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, he was a founding member and president of the Société Internationale pour l'Histoire des Sciences et de la Philosophie Arabes et Islamiques (SIHSPAI), as well as founding member and Board member of the Middle East Studies Association.

He served on the editorial boards of *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy: A Historical Journal*, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, *Hamdard Islamicus*, and *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*. He served as president of the American Research Center in Egypt and held the distinction of having been the first corresponding member of the Cairo Academy of Arabic Language. In later years, he spent a great deal of time in Paris, where he lectured at the Institut du Monde Arabe, participated in seminars, and was a familiar and beloved figure in the cafés and bookshops frequented by intellectuals from all over the Muslim world, many of them former students. Less than a month before his death, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the American University in Cairo.

Thoroughly versed in ancient Greek, medieval Jewish and Christian philosophy, as well as modern Western political philosophy, Muhsin Mahdi acquired an incomparable command of the Arabic language in its rich and varied historical and geographical manifestations. He grounded himself in the well-established methods of critical editions of manuscripts developed by European scholars so that he could establish the same rigorous standards for research in Arabic and Islamic philosophy. Early in his career, he searched for and found long lost manuscripts wherever his travels took him and then graciously shared them with fellow scholars. He is especially known for the recovery, edition, translation, and interpretation of many of Alfarabi's writings. Indeed, building on Leo Strauss's early insights, he showed clearly in his 2001 *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* how Alfarabi fundamentally altered the Arabic-Islamic tradition.

A demanding and inspiring teacher, Mahdi emphasized meticulous analysis and interpretation of philosophical texts in Arabic. He worked closely with students from the Middle East, North Africa,

Europe, and the United States, several of whom met to honor him at the time of his 65th birthday and then published a collection of essays in his honor, *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*. With Ralph Lerner of the University of Chicago and the late Fr. Ernest Fortin of Boston College, he co-edited the famous *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* containing selections in translation from Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin. He is equally famous for his critical edition of the *1001 Nights*, especially for proving that they consist only of 282 nights and for his painstaking account of how 18th and 19th century Orientalist scholars falsely expanded the collection. In April 2005, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University organized a conference in Professor Mahdi's honor on precisely this theme: The Arabian Nights, Eastern and Western Vantage Points.

Charismatic and charming, with a ready and hearty laugh, Muhsin Mahdi maintained the stance of a true philosopher in an era marked by conflict between and among the three Abrahamic faiths. Even though he sometimes wrote on modern and contemporary political thinkers, he staunchly resisted political engagement. All the same, he was terribly affected by the destruction of his native land beginning in 2003.

Professor Mahdi is survived by his wife, Sarah Roche-Mahdi; two daughters, Fatima and Nadia, from a previous marriage to Cynthia Risner; and two stepdaughters, Rachel and Rebekah Gerstein. He is also survived by his first wife, Louise Carus Mahdi.

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