

### III. Interviews

#### INTERVIEW: OMAR MERZOUG

## New French-language Biography of Ibn Sina

*Omar Merzoug is a Doctor of Philosophy and specialist in medieval thought. He taught philosophy and Islamic civilization at the Al-Ghazali Institute of the Great Mosque of Paris for seven years. His book, *Existe-t-il une philosophie islamique?* was republished in a second edition by *Cahiers de l'Islam*, in 2018.*



Philippe Matsas  
Omar Merzoug

*This interview was conducted on April 17 by Karel Vereycken, director of publications of the French monthly *Nouvelle Solidarité*. The original French language interview is available [here](#).*

**Karel Vereycken:** Mr. Merzoug, good morning! After seven years of research, study and verification of historical documents related to your subject, your enthusiastic and thorough biography of Ibn Sina (980-1037), *Avicenne: ou l'islam des Lumières*, [*Avicenna, or an Enlightening Islam*] was just released by Flammarion (March 10, 2021). Please tell us more about your subject and why you decided to write the book?

**Omar Merzoug:** It is about the illustrious Ali Ibn Sina (known in the West by his Latin name Avicenna), a scientist, physician, philosopher, and statesman, who had an exciting and eventful life and whose influence on medieval Christian thinkers was considerable, according to the opinion of the most competent



specialists. He was not, as we tend to believe, a commentator, but a thinker who created a whole system inspired by Aristotle, but who enriched him and contradicted him.

As a result, he developed as an independent thinker. He was read as a philosopher until the 17th century, and echoes of his philosophical work can be found in the works of the modern philosophers Malbranche, Leibniz, and Spinoza. His medical works were in the curriculum of European universities for quite a long period. He is therefore a very interesting figure as a scientist, but also as an individual.

To publish this book now is first of all to bring recognition to this eminent figure of the Muslim world at a time when Islam is not getting good press. Avicenna's rationalism, his intellectual curiosity, his ability to assimilate all kinds of knowledge, his encyclopedic spirit and his philosophical inventiveness are all traits that could contribute to the renaissance of a truly philosophical culture in the Muslim world, a philosophical culture that, it must be said, is in mangled shape these days.



cc/Blondinrikard Fröberg  
*Ibn Sina (Avicenna), 970-1037.*

**Vereycken:** Ibn Sina had an Afghan father, was born in Uzbekistan, and had a Persian education. Many countries (which did not exist at his time in their current borders) claim to be the heirs of his glory. Who is right?

**Merzoug:** Some say only the rich get credit. More seriously, Avicenna is a Persian from Uzbekistan. Everything points to that, but that does not prevent Turks, Arabs, and Europeans from claiming him as their own, from reading him or from criticizing him. And that is what indeed has happened.

**Vereycken:** The second part of the title of your book, *An Enlightening Islam*, implies that there are several Islams?

**Merzoug:** There are, of course, not several Islams, but there are different, and even contradictory readings and approaches to Islam. And this is not new. There is, in short, a literal reading of the fundamental texts of Islam and there are more subtle readings, more concerned with making the spirit prevail over the letter. Moreover, the *Koran* itself authorizes this disparity of readings. (Surah 3, Verse 7.)

**Vereycken:** How did Avicenna reconcile theology and philosophy?

**Merzoug:** Like all the great thinkers of the Middle Ages and even of modern times, Avicenna tackled this essential and inevitable problem of the relationship between theology and philosophy. It was not so much a question of reconciling reason with faith, but rather about religious law and reason. On this point, Avicenna presents his theory of emanation as the only true interpretation of creation. Starting from the principle that the stories, allegories, metaphors and all the symbolism of the *Koran* should not be taken literally, he concludes that it should be interpreted according to the principles of reason. It is ultimately reason that retains primacy in the interpretation of religious texts.

**Vereycken:** In his time, was Avicenna appreciated for his work in medicine or for his philosophical ideas?



Christoph Bernhard Francke

*Echoes of Ibn Sina's philosophical work can be found in the works of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 1646-1716.*

**Merzoug:** On this point, Avicenna scholars do not all agree. In the East, he is esteemed much more as a physician than as a philosopher. In the West, he is more likely to be considered a philosopher, especially since his medicine is of historical interest only, given the progress of medical science.

**Vereycken:** Neo-Platonists, Aristotelians and Thomists often claim to be followers of Avicenna, but when we read him, we see that he does not fit into any box. What do you think? What qualities must one have in order to call oneself a disciple of Avicenna?

**Merzoug:** To be a disciple of Avicenna today would mean being a rationalist, but not in the sense of rationalism meaning a kind of agnosticism or atheism, rather rationalism in the sense that reason is entitled to examine all things, that few domains are exempt from its empire. Of course, in his mysticism, which is highly intellectual, Avicenna allows for a transition to an understanding beyond reason, which can only be reached by a kind of illumination. This is indeed the reason why some medieval Christian thinkers were able to establish a link between Saint Augustine and Avicenna.

**Vereycken:** Without having lived in Baghdad, and having been born after the great period of the Abbasids under Al-Ma'mûn and the Houses of Wisdom, which brought together Arab, Jewish, and Nestorian Christian thinkers to translate the Greek and Syriac heritage, do you see in Avicenna an heir to the Mutazilist approach that had made Baghdad great?

**Merzoug:** Avicenna is certainly closer to the Mu'tazila than to the supporters of the literalist and anthropomorphist approach. The Mu'tazila had fought for freedom of the mind, and this is more or less the same as Avicenna's fight. He was convinced that any outrage to this principle would be catastrophic. If there is no

debate, no controversy, no free dialogue and no independent research, there can only be a decline in thought. The greatness of the Baghdad civilization was precisely that it allowed, under al-Ma'mûn and his immediate successors, a deliberate and thoughtful policy, which produced a cultural ferment, an extraordinary intellectual effervescence that has not been seen since in the Muslim world.

**Vereycken:** In reading your biography, which introduces us to Avicenna through his daily life, we discover that he was not an armchair intellectual. Very committed to the common good and the health of all, his life was far from easy, he was eventually forced into perma-

ing book from several points of view. It is a book that is a sum of medical knowledge and as such has an exceptional posterity. In this book, there are several interesting advances. It is a book that is very well composed and is based throughout on rules and principles of logic. Moreover, it was conceived from a pedagogical perspective. Entire sections of the *Canon* are written in the form of short abstracts to allow for a more rapid assimilation of medical knowledge.

Avicenna believed that illness could only be understood, and cures found, if causal links were established. Taking up Aristotle's theory of four causes, he adapted them to his medical research and judged that full knowledge of a disease could only be attained if its causes were researched, thus rejecting a strictly empirical approach.

In his view, there is a unity between the organs and the functions of the body, in the same way he establishes a relationship between the organism and the external world, which is why he gave, as a physician, a decisive importance to prophylactic measures and to the environment.

He was also the first to propose an approach to the anatomy of the eye, to diagnose pleurisy and pneumonia, and to

distinguish infectious meningitis from other acute infections.

On the other hand, he gave primary importance to physical exercises. He was probably the first, ten centuries before [Sigmund] Freud, to have insisted on the importance of sexuality and its role in the psychological balance of the person. Finally, he was undoubtedly one of the pioneers of psychosomatic medicine. The case of the young man in love that I report in my biography is an example of this.

**Vereycken:** Mrs. Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the founder of the Schiller Institute, considering him a great figure capable of inspiring the best of Islamic civilization, has launched a great initiative she has called "Operation Ibn Sina," for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and its health system. How do you see this initiative?



Film, *The Physician*

*Ibn Sina is esteemed by Muslims and Christians alike as both a physician and a philosopher.*

nent exile. Why?

**Merzoug:** Following the Platonic tradition that philosophers should govern states because they are the most knowledgeable, Avicenna undertook the responsibilities of political power. On two different occasions, he managed a state and it almost cost him his life. Introducing the necessary reforms and fighting against the privileges of the army, which he considered undue, he triggered a mutiny of the praetorians. Yes, to engage in public life for meritorious causes is to be in a certain way Avicenna. Like Plato, he failed in his enterprise, but it was worth trying, as it always is.

**Vereycken:** Why did Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine* make so much progress possible in medicine?

**Merzoug:** The *Canon of Medicine* is a very interest-

**Merzoug:** It is undoubtedly an extremely commendable initiative that reintegrates Avicenna into his milieu; his father was Afghan, and that, from two perspectives—health and the greatness of his glory—pays tribute to him.

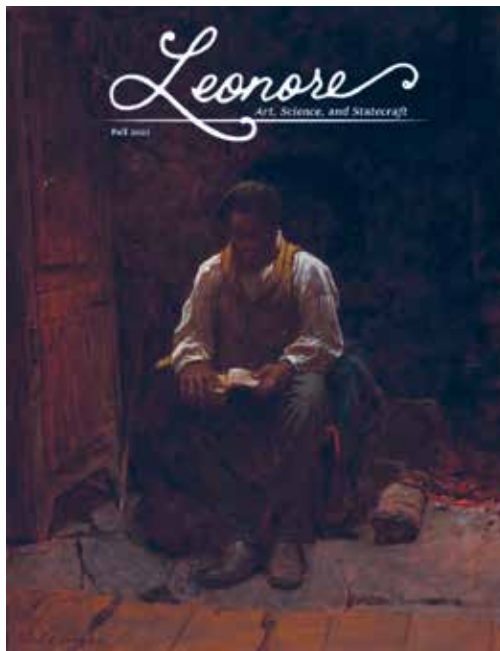
**Vereycken:** What are the reasons for the success of your book?

**Merzoug:** It is always difficult for an author to know the reasons for the relative success of a book. In my case, I attribute it first of all to the biographical genre, which is somewhat akin to a novel; in fact, the life of Avicenna is very gripping. The pedagogical effort makes this eminent figure of knowledge very accessible, and then perhaps also to its lit-

erary style, which many find uncluttered and quite readable.

**Vereycken:** We know Avicenna’s work in medicine, and now, thanks to your biography, his life. When will a new book dedicated more specifically to his philosophical ideas be published?

**Merzoug:** There is no systematic exposition of Avicenna’s thought on the market; what does exist, as a result of the work of some scholars working in the field of Avicenna studies, are monographs on his themes or concepts. That would be a work of a completely different nature than the biography and for a completely different, more restricted audience. I might be tempted by such a project, who knows?



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Have fun! *Anastasia Battle*, Editor-in-Chief, *Leonore*