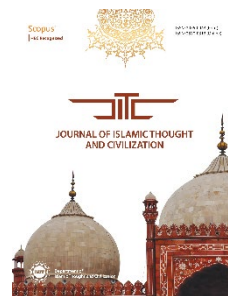
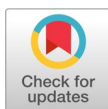


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Academic Freedom in the Islamic Medieval Era: What Values Can Be Learned?

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the concept of academic freedom in medieval Islam and its potential to play a role in forming the future of Islamic civilization. Using a historical-analytical and interdisciplinary perspective, this study investigates how freedom of thought, scientific independence, and intellectual discourse was practiced in the social, political and religious contexts of the time. The results of this study indicate that despite normative religious constraints, academic freedom during the medieval era still provided space for substantial scientific development in various disciplines such as medicine, mathematics, and philosophy. Educational institutions such as *Bait al-Hikma* in Baghdad played an important role in creating an open and inclusive intellectual environment and encouraging cross-cultural and interreligious collaboration. The implications of this research suggest that academic freedom upheld by ethical principles and religious norms in the past can serve as a model for academic and social development in the present and future. These lessons are particularly important in addressing the challenges of digitalization and globalization that impact freedom of speech and thought in academic spaces.

Keywords: Academic freedom, intellectual autonomy, Islamic civilization, intellectual independence, medieval Islam

Introduction

Examining academic freedom¹ within the intellectual tradition of medieval Islam holds significant academic value. It facilitates a more profound understanding of how Islamic civilization accommodated space for free thinking, scholarly discourse, and scientific exploration within its era. This notion was not yet articulated in any form, and the term itself had not been introduced. The term academic independence,² which is closely related, has not been introduced in terms of academic

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¹David B Audretsch et al., "Academic Freedom and Innovation," *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 6 (June 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304560>.

²Michele L Moohr et al., "Practicing Academic Independence: Self-Regulation Strategies for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders," *Beyond Behavior* 30, no. 2 (June 18, 2021): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10742956211020666>.

autonomy,³ freedom of expression,⁴ freedom of speech in academia,⁵ intellectual independence,⁶ or intellectual autonomy.⁷ However, many of the principles underlying freedom of thought and expression in the academic world are evident in the intellectual traditions of medieval Islam.⁸ By acknowledging this, we can recognize the significant contributions of Muslim scientists in various disciplines, including medicine, psychology, mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy.⁹ These disciplines flourished in an environment that fostered freedom of thought and experimentation.

As Al-Khalili (2011) indicates, perhaps the most significant example of the ability of Muslim scientists, of different cultural backgrounds, to work together, translating Greek philosophical writings and developing new scientific theories, is the *Bayt al-Hikma* in Baghdad and some other centers of learning. According to Bsoul, this historical reality highlights the space for independent thought.¹⁰ As Zarvandi and Sadeghi mentioned, this idea is not only limited to philosophy but applies to many other domains, such as astronomy, medicine, and mathematics.¹¹ Islamic scientists were deeply involved in experimenting with approaching observation and rationality, and intervening in anything beyond external restrictions.

³Jennie Bristow, Sarah Cant, and Anwesa Chatterjee, "The Rise of Student Choice, and the Decline of Academic Autonomy," in *Generational Encounters with Higher Education: The Academic-Student Relationship and the University Experience*, ed. Jennie Bristow, Sarah Cant, and Anwesa Chatterjee (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781529209778.003.0002>.

⁴Patricia Aufderheide, and Laura Vazquez, "Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression in the University Film and Video Association: Creating Legitimacy for Asserting Norms," *Journal of Film and Video* 76, no. 2 (2024): 12–20, <https://doi.org/10.5406/19346018.76.2.03>; Robert C Post and Jordi Pujol, "A Conversation on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression at The University," *Church, Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (July 2, 2024): 464–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2024.2396405>.

⁵Anjalee de Silva, and Andrew T Kenyon, "Countering Hate Speech in Context: Positive Freedom of Speech," *Journal of Media Law* 14, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 97–118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17577632.2022.2083680>.

⁶M Havrda, "Intellectual Independence in Christian and Medical Discourse of the 2nd-3rd Centuries," in *Rise of The Early Christian Intellectual*, ed. L Ayres and H C Ward, vol. 139 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2020), 81–100, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110608632-007>.

⁷Robin McKenna, "Intellectual Autonomy," in *Non-Ideal Epistemology*, ed. Robin McKenna (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192888822.003.0005>.

⁸Khaled El-Rouayheb, "Islamic Disputation Theory: The Uses and Rules of Argument in Medieval Islam by Larry Benjamin Miller (Review)," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 61, no. 3 (July 2023): 518–20, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2023.a902883>; A Bakir, "Medical Science and Researches in the Golden Age of Medieval Islam," *Tarih Incelemeleri Dergisi* 31, no. 1 (2016): 35–76.

⁹Sameer Ansari, and Naved Iqbal, "Contributions of Muslim Medieval Scholars to Psychology," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 45, no. 3 (September 11, 2023): 308–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00846724231197238>; Mahdi Zarvandi, and Ramin Sadeghi, "Exploring the Roots of Clinical Trial Methodology in Medieval Islamic Medicine," *Clinical Trials* 16, no. 3 (February 19, 2019): 316–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1740774519830396>.

¹⁰Labeeb Ahmed Bsoul, *Translation Movement and Acculturation in the Medieval Islamic World* (Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

¹¹Zarvandi and Sadeghi, "Exploring the Roots of Clinical Trial Methodology in Medieval Islamic Medicine."

Examining the intellectual traditions of medieval Muslims can formulate what Gilson claims is an interplay of revelation and reason in the medieval Islamic world.¹² These two sources of knowledge were then thought to be in discord. It also reflects the significant contribution of such scientists as Ibn Sina (980 – 1037), Al-Farabi (872 – 950), Ibn Rushd (1126 – 1198), Al-Ghazali (1058 – 1111), Al-Khwarizmi (780 – 850), Al-Biruni (973 – 1050), Al-Razi (865 – 925), Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201 – 1274), and Ibn al-Haytham (965 – 1040), whose positive thesis of rational and scientific thinking perfectly coexisted with religion.¹³ This integration often allows for a more robust coalescence of a religious understanding. It implies that even though there is a limitation on individual liberty due to the dominant normative model, there is still some space for the operation of new ideas, as long as they are not in opposition to the religious principle of the dominant civilization. Academic freedom in medieval Islamic culture was guided by a complicated interplay of permissiveness and limits that enabled more unrestricted, more rational expression of thought within the confines of timidity toward religious and political powers.

In this vein, exercising academic freedom is also essential for studying the relationship between religion, state, and science in Islamic societies in this era.¹⁴ In this period, many rulers and caliphs, among them Harun al-Rashid and Al-Ma'mun, showed great dedication to the development of science and allocated significant financial resources to scientific centers.¹⁵ Islamic rulers added to this intellectual freedom by opening educational institutes and encouraging scientists of differing cultural backgrounds to work together. It shows that academic freedom can thrive in a country that advances knowledge and civilized society. However, this freedom is based on religiousness, and accordingly, the scientific exploration and the political mindset are derived from many religious limits.

This study is expected to generate reflection opportunities on the relevance of academic freedom in the current context. Knowing the tendencies of the medieval Islamic world concerning depriving freedom of thought and scientific work, we can determine the path of worse obstacles that spiritual freedom encounters, and severely impedes its development in the Muslim world precisely and in the global world in general. The research offers insights into the Islamic intellectual landscape and how ideas were forced to conform within the bounds of social and religious norms, providing a complex view of the relationship between thought freedom and social control. It, however, also contributes to a clear line of reasoning on how academic freedom can be retained and enacted in the modern world while considering the historical and cultural milieu building the edifice up to that point in time.

This study highlights the importance of balancing on-campus academic freedom against off-campus social responsibility and commensurate application of principles like cross-disciplinary talk and intercultural cooperation to current global and digital environments.¹⁶ They also need insights

¹²Étienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2020).

¹³Ainur D Kurmanaliyeva, "A Comparative Study of Reason and Revelation in Relation to Natural and Divine Law in Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd," in *Reason, Revelation and Law in Islamic and Western Theory and History*, ed. R Charles Weller and Anver M Emon (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 123–33, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-6245-7_6.

¹⁴Ahmad Dallal, "Science, Medicine and Technology," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. J Esposito (London: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁵S Senel, and L Öztürk, "Scientific Activities in The Palace During The 'Abbasid Caliphate Al-Mu'tasim Bi'llah (218-227/833-842)," *Bilimname* 44, no. 1 (2021): 491–519, <https://doi.org/10.28949/bilimname.844242>.

¹⁶M Sundt, "Sustaining Academic Freedom in The Transition to Online Degrees," in *Teaching and Learning Practices for Academic Freedom*, ed. E Sengupta and P Blessinger, vol. 34, (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2021), 53–69, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2055-364120200000034006>.

on facilitating constructive criticism and scientific debate without reverting to the polarization and extremism that often bleed into the digital spaces. The medieval Islamic world's ethos may offer a crucial model for navigating the present era, characterized by widespread exposure to unmediated content. This content, though technologically advanced, harbors a notable absence of reformed characteristics, resulting in an increasingly open yet diverse and turbulent academic environment. The social burden of this environment is shouldered by a select group of voices. By examining the historical evolution of academic freedom, we can develop strategies to channel decision-making in scholarly disputes and critical analysis into freer, more open venues, such as the Internet.

1.1. Research Questions

Based on the arguments in the background, we have identified the following issues to be examined: First, how was academic freedom understood and practiced during the medieval Islamic period? Second, how is academic freedom in the medieval Islamic period relevant and supportive of the practice of academic freedom today?

2. Literature review

2.1. The Concept of Academic Freedom

In a conceptual context, academic freedom is defined as the rights and freedom of the people, including academics, students, as well as educational institutions, to conduct research, teach, and communicate opinions and ideas without internal or external pressure or intervention that could limit the intellectual process and development of knowledge.¹⁷ In broader terms, academic freedom includes encountering new ideas, articulating subversive thoughts, and expressing ideas contradictory to majority beliefs, or the ruling political and social authorities.¹⁸

Familiar to many, academic freedom is a broad principle that stipulates that financial, political, and religious authorities should not interfere with the work of individuals and groups to create, teach, and use knowledge.¹⁹ As a right, academic freedom seeks to defend academics and scientists from pressures that can potentially repress their freedom of thought experimentation and fight against orthodoxy.²⁰ Contemporary academic literature now perceives academic freedom as an individual right and a responsibility due to being accountable to society while abiding by ethical and scientific integrity rules.

Academic freedom, which can be understood through various perspectives, comprises several interrelated dimensions—most notably, the freedom of opinion, the freedom to teach, and the

¹⁷Paul Gordon, "Academic Freedom," in *Absolute Freedom: An Interdisciplinary Study*, ed. Paul Gordon (London: Anthem Press, 2022), 71–84; Bev-Freda L Jackson, "Intellectual Freedom, Academic Freedom, and Social Justice," in *Academic Freedom: Autonomy, Challenges and Conformation*, ed. Robert Ceglie and Sherwood Thompson (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 173–81, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83909-882-620211013>.

¹⁸Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, "Intellectual Autonomy," in *Epistemic Values: Collected Papers in Epistemology*, ed. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197529171.003.0018>; McKenna, "Intellectual Autonomy."

¹⁹Havrdá, "Intellectual Independence in Christian and Medical Discourse of the 2nd-3rd Centuries"; L Parshukova et al., "Media Technologies In The Educational Space: The Formation of Intellectual Independence," *International Journal of Computer Science and Network Security* 21, no. 12 (2021): 323–27, <https://doi.org/10.22937/IJCSNS.2021.21.12.45>.

²⁰Aufderheide, and Vazquez, "Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression in the University Film and Video Association: Creating Legitimacy for Asserting Norms"; Post and Pujol, "A Conversation on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression at The University."

freedom to conduct research.²¹ Freedom of opinion allows the members of the academic world to express their views or ideas without fear of retaliation or sanctions by outsiders. As academicians, we are free to teach what we believe to be legitimate/applicable at our university without fearing the pressure of the corporate/governmental world tampering with what we should teach. Also, researchers need the freedom to investigate questions that might be controversial or unpopular because those questions are part of scientific progress and are fundamental to the scientific process.

For many, academic freedom is inextricably linked to democratic ideals and personal freedoms. Many previous studies argue that a forum in which ideas can be evaluated, criticized, and disseminated without impediment is a prerequisite for establishing an open and democratic society.²² On the other hand, academic freedom is often regarded as a boon for innovation and scientific advancement, as it promotes creative thought and novel findings that can change the world. Academic freedom thereby includes the right of the mind to discuss freely in detail its ideas along with the objective scientific understanding of relevant efforts to improve the quality of life as the means to an ultimately civilized world.

However, as globalization and the digital age evolve, concerns over academic freedom are increasingly growing. Data is one of the online currencies that connects the world digitally. Nevertheless, information is vulnerable to disinformation spread, and information censorship by governments, corporations, or groups with particular agendas.²³ One of the most prominent themes in contemporary discourse concerns the increasing constraints on freedom of speech in cyberspace, which sometimes conflicts with academic freedom. For example, one such emerging tension is represented by censoring scientific discourses or ideas deemed controversial or contradictory to the dominant values. It raises a discussion about how protected academic freedom should be in the digital environment, given the new challenges on the horizon—the social polarization that often takes place in social media and the role of online intermediaries that tighten the grip on freedom of speech.

2.2. The Context of the Islamic Medieval Era

A momentous exercise in culture and civilization occurred in the medieval Islamic era between the seventh and fifteenth centuries AD.²⁴ Lifestyle innovations began in the 7th century CE with the onset of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula under the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad. After the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, the companions of the Prophet's first caliphate would expand the Rashidun Caliphate beyond the Arabian Peninsula at a significant speed, eventually including areas that we now know as parts of Egypt, Persia, the Levant, and most of North Africa.²⁵ This expansion led to the rise of two powerful dynasties, the Umayyads (661-750 AD) and the Abbasids (750-1258

²¹Paul Barnes, "Academic Independence, Freedom and 'Enlightenment': The Case of Accounting Research," *Accounting History* 24, no. 4 (July 12, 2018): 591–609, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1032373218785192>; Moohr et al., "Practicing Academic Independence: Self-Regulation Strategies for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders."

²²Audretsch et al., "Academic Freedom and Innovation,"; Gordon, "Academic Freedom,"; Katarzyna Kaczmarek, "Academic Freedom and the Discipline of International Relations," *International Studies Review* 26, no. 3 (September 1, 2024): viae037_4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viae037.04>.

²³M Sobirin, and D Djubaedi, "Importance of Contextualizing Islamic Religious Education in Social Transformation Era," *Bestari* 21, no. 2 (2024): 136–148, <https://doi.org/10.36667/bestari.v21i2.1917>.

²⁴Bsoul, *Translation Movement and Acculturation in the Medieval Islamic World*.

²⁵Bakir, "Medical Science and Researches in the Golden Age of Medieval Islam."

AD), that put Islam on the world stage, ultimately dominating the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.²⁶

Baghdad fulfilled a similar role during the Abbasid period, hosting the *Bayt al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom), where research and translation were centered. It is an institutional foundation that enables the transfer and enhancement of knowledge from various civilizations, such as Greece, Persia, and India.²⁷ Muslim scholars were responsible for significant leaps in numerous disciplines, such as Ibn Sina in medicine, Al-Razi, and Al-Khwarizmi in mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, etc. These scholars managed a systematic method that garnered human reason and the principles of revelation, enabling the progress of knowledge through varying fields of tradition and science. This scientific attitude comprises experimental and observational approaches as well as theoretical frameworks. In optics, for instance, researchers like Ibn al-Haytham applied experimental scientific techniques that profoundly affected European science in the Enlightenment period.²⁸

Nevertheless, despite significant advancements in science and culture, there were conflicts between the quest for knowledge, and religious and political power throughout medieval Islamic history.²⁹ While the *Mu'tazilah* and the *Ash'ariyah* argued over the primacy of revelation, philosophers and scientists kept honing reason.³⁰ The interaction between a major theologian, Al-Ghazali, and intellectuals like Ibn Rushd, who confirmed the fit of reason and revelation, shows notable conflicts between theological and philosophical approaches.³¹ Under the framework of Islamic civilization, there is a complicated interaction between intellectualism, theology, and politics.

From the 11th to the 13th century, the Abbasid caliphate started to fall owing to many external dangers, leading to the Mongol invasion and Baghdad's sacking in 1258. The caliphate was also weak due to internal conflicts between several dynasties and political factions.³² Despite these political challenges, Islamic civilization thrived elsewhere, such as in Andalusia (the region of modern-day Spain), where it peaked during the Umayyad dynasty in Cordoba, or in the Islamic

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Jim Al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2011).

²⁸John Joseph Saunders, *A History of Medieval Islam* (London: Routledge, 1965); Husni Husni and Walter Hayden, "The Epistemology of Ta'dib in Islamic Civilizational Discourse: Reviving and Reconstructing Contemporary Muslim Scholars' Views," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 19, no. 1 (June 30, 2024): 181–97, <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol19no1.14>.

²⁹Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Leila Rouhi, "European Literatur, Perception of Islam," *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia* (Psychology Press, 2006).

³⁰Husni Husni, and Hasan Bisri, "Inclusivism and Exclusivism: Responses of Prospective Islamic Religious Teachers towards Islamic Sects," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2024): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9361>.

³¹Abû Hâmid Al-Ghazâlî, *Tahafut Al-Falasifah* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1958); Abû Hâmid Al-Ghazâlî, *Ihyâ' Ulûm Al-Dîn* (Qahirah: Maktabah al-Nahdhah al-Mishriyyah, 1956); Karen Taliaferro, "Elitist Democracy and Epistemic Equality: Aristotle and Ibn Rushd on the Role of Common Beliefs," in *Reason, Revelation and Law in Islamic and Western Theory and History*, ed. R Charles Weller and Anver M Emon (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 101–21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-6245-7_5.

³²Michael de Nie, "Victorian Muslim: Abdullah Quilliam and Islam in the West," *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 4 (2019): 1474–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shx137>; Aulia Rakhmat, "Religion and Reason in Contemporary Islamic Ethics: A Comparative Study of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas and Taha Abderrahmane Thought," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 13, no. 2 (2023): 134–51, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.132.09>.

kingdoms of India and North Africa. In the Andalusian cities of Córdoba, Granada, and Seville, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scientists collaborated to create a highly productive intellectual atmosphere that led to several scientific and technological innovations.³³

During the medieval period, the Islamic civilization's cultural and intellectual legacy continued well into the modern period. Although Islamic civilization considerably declined by the 14th and 15th centuries, Muslim scientists impacted Western culture and the world. This legacy is evident in the development of European science during the Renaissance, where classical Greek texts were first translated into Arabic and later from Arabic into Latin. The foundations lie in the theoretical frameworks, dissemination, and application of scientific methods employed by Muslim scholars across various fields—philosophy, science, medicine, and mathematics—all of which represent the highest intellectual achievements of humanity.

3. Method

This research employs a historical-analytical approach, enabling the exploration and analysis of the evolution of academic freedom within the social, political, and intellectual milieu of the era. This method necessitates the examination of primary sources, including the scholarly contributions of prominent thinkers, historical texts, and institutional records such as madrasas and academies. Using this perspective, scholars can understand how ideas of academic freedom were accepted, understood, and practiced in medieval Islamic societies. This methodological framework facilitates mapping intellectual dynamics and examining the engagement between scientists and religious institutions or the state, which often shape the conception and application of academic freedom.

Furthermore, a thorough grasp of this phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates aspects of sociology, philosophy, theology, and history. An examination of theological and philosophical writings by well-known academics like Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd, for example, can shed light on how intellectual freedom interacts with dominant social paradigms, and is challenged by religious and political issues. A more nuanced understanding of how educational institutions like madrasas and *Bayt al-Hikma* either expand or restrict the scope of intellectual freedom, on the other hand, can be facilitated by theories from the sociology of education. An understanding of how academic freedom functions within the social structure and cultural context of medieval Islam, as well as its contribution to intellectual advancement in the Islamic world during that time, can be gained by combining an interdisciplinary viewpoint with a historical approach.

4. Results and Discussion

Under normative religious and state-imposed restrictions, academic freedom was essential to the development of science and culture during the Islamic era. In this period, particularly during the Abbasid caliphate, educational establishments such as Baghdad's Bayt al-Hikma functioned as hubs for scientists studying a variety of subjects, including astronomy, medicine, mathematics, and philosophy.³⁴ In a delicate trade-off, it achieved the veracity of the cosmos by fusing Islamic religious values with vibrant intellectual freedom. Muslim scholars such as Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi created scientific theories that combined revelation and reason, demonstrating how intellectual freedom can

³³Zarvandi, and Sadeghi, "Exploring the Roots of Clinical Trial Methodology in Medieval Islamic Medicine."

³⁴Madjid Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism: A Short Introduction* (London: Oneworld Pubns, 2000); Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

coexist with religious teachings.³⁵ There is still conflict, though, between rationalists and more conservative religious doctrine proponents. Academic freedom endures in spite of this conflict, enabling discussion and debate in a variety of subjects. These inclusive educational institutions also foster a culture of intercultural communication that encourages collaboration between scientists from different racial and religious backgrounds. We will have the opportunity to participate in this vibrant intellectual atmosphere that enhances Islamic culture.

4.1. Intellectual and Rational Debate

The interaction of various schools of thought, including philosophy, theology, and Islamic jurisprudence, demonstrates how academic freedom in medieval Islam was marked by ample room for logical and intellectual discussion. The philosophical investigation was arguably the most noteworthy aspect of this environment. Prominent scholars like Al-Farabi,³⁶ Ibn Sina,³⁷ and Ibn Rushd³⁸ emerged from intellectual debates about the interrelationships of faith, reason, and the natural sciences. These scholars had extensive interactions with theologians and theologians of science like Al-Ghazali.³⁹ Muslim philosophers of the era blended Islamic teachings with Greek rationality, which was founded on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophical ideas. They aimed to deepen and broaden our knowledge of spiritual truths and the universe. They claimed that the universe and its inherent theological truths could be better understood with the aid of human reason. However, theologians—which includes deep thinkers who study theology scientifically—argued that revelation is the only source of truth. They frequently viewed reason as a finite instrument that, when applied to contradict their beliefs, could produce flawed outcomes given enough time and effort.

The hitch between rational and revelatory modes notwithstanding, opening debate among the intellectual elite has merits. This example of intellectual freedom will allow scientists and thinkers to voice contrary views, make their case, and discuss with absolute logical pillars. It does not align with the existing intellectual tradition, in which dissent and rational argumentation serve the pursuit of truth, not as something that should be avoided or silenced. It can be seen from debate between those two schools, the rationalist *Mu'tazilah* and the more traditionalist *Ash'ariyah*.⁴⁰ The *Mu'tazilah* were an intellectual school of thought emphasizing reason and rationality and contending that morals and theological principles should be discerned through human reason. By contrast, the competing *Ash'ariyah* school of thought prized utter submission to revelation and religious authority. This

³⁵Shams Inati, *Ibn Sina's Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics: An Analysis and Annotated Translation*, ed. Shams Inati (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7312/columbia/9780231166164.001.0001>.

³⁶Abu Nashr Al-Farabi, *Kitab Al-Huruf* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 2006); Abu Nashr Al-Farabi, *Al-Madina Al-Fadilah*, ed. Albir Nasri Nadr (Beirut, 1957).

³⁷Parviz Morewedge, *The "Metaphysica" of Avicenna (Ibn Sina) A Critical Translation-Commentary and Analysis of the Fundamental Arguments in Avicenna's "Metaphysica" in the 'Danish Nama-i "Ala'i" (The Book of Scientific Knowledge)* (London: Routledge, 2015); R Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 2003).

³⁸Karen Taliaferro, "Ibn Rushd and Natural Law: Mediating Human and Divine Law," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etw045>; Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Ahmad Ibn-Rusyd, *Fashl Al-Maqal Fi Ma Bayn Al-Hikmah Wa Al-Syari'ah Min Al-Ittishal* (Cairo: Dar al-Ihya al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, 1957).

³⁹Abû Hâmid Al-Ghazâlî, *Ihya'u 'Ulum Al-Din* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995); Abû Hâmid Al-Ghazâlî, *Al-Mustashfâ Min 'Ilm Al-Ushûl* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1969); Griffel, *Al-Ghazâlî's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁰Fadlil Yani Ainusyamsi et al., "Mediaeval Theology of Education: Embracing Philosophy, Kalâm, and Sufism," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105, no. 5 (2024): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.513>.

debate went far beyond the halls of philosophy and theology, filtering into the many schools of thought found within academia and reaching into the legal community whose scholars helped codify and render meaning to the underpinnings of *fiqh*—ways of life best known today as Islamic laws.

In this instance, under medieval Islam, the forms of scholarly freedom can roughly be understood in two significant ways. This first manifests itself in the freedom to question and philosophize over the fundamental tenets of religion. Second, it is evident in the quest for knowledge that does not succumb to rigid dogmas or political restrictions.⁴¹ These schools of thought, for example, the Mu'tazilah and Ash'ariyah schools, differ greatly, showing that even when the tendency is to preserve certain religious doctrines, the possibility of scrutiny and unquestioning these teachings through the rational mind still exists. Hegel's writings demonstrate both the concerns of philosophy at the time, and the interaction between philosophy and theology, creating a vibrant intellectual atmosphere where argument is seen as a key vehicle for advancing debate and deepening understanding of religion, ethics, and human life.

The plurality of views in medieval Islamic society testifies to the intellectual pluralism of that society, marked by competing interpretations of sacred texts and the prophetic tradition. By no means limited to the upper crust of cerebral exchange, this intellectual liberty spread rapidly through the wider society, generating vituperative controversy over religion and philosophy as part of everyday intellectual life. Despite the battles between schools of thought and the experts of various philosophical [or theological] schools, this space for discussion and argument was one of the distinguishing features of medieval Islamic civilization, which paved the way for an inexplicable advancement of science and thought.

4.2. Freedom in Science Research and Development

Academic freedom in terms of research and science in the Islamic medieval period is directly related to the existence of a space for scientists to conduct research without severe regulations enforced by religious, political, and military institutions. It is essential to note this kind of freedom. Not only were Muslim scientists not necessarily limited by religious doctrine at the time in question, but while they were expected to be religious, they were also given the freedom to create and develop new concepts in different sciences. One of the principal characteristics of this autonomy, for instance, can be seen in the ground-breaking achievements of great scientists like Ibn al-Haytham, Al-Razi, and Al-Khwarizmi, who profoundly advanced the fields of optics, medicine, and mathematics.⁴² For instance, one of the most well-known personalities is Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen), who, at his time, made an unparalleled scientific method adoption and study on the nature of light. Based on direct observation, experimentation, and validation, his approach set him to be the forerunner of the scientific method that would later grow in Europe during the Age of Enlightenment. Among the essential medical figures, Al-Razi (Rhazes) is well-known for separating medical science from its spiritual and religious influences on the sick and stressed,⁴³ laying out a scientific basis for diagnosing and treating disease. Likewise, Al-Khwarizmi demonstrated how Muslim scientists could apply mathematical thinking at the time unconstrained by more strait-laced elements of their religion by creating basic algebraic ideas we still use today.⁴⁴

⁴¹Fadlil Yani Ainusyamsi et al., "Interreligious Engagement: Learning from the Medieval Muslim Intellectual Legacy," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 15, no. 1 (April 25, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.151.21>.

⁴²Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Muzaffar Iqbal, *Science and Islam* (London: Greenwood Press, 2007).

⁴³Bakir, "Medical Science and Researches in the Golden Age of Medieval Islam."

⁴⁴Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Problem of Modern Science," in *An Early Crescent: The Future of Knowledge and the Environment in Islam*, ed. Ziauddin Sardar (London: Mansell, 1989).

At that time, a crucial element of academic freedom includes multiple reasons guided by vigorous scientists. Other than for pragmatic uses or the satisfaction of those in authority, intellectual curiosity and a more lauded quest for universal truth inspired these scientists. Since they found no inconsistency between the development of science and religious faith, they regarded science as a way of making sense of God's creation. Hence, scientists usually had a free hand to investigate and create new hypotheses, even if religious leaders dominated the field of social and moral values. These scientists have been working in *biharas*, *madrasas*, and scientific centers established by caliphs or kings who believed scientific studies could benefit society.⁴⁵

An empirical approach is the one that most Muslim scientists use to determine their scientific activities. Science is not merely classical books or ideas inherited from Muslim scientists or even the study of those books, which can be read or studied without even understanding them—science relies on objective observation, experimentation, and verification. It differs from the religious perspective, which has been more typically based on divine revelation and authority. An intellectual culture emphasizing direct observation and experimentation created a climate requiring claims to be backed up by some type of hard evidence, thus significantly helping to shape science across many fields. The achievements of Muslim scientists like Al-Battani, the astronomer, Al-Farabi, who contributed to mathematics; Al-Razi and Jaber ibn Hayyan, pioneers of chemistry, epitomized this intellectual culture.

4.3. Open and Inclusive Education

From the above discussion, one may assert that academic freedom also impacts the emergence of an open and inclusive education system that accommodates all levels of society, including non-Muslims, to participate in the intellectual process. In this process, madrasas and the academies, including *Bayt al-Hikma* in Baghdad and Nizamiyah Madrasa in Khorasan, had a central role.⁴⁶ These organizations did two things: they promoted both freedoms to think, and scholarship in religion so that appropriating many different disciplines could flourish. Importantly, these establishments were organized as meeting points for intellectuals of varied religious and cultural identities and scientists, facilitating rich culture-to-culture communication. At *Bayt al-Hikma*, scholars from various traditions, including Greek, Persian, and Indian, collaborated to translate and develop scientific knowledge, forming the foundation of science in the Islamic world in that era.⁴⁷

Medieval Islamic society, with many educational institutions and rather few restrictions depending on social level or gender, clearly displayed this phenomenon. Some records present a welcome perspective of the variety of ideas and trans-religious cooperation in creating a scientific society by letting non-Muslims like Jews and Christians participate in intellectual interests and further knowledge actively. Though education for women was mainly discouraged through institutions, some women made their mark in medicine, and there were some exceptions for women in literature as well. In terms of education, many institutions later opened up that would allow women to study, but under excellent supervision. Still, their possibilities were less than those of men. Therefore, academic freedom in medieval Islamic society attempts to create avenues for people who want to increase their knowledge, irrespective of class, sect, or color.

Apart from highly rigid courses, education in the madrasas and academies included philosophical debate and discussion, advancing new ideas. For example, eminent scholars, including Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd, were invited for teaching visits at Al-Fustat (Cairo) and Baghdad,

⁴⁵Ainusyamsi et al., “Mediaeval Theology of Education: Embracing Philosophy, Kalām, and Sufism.”

⁴⁶Al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance*.

⁴⁷Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization*.

allowing their views on Greek thought, logic, and sciences to reach the next generations of academics.⁴⁸ Beyond theology and religion, these discourses covered thorough theories of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. For the students, such an intellectual environment is balanced with critical thinking and provides an autonomous viewpoint.

A flourishing madrasa and academy culture represented academic freedom during the Middle Ages Islamic era. These establishments promoted valued pluralism of opinion, the freedom to question and produce fresh ideas, and the deliberate spread of knowledge.

4.4. Independence and Intellectual Autonomy

In the medieval Islamic age, academic freedom was also connected with scientists' scientific independence. Despite being part of a religious institution and the state, scientists were usually allowed to think and work independently without the limitations that would curtail their intellectual freedom. In the context of a profoundly devout world, notable figures such as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd have been known to theorize in ways that occasionally contradict the prevailing orthodoxies of their era. For instance, Ibn Sina's metaphysical and epistemological theories have been noted to be significantly influenced by Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thought. However, he has also proposed highly original concepts concerning reason and revelation. Ahmad al-Ruba'i, a prominent figure whose full metaphorical caliphate title encapsulates a synthesis of rationalist, scientific, and modernist intellectual qualities, engages in a discourse with conservative figures who rely on verse quotations. Despite his isolation as a scholar, al-Ruba'i is highly esteemed within his hermetic context and even among those who employ more syncretic tongues.⁴⁹

Popularly known as Ibn Rushd, this influential figure is best known for his commentary on Aristotle and his perspectives promoting rationality and logic in understanding the world and religion, which were at odds with more traditional theological views on the relation between reason and revelation.⁵⁰ Despite such differences, he was held in high esteem and given the independence to formulate and develop his ideas. A Philosophy inherent in Ibn Rushd's works states that religion and philosophy are not oppositional forces but rather two means of accessing the same truth: each leading to the truth through a different road. Having that view shows the intellectual independence that could be exercised by scientists of the time, who could analyze ideas critically, including ideas that were firmly held and widely embraced in the public sphere.

Intellectual autonomy is significant because it can promote critical and innovative thinking that can be inserted into otherwise conservative, social, and religious structures. Scientists enjoyed a fair amount of room to maneuver during this time, which allowed them to question accepted viewpoints, criticize established theories, and pursue new ideas without the threat of severe limitations. This personal autonomy was recognized, yet the relationship of scientists with the rulers or religious authorities could impact the acceptance and durability of their sciences. Yet, the prevailing environment encouraged them to express their views, reflecting the respect for intellectual independence and academic freedom at the time.

4.5. Willingness to Criticize and Revise Traditional Thinking

One of the most critical features of academic freedom during the medieval Islamic period was the development of an inclination where the classical way of thinking was subjected to critique or revamping, as evidenced by major scholars challenging and reinterpreting traditional views of theology and philosophy. It was not that Muslim scholars of the Abbasid period unquestioningly

⁴⁸Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*.

⁴⁹Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*.

⁵⁰Taliaferro, "Elitist Democracy and Epistemic Equality: Aristotle and Ibn Rushd on the Role of Common Beliefs."

accepted religious instruction, indeed, many attempted to interpret and criticize religious teaching rationally. It is worth mentioning that Al-Ghazali, a highly influential scholar and revered theologian, was not afraid to take on the dominant philosophical trends of his time, especially those rooted in Greek rationalism. Indeed, this rationality could hide the understanding of revelation and faith to him. As a learned man, Al-Ghazali denounced philosophy in his famous text *Tahafut al-Falasifa*, declaring that it had strayed too far from the primary aspects of religious belief.⁵¹ Despite his denunciation of philosophy, Al-Ghazali nonetheless recognized a role in the rational development of thought within the limitations of Islamic orthodoxy. It means that even if there exists tension between rationality and revelation, Al-Ghazali did not slam the door on intellectual discourse and growth.

Conversely, both Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina played key roles in reconciling rationality with revelation and showing that such intellectual freedoms were capable of transcending tradition.⁵² Al-Farabi's attempts to reconcile philosophy, religion, logic, and rationality into a single coherent framework—one that confirms his interpretation of Islamic doctrine—are an example of this synthesis. Human and divine logic were not only capable of existing side by side, as the author emphasized reason, they were not necessarily mutually exclusive either. This claim not only insulated the teaching and research of truth but also constructed an external threat that spurred on the intellectual pursuits of seekers. His contributions to science and knowledge in Islam are noteworthy. He promoted rational scientific theories, and skillfully synthesized philosophy and theology in his foundational writings. In particular, he argued that divine revelation is above human reason, but not in itself contrary to rational devices that can be derived from reason. As such, these scholars effectively established the roots of rational thought with the Islamic tradition and so laid the groundwork for the future of science and philosophy.

Notably, at this period, they embraced intellectual freedom to challenge and reinterpret a conventional way of thinking. Scientists and theologians had room to challenge accepted wisdom, investigate novel concepts, and foster ideas that defied easy fit into a mainstream perspective. Thus, the growth of a rich and favorable environment of intellectual inquiry helped to enable free and critical thought to be ingrained and an educated debate from the several rationalist and theological streams to be supported. Unlike dogmatic thinking, this academic freedom shows the development of medieval Islamic intellectualism—a process of critical analysis, revision, and synthesis of ancient knowledge.

5. Conclusion

During the medieval Islamic era, a fertile atmosphere existed for the cultivation of intellectual and scientific thought, an ethos that supported hypothesis and experimentation for applications in medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. The Bayt al-Hikma of Baghdad was a most famous example of this flowering of intellect where the work of Muslim scientists prospered, facilitating the adoption of all kinds of philosophical ideas and religious schools from the indigenous populace around them, in contrast to the ruling norms of that historical period. By demonstrating that rational and scientific thought was not incompatible with religious belief, medieval Muslim scientists expanded the understanding of revelation. This type of study connects the medieval Islamic concept of academic freedom with contemporary issues such as the censorship of ideas that violate social or religious propriety and government control of education, especially in a digitized cosmos awash in misinformation.

⁵¹Al-Ghazali, *Tahafut Al-Falasifah*.

⁵²Dominic J O'Meara, "Platonopolis in Islam: Al-Farabi's Perfect State," ed. Dominic J O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199285532.003.0014>.

To ensure the appropriate climate for building Islamic civilization, we must suggest preserving academic freedom within the framework of the religion's ethics and norms and maintaining a balance between freedom of thought and social responsibility. Educational opportunities need to be available and accessible to all groups equally. They must be open to active participation across various cultures and religions. Moreover, they need to promote intellectual autonomy, following in the footsteps of the great scholars of the past who managed to exercise critical reflection even in the grip of ecclesiastical authority. As Islamic civilization faces unprecedented global challenges, we should look for ways to recreate the open and innovative environment of academic freedom to lay the foundations of a future for this civilization that is more resilient, advanced, and competitive than before.

Author Contribution

N Hani Herlina: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, writing original draft, writing review & editing. **Nurjanah:** Investigation, project administration, resources, visualization. **Lilis Nurteti:** Software, supervision, validation.

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