

Cross-Cultural Studies of Scholasticism and the Legacy of George Makdisi

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Throughout his career, George Makdisi argued that Western scholasticism owes its very existence and its definition to Islamic institutions and intellectual practices. Beginning with his dissertation on Ibn ‘Aqīl, Makdisi proposed to demonstrate that, as he put it in 1974, “the intellectual contact between Islamic and Western culture went perhaps deeper than we have generally allowed.” That contact extended far beyond the generally accepted transmission of texts and matériel of intellectual culture; rather, it included the creation of colleges – not universities, he was careful to point out – in both Islamicate and European societies, the rise of humanism in both, and underlying both, the use of a scholastic method to expand knowledge in law, theology, and nature. In this paper, I propose to investigate the motivations for and consequences of Makdisi’s position, which lead to conclusions about the nature of transmission across and within cultures.