

Philosophical thought

The word philosophy¹ comes from two Greek terms *philein* and *sophia*, and literally means ‘love of wisdom’. From one point of view, philosophy is ‘a critical, reflective analysis of what we think we know about ourselves and our universe’.² Philosophy is based on the attempt to understand reality rationally, whereas theology is based on an appeal to supernatural revelation.³ In the West during the Middle Ages, philosophy was considered ‘the handmaiden of theology’ and philosophical principles were used to justify religious faith.⁴

Greek and Roman philosophy

The lineages and interconnections within the historical development of Greek and Roman philosophy can be clearly seen. It is generally acknowledged that the first Greek philosopher was Thales of Miletus, who lived in the sixth century BCE.⁵ Subsequently, Socrates, whose philosophical teachings adhered to an ethically influenced analysis, inspired other philosophers such as Plato, who is best known for his philosophy of ideas and who founded an academy to educate philosophers. Plato’s disciple Aristotle was one of the greatest Empiricists and began his own Peripatetic school.⁶ Subsequent to Aristotle, a number of philosophical trends arose, including the Stoics (who argued that virtue is the only real good and everything else is an illusion), the Epicureans (who held that pleasure is the highest end) and the Sceptics (who believed that nothing can be known for certain).⁷ There were other schools that followed these traditions. Some of these schools had a significant influence on Islamic philosophy. A particular example was Neoplatonism, which began with Ammonius Saccas during the third century CE. He forsook Christianity and developed his own conception of Platonic philosophy with Aristotelian and Stoic influences. The Neoplatonists developed the theory of emanation, in which levels of existence come from the existence of the One (Supreme Being).⁸

Near Eastern philosophy at the dawn of Islam

Greek philosophy and theology were studied by Syrians and Iraqis as early as the fourth century CE and a number of centres of study were still in existence when the Arab Muslims conquered Syria and Iraq. Notable Near Eastern Christian philosophers who wrote commentaries and treatises on important Greek works included Severus Sebokht, Jacob of Edessa and George, Bishop of the Arabs.⁹ In the seventh century CE there were important centres of Greek learning at Harran and Jundishapur. Egypt also had educational institutions that were interested in philosophy. There is no doubt that from an early period, probably even from the time of Alexander the Great, Greek philosophy was studied there. In Alexandria, Greek thought came into contact with a range of other Eastern religious traditions. These included Jewish, Egyptian and Christian philosophies. Greek thought did not remain strictly the same as it was in the times of its great masters; rather, it went through a transformation as a result of the interaction with the thought of other cultures in the East.

With the spread of Islam, particularly after the death of the Prophet, Muslims came into contact with a range of civilizations. Their conquest of Iraq and Egypt provided the first major contact between Muslims and the learning that was inspired by the Greeks. Centres of learning already present in those lands played a significant role in transmitting both the Greek philosophical tradition and the medical tradition to Muslims. Scholars from Harran and the Nestorian Christians from Jundishapur (a major centre of Hellenistic learning) were influential in the Abbasid court. They provided a link back to Greek science and knowledge for the Arabs.¹⁰ There were two ways in which Greek philosophy was transmitted to the mainly Arab Muslims of that period: through the translation of Greek philosophical works and as a result of the ongoing interest in medical research.

A range of philosophical works had been translated into Syriac and were being taught in Syria at the time of the Muslim conquest there. The conquest did not stop the study of Greek thought, which was continued largely by Christian scholars. It was after the conquest of Syria that a number of philosophical, scientific and medical works were translated from Greek and Syriac into Arabic from the eighth century CE. The Arab conquerors were fascinated by Greek thought and many of them encouraged the translation of works into Arabic. The earliest era of philosophical works in Arabic should be considered the activities of the translators, such as Hunayn b. Ishaq (d. 260/873).

Indian and Persian philosophy

Unlike Greek philosophy, the Indian and Persian influence on Islamic philosophy is comparatively small; nevertheless some Arabic-speaking scholars

engaged with Persian and Indian ideas, particularly in the scientific realms. In the Abbasid era, Indian medical and astronomical works were translated into Arabic. Al-Biruni (d. 440/1048) wrote on Indian philosophical and religious beliefs, and Muslim theories of atomism carry a number of marked similarities to Indian thought. A number of Persian aphoristic works and moral treatises were available to the Arabs through the work of writers such as Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 139/756) and Miskawayh (d. 421/1030). Importantly, many great figures in Islamic thought were Persians, including Ibn Sina, al-Razi and al-Ghazali.¹¹

Muslim philosophy

The earliest texts translated into Arabic were of a practical nature and concentrated on medicine, alchemy and astrology. This led to a developing interest in more theoretical and speculative works.¹² Arab philosophers emerged during the third/ninth century. The Abbasid caliphs were interested in learning and gave financial and material support to translators and scholars. The first prominent example of an Arab-Muslim philosopher is considered to be al-Kindi (d. circa 260/873).¹³ From the time of al-Kindi, Muslim philosophy became a creative phenomenon that moved beyond translation and commentary and developed into a distinct Islamic discipline.¹⁴ Muslim philosophers sought to integrate Greek thought into their Islamic framework and were interested in harmonizing rationality and religious faith. While the scholars of theology (*kalam*) sought to defend the revealed truths of the Qur'an and the Sunna with proofs, those who took the path of philosophy (*falsafa*) resorted to reason exclusively to disentangle the problems that beset the human intellect. They viewed the Neoplatonic conception of the universe as consistent with Islamic beliefs, in particular the apocryphal *Theologia Aristotelis* with its doctrine of emanation.¹⁵ There are two main types of philosophic literature: commentaries on texts and independent creative works. Both followed Greek methods of organizing scholarly work.¹⁶

Muslim philosophical trends

The development of Muslim philosophy during the Abbasid period must be seen in light of the following: (1) sectarian conflict that developed after the passing of the Prophet and saw schism in the Muslim community which broke up into the Shi'i, Khariji and majority Sunni factions over the question of rightful leadership;¹⁷ (2) the development of the disciplines of jurisprudence, Qur'anic studies and theology;¹⁸ (3) theological arguments between the Traditionists and Qadaris, and the rise of the Mu'tazili school of theology which utilized Greek dialectical tools;¹⁹ and (4) the founding of the institution of the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikma*), in Baghdad, which provided for scholarly activity including the translation of Greek texts.²⁰

Philosophy entered the western part of the Muslim world (in Spain and North Africa) after the third/ninth century. However, it did not flower until the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries after the works of eastern thinkers such as al-Farabi (known in Europe as Alfarabi) (d. 339/950), Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (d. 429/1037) and al-Ghazali (Algazel) (d. 505/1111) became available to Muslims living in Spain and North Africa. Major western figures included Ibn Bajja (Avempace) (d. 533/1138), Ibn Tufayl (Abubacer) (d. 581/1185) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (d. 595/1198), who gave a spirited defence of philosophy in his refutation of al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-falasifa*).²¹

In the Muslim West, the Almohad dynasty began with Ibn Tumart (d. 524/1130), from a Berber tribe of the Atlas mountains. His successors overthrew the Almoravid rulers of Spain. He encouraged observance of the literalistic Zahiri legal school and belief in a strict transcendent concept of God. The Almohads viewed philosophy as the pursuit of elites; nevertheless leaders such as the caliph Abu Ya'qub Yusuf (d. 580/1184) gave patronage to philosophers like Ibn Rushd and other intellectuals in Spain.²²

Western Islamic philosophy had a major influence on thinkers in medieval Christian (and Jewish) Europe, as well as the eastern Islamic world, with the export of the writings of philosophers such as Ibn Bajja, Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Rushd. However, a new development in the history of Islamic philosophy occurred with the resurgence of traditionalism as found in the works of figures such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and the synthesis of mysticism with philosophy.²³ While the impact of traditionalism on philosophy was devastating (within Sunni Islam), from the sixth/twelfth century a new type of philosophy wedded to mysticism can be seen in the rise of hikma (wisdom), particularly within the Shi'i world. Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (d. 587/1191) founded the illuminationist (*ishraqi*) school of theosophy. Mir Damad (d. 1041/1631) revived Ibn Sina's philosophy, giving it a Shi'i ishraqi character. Mulla Sadra (d. 1050/1640) harmonized revelation, rational demonstration and gnosis (*irfan*). The new philosophy spread to the Indian subcontinent and influenced figures such as Shah Wali Allah (d. 1176/1762).²⁴

Great Muslim philosophers

Al-Kindi

Al-Kindi (Alkindus, d. circa 260/873) was the first significant Muslim philosopher, and became known as 'the Philosopher of the Arabs'. He had encyclopaedic knowledge and exerted a great influence on medieval Europe. Over two hundred scholarly works are attributed to him and cover a range of disciplines: metaphysics, music, logic, medicine, geometry and politics. He was possibly the first Arabic-speaking logician, but many of his works

(including those on logic) have been lost.²⁵ Al-Kindi was an influential thinker within several areas, including Qur'anic exegesis including Mu'tazili methods of Qur'anic exegesis (see Chapter 2) and Greek philosophy (Aristotle and Neoplatonism).²⁶

For al-Kindi, philosophy was a 'comprehensive science that embraced all sciences including theology. Its high status was due to its exalted subject matter (divine reality). Al-Kindi attempted to reconcile philosophy (which has finite limits) and religion, because for him both had the same end. Al-Kindi borrowed the Aristotelian concept that religion needs philosophy, which is its rational defence although he was not consistent on the problem of whether philosophical or religious truth is more certain. We can generally say he gave precedence to revelatory truth, with any contradiction between philosophy and revelation being due to human misinterpretation of the Qur'an.²⁷

Al-Kindi believed that philosophy is an essential aid in the study and practice of religion. For him, there was no contradiction between the truth that is arrived at on the basis of religion and the truth that is arrived at on the basis of philosophy. One supported the other. He wrote on the proof of God's existence and God's attribute of absolute unity.²⁸ Al-Kindi saw a dualism between God, who is beyond description and definition and is absolutely eternal, and created-out-of-nothing beings, who are divided into three categories (corporeal beings, beings separable from matter owing to their finer nature, and spiritual beings with no corporeality). Al-Kindi classified 'beings' into individuals and universals.²⁹ He supported the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) using mathematical and logical reasoning. Al-Kindi argued that the universe is in motion and motion is not eternal; therefore the universe is not eternal.³⁰ He also advocated a finite creation.³¹

Al-Kindi's structure of the universe was based on Aristotelian and Ptolemaic theories: nature, being orderly, reveals an intelligent design and thus points to God. Human beings are microcosms of that well-organized and orderly macrocosm. Relying on astrology, which was believed to be a legitimate science, he held that heavenly bodies were animate, possessing reason.³² Al-Kindi also wrote on the nature of the soul, which he regarded as an incorporeal substance that gave an animate substance its essence and definition.³³

Al-Farabi

Al-Farabi (d. 339/950), called the 'Second Teacher', was a leading figure in a number of philosophical fields including logic, cosmology and metaphysics. He gave the Arabic-speaking world an understanding of Aristotelian logic, developed an Islamic version of the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation and is well known for his socio-political model of his *The Virtuous City*

(*al-Madinat al-Fadila*).³⁴ Al-Farabi believed that religious and philosophical truths are objectively one, although formally different. Below are some of his key ideas.

*Theory of ten intelligences*³⁵

Among the chief concerns of this theory is the solving of the problem of the One and the many. Al-Farabi holds that the One (that is God) is the Necessary by Himself; hence, He is not in need of another for His existence or His subsistence. Al-Farabi holds that from the Necessary One flows or emanates only one other by virtue of Its self-knowledge and goodness. This emanent is the first intelligence. The first intelligence is possible by itself, necessary by another; and it thinks the One as well as itself. It is one-in-itself, and many by virtue of these considerations. From the first intelligence flows a series of intelligences. The tenth and last intelligence is that which governs the sublunary world. From the tenth intelligence flows prime matter (*byle*), the origin of the four elements, as well as forms, which when united with prime matter form bodies.³⁶ It is from this intelligence that the human souls also flow, and the four elements which are fire, air, water and earth. These intelligences are hierarchical.³⁷ Thus, 'physics is fused with cosmology and the terrestrial world is subjected to the heavenly world'.³⁸

Theory of intellect

Al-Farabi classified intellect in various ways and outlined a theory of how intellect gradually rises and acquires perfection. He based this concept of the intellect on Aristotle's *De Anima*, but added his own contribution. This included the acquired intellect, which serves as a link between human knowledge and revelation. Al-Farabi's theory of the intellect has been extremely influential on Muslim and Christian philosophy.³⁹

Theory of prophecy

In Islamic thought, the basis of religion is revelation, and al-Farabi (like other Muslim philosophers) was concerned with the compatibility of rationality with religion. Consequently, he stressed the theoretical study of society and its needs and wrote a treatise on politics, including his *The Virtuous City* (*al-Madinat al-fadila*), which visualizes the city as a series of united parts like the organs of the body. He thought that all individuals were allocated a vocation, of which that of 'chief' was the highest station. The chief should have a number of attributes (similar to the philosopher-king in Plato's *Republic*), including the ability to commune with the celestial world through contemplation and inspiration.⁴⁰ Through his attempts to argue against the scepticism about prophecy, which was an issue of his time, al-Farabi not only 'explained prophecy on rational grounds and gave it a scientific

interpretation'⁴¹ but also made an important contribution towards a deeper understanding of human psychology and epistemology.

Interpretation of the Qur'an

Al-Farabi held that miracles are supernatural but do not contradict natural laws. Prophets have spiritual power which connects them with the agent of intelligence, and through this communication can cause miraculous happenings. He denied literalistic interpretations of Qur'anic concepts such as the Preserved Tablet. Al-Farabi believed that punishment and bliss in the hereafter are felt spiritually rather than materially and physically.⁴²

Neoplatonism and al-Farabi

Aristotle views God as perfection and as a pure form that eternally contemplates itself. He also believes that the world itself is eternal and that God is self-sufficient and independent of matter. This view of God is particularly problematic for people of faith, for whom God is central to their beliefs and way of life. Muslims believe in a God who reveals himself through prophets. Neoplatonism rejects this view. Muslims believe in the act of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing and in time). On the other hand, Neoplatonists believe that emanation is eternal, and reject the idea of creation as a temporal act.

This problem was not resolved until al-Farabi attempted to reconcile the Islamic concept of prophethood and revelation with the theory of emanation. Al-Farabi's view of how the theory of emanation and creation *ex nihilo* could be brought together relates to the question of knowledge. He argued that human beings have three faculties: reason, sense and representation. These faculties should combine with the active intellect, the tenth intelligence and the source of knowledge. Al-Farabi gives an example of the relationship between the faculty of knowledge and the active intellect being like that between the eye and the sun. In order to see something, it is not sufficient that one have an eye and an object to be seen. The eye cannot see unless there is light from the sun which gives the light to the eye. Al-Farabi saw the relationship between the faculty of knowledge and the active intellect in the same way and just as necessary in order to intuit knowledge.⁴³ The human faculty of knowledge, also called the potential intellect (*in potentia*), needs to be connected to the source of knowledge, the active intellect. The active intellect is understood by al-Farabi to refer to an immaterial form which was never in matter and can never be.

It is much like an acquired intellect, but it is the faculty which ultimately changed this substance that was an intellect in *potentia* into an intellect in action, and the intelligibles in *potentia* into 'actual' intelligibles. The relationship between the active intellect and intellect in *potentia*,

therefore, is similar to that of the sun and the eye, which can only see things in *potentia* as long as it remains in obscurity.⁴⁴

Given that the role of the active intellect is not unlike that of the sun for the act of seeing, it can be said that, for al-Farabi, the active intellect makes the intellect *in potentia* actual: 'potential' intelligible things become 'actual' intelligible things.

The intellect *in potentia* also receives knowledge through things such as visions, and these visions can sometimes occur while a person is awake or asleep. This is where al-Farabi is trying to explain prophecy. For him, representation, one of the faculties of the intellect, is a powerful faculty in the human being. And when that is developed to perfection, this faculty can be the medium by which a person can receive awareness of present and future events. Through such a person, prophecy can be received. This explains the revelation that occurred with the Prophet himself.⁴⁵

With rational explications like these, al-Farabi endeavours to provide a basis for an accommodation of religious truth within the philosophical context: the philosophical truth (or the knowledge arrived at by philosophers) is important, as well as the prophetic truth (the knowledge arrived at by prophets). Prophets often simplified their message so that they could be understood by common people, whilst philosophers are often seen as not very good at conveying their knowledge to the masses.

Ibn Sina

Ibn Sina (d. 429/1037), known as Avicenna in the West, is one of the most famous and influential Muslim philosophers. From Ibn Sina's autobiography, it is clear that he received a thorough education and mastered a number of sciences from an early age. It was, however, a commentary by al-Farabi that opened up Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to this great mind. Ibn Sina lived in politically turbulent times and worked as a physician for a number of princes.⁴⁶ He wrote, largely in Arabic but also in Persian, on a wide variety of topics and was influenced by Greek philosophy. He developed a mystical 'Oriental Philosophy' and his medical tome the *Qanun* (*Canon*) is generally considered one of the most influential medical texts in both the Muslim world and the West.⁴⁷

The central topic of Ibn Sina's metaphysical scholarship concerns ontology (the study of being). As well as discussing distinctions between essence and existence, substance and accident, he developed a series of categorizations of being:

- Necessary: a being whose absence would be metaphysically impossible or contradictory, such as the Necessary Being upon whom all other existents (the entire universe) depend;

- Possible: a being whose existence may or may not exist without either state being impossible or contradictory. He divided this category into that which is possible in itself, but made necessary by the Necessary Being (i.e. angels); and those beings who are simply possible without any condition of necessity (i.e. evanescent creatures of the material world);
- Impossible: a being whose existence would be impossible or contradictory if it existed, such as a second Necessary Being (God).⁴⁸

Ibn Sina's cosmology was influenced by the Neoplatonic concept of the emanation of an angelic hierarchy based upon intellection, and followed the principle that only from the One can anything come into being. According to Ibn Sina, the Necessary Being (the One) is completely transcendent from multiplicity, and contemplates its being, which then generates the first creation – the First Intellect, or the supreme archangel. As the latter contemplates itself 'as an act', the Soul, which is the form of the extreme sphere, emanates, and as it contemplates itself *in potentia* a body of that same sphere emanates. Then, as the First Intellect contemplates its cause, the Necessary Being, as necessary, this brings the Second Intellect into being through the same process; from this proceeds the soul and the body of the eighth sphere (Saturn) and the third intelligence and so on until the emanation of the active intelligence, which reigns over our souls.⁴⁹ The tenth intellect, called the Giver of Forms, is responsible for bringing material forms into existence and illuminating minds.⁵⁰

Ibn Tufayl

Ibn Tufayl (Abubacer, d. 581/1185) was a leading figure of Muslim Spain. He was not only a physician but also a philosopher, mathematician and poet. His allegorical work *The Living Son of the Vigilant* (*Hayy ibn Yaqzan*) had a profound effect in the West when it was translated into Latin and published in Oxford in 1671, then rendered into English in 1674 and subsequently into other European languages.⁵¹ Ibn Tufayl lived and worked as a secretary to the governor of Granada, Spain, under the Almohads. Later on he became the personal doctor of Abu Ya'qub Yusuf, and his vizier. He was the teacher of Ibn Rushd, and the one who introduced him to the Almohad ruler. Though unsystematic in his writing in comparison to al-Farabi or Ibn Sina, Ibn Tufayl is often regarded as a leading figure in the 'Andalusian Revolt' against Ptolemaic astronomy, and also a bridge between al-Ghazali's creationism and Aristotelian eternalism.⁵²

In the allegorical work *The Living Son of the Vigilant* (which is presented as a story), Hayy grows up on an uninhabited island, is nurtured by a deer, and discovers through his own intellectual efforts philosophical truths about reality and the necessity of a Creator. He then meets the mystic Asal, who has arrived from a neighbouring island. Asal teaches Hayy language,

and tells him of his scriptural religion, understood to mean Islam, and of the teachings of the Messenger, understood to be Muhammad. Hayy recognizes Asal's religious teachings as true and in conformity with his own intellectual discoveries. Nevertheless, Hayy cannot understand why revelation resorted to parables and figurative language when speaking about the Divine, and why it gave permission for humans to pursue worldly interests. Asal returns with Hayy to the neighbouring island, which is ruled by Salaman. After attempting to teach Salaman and his subjects, who are not inclined to the esoteric philosophy of Hayy, the latter realizes that there is wisdom in obscuring scripture in figurative language and that the masses are content with the outward law. Hayy and Asal return to the uninhabited island to live a life of contemplation.⁵³

Ibn Tufayl's story deals with the essential problems of philosophy and with the issue of whether it is right to divulge its secrets or not. According to Badawi, the work revolves around six main arguments:

- There are no contradictions between philosophy and religion (i.e. Islam).
- Metaphysical matters, like those that pertain to the eternity of the world, are open to interpretation and different solutions.
- Truth has two different modes of expression: one symbolic and relying on illustrative images for commoners, and one precise and pure for the elect. One should not use the language of the former to address the latter and vice versa. Using the language of the elect with the common people only serves to confuse them.
- It is possible for a philosopher who has attained the heights of speculation to achieve union with the Active Intellect, which is the ultimate end of wisdom.
- Reason, through no other device but its own and once connected to the Active Intellect, can dwell in the intelligences of the most hidden secrets of nature and can thus arrive at the most sought-after solutions to the most complicated metaphysical problems.
- Human society is corrupt, and there is nothing more suited to it than popular religion. Any attempt to reform it towards a high intellectuality is bound to fail. For those who are endowed with wisdom, there is no refuge other than the heights of pure reason.⁵⁴

Ibn Tufayl criticized both the doctrine of the eternity of the world and creation *ex nihilo*. He took a middle position in which God, the Creator, precedes creation in essence, but not in time. However, he also believed that reason itself has limits and arguing the point can lead to a maze of contradictions.⁵⁵ He held a mystical interpretation of the relationship between God and creation, using the metaphor of light.⁵⁶

Al-Ghazali

There is a widely held view that because Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (Algazel, d. 505/1111) strongly attacked Islamic philosophy and philosophers in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-falasifa*), their role was significantly reduced within the Sunni world. While there is some truth to this view, attacks on philosophy were prevalent well before al-Ghazali, particularly amongst Traditionists.

The rejection of philosophical approaches to Islamic thought needs to be placed within their historical contexts. We must remember the Mu'tazili position in the early Abbasid period in relation to the creation of the Qur'an and the way these views were adopted by the Abbasid state during the caliphates of al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tasim and al-Wathiq. The decline of Mu'tazili influence and the reversal of Abbasid state policy under al-Mutawakkil provided a strong basis for the Traditionists who were against the Mu'tazili approach to emphasize a literal reading of the key texts (Qur'an and hadith) at the expense of rational theological argument. Therefore, when al-Ghazali appeared on the scene, there had already been a relatively long period of suspicion of and attacks on philosophy and its methods.

Al-Ghazali is among the most influential Muslim thinkers of the post-prophetic period. He was born in Tus, to a scholastic family interested in Sufism. He studied under the distinguished scholar Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (d. 478/1085), and in 484/1091 he became the youngest professor appointed to the Chair of Theology at the Nizamiyya College in Baghdad. He became a celebrated theologian, and initially took a personal interest in the study of philosophy, but later grew disillusioned by it.⁵⁷

He turned to Sufism, gave up his lucrative career and became a travelling ascetic, which gave him spiritual solace. He found his faith and wrote his influential work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Ihya' ulum al-din*), an autobiographical work *The Deliverer from Error* (*Al-Munqidh min al-dalal*) and the mystical work *The Niche of the Lights* (*Mishkat al-anwar*). He continued to teach and publish until his death in 505/1111.⁵⁸

In his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazali took aim at metaphysics as represented by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. He found twenty areas where he felt that these philosophers' teachings were flawed. He was most concerned with the idea of the eternity of creation, God's knowledge of particulars and bodily resurrection. Some of his arguments against the philosophers were the following:

- If the world is co-eternal with God it violates strict Islamic monotheism.
- Philosophers make God a fashioner rather than an originator.
- It is impossible to prove or disprove the eternality of the world, so there is no reason for rejecting the orthodox tenet of creation *ex nihilo*.

- Philosophers assume an immediate relationship between cause and effect which al-Ghazali said was not logically necessary.
- The complex theory of emanation does not safeguard God's unity and is deterministic.
- The material world does not demonstrate the principle of one proceeding from one, thus at some point one must meet multiplicity.
- The proposal that God does not have temporal knowledge is highly speculative and implies there is no freedom for God to exercise His will, which makes Him impervious to the petitions of His creatures.
- Emanation does not allow for miracles except as they are naturalized through science.⁵⁹

Instead, al-Ghazali asserted that philosophy was in error for attempting to fathom God's will as if it were similar to human will. As finite creatures we can never fully comprehend the relationship between God and His creation;⁶⁰ God is transcendent to time and change but also mysteriously immanent to it;⁶¹ a relationship between cause and effect is not logically required, it only appears that way through observation of the succession of events. Because we perceive them as connected, they are necessarily connected only at a psychological level. We cannot limit causes only to those we have observed, and essentially effect follows cause(s) through God's will. However, ordinarily, God chooses not to disrupt the flow of succession of events.⁶² Because there is no necessary relationship between cause and effect, it is not illogical to believe in miracles.⁶³

Ibn Rushd

Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), known in the West as Averroes, was born in Cordoba (Spain) to a prestigious line of scholars and jurists. He succeeded Ibn Tufayl as *qadi* (judge) in the Almohad court of Abu Ya'qub Yusuf (d. 580/1184) and continued under Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Mansur (d. 596/1199). Ibn Rushd is famous for his series of commentaries on the works of Aristotle, which greatly influenced a number of medieval Jewish and Christian scholars.⁶⁴ He also wrote texts on jurisprudence and medicine. Envious of his close relationship with the ruler, colleagues at the court convinced Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Mansur that Ibn Rushd was using impolite language when writing about the ruler, that he doubted certain Qur'anic teachings and most importantly that he held polytheistic views such as that the planet Venus was a divinity.⁶⁵ He was persecuted for his philosophical teachings, was exiled, and his books were burnt. He was later pardoned by Abu Yusuf.⁶⁶

Like philosophers before him, Ibn Rushd sought to defend the pursuit of philosophy. He argued that the Qur'an itself recommended philosophical

pursuits when it called on human beings to employ rational consideration (*i'tibar*). According to Ibn Rushd, philosophers are the group of the learned to whom the Qur'an refers in the third chapter, where it says that only God and 'those deeply rooted in knowledge'⁶⁷ know its hidden meanings, unlike theologians and the masses.⁶⁸

Ibn Rushd held an Aristotelian ontology and his metaphysics were primarily concerned with knowledge related to 'being'. The object of his criticism of the scholars was not just al-Ghazali but also philosophers such as Ibn Sina, who he thought was not always right in his interpretation and understanding of Aristotle. He addressed questions such as the nature of time, the creation of the world, causality, the nature of God's knowledge and the ways to God.⁶⁹ As for his beliefs on creation, Ibn Rushd attempted to reconcile the philosophical view of the eternity of the world with the theological view of creation-in-time by seeing the world as both eternal and temporal. The universe has finite bodies, but moves eternally. He rejected the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation, especially as advocated by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.⁷⁰ According to him, neither Aristotle nor his peripatetic commentators had ever mentioned anything about the order of emanation or about their separated intelligences and their numbers. Keen to stay close to the Qur'anic view of the world, Ibn Rushd's Aristotelian system endeavours to conceive the world as a whole in which only one force moves all. The world according to his vision is like a state ruled by the one monarch. His viziers are subordinate and derive all their authority from the monarch. As such, all make up one system empowered and regulated by one and only one 'primary principle'. There is no room for the hierarchy of the intelligences and the Avicennan principle which stipulates that 'from the one can proceed only the one'.⁷¹

Ibn Rushd wrote *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (*Tahafut al-tahafut*), in which he defended the pursuit of philosophy from its detractors, al-Ghazali in particular.⁷² He responded to several of al-Ghazali's arguments, for instance that philosophers transgressed the *ijma'* (consensus) of the community, and were guilty of disbelief in relation to the eternity of the world, their denial of God's knowledge of particulars and their denial of corporeal resurrection.⁷³ Ibn Rushd pointed out that there is no consensus about all doctrinal matters, because of the esoteric nature of some Qur'anic statements. Also, theologians had misunderstood the purpose of the Qur'anic allegories, which are used to encourage the masses to live virtuously. Philosophers, on the other hand, may apprehend their esoteric meanings, but must not make them public.⁷⁴ The influence of Ibn Tufayl in relation to this last point is not hard to detect.

Ibn Rushd listed the core requisites of belief to which all Muslims must assent, although the manner of their interpretation is not a matter of consensus: the existence of a Creator God who rules the world; the unity of God; God's attributes of perfection, which are knowledge, life, power, will,

hearing, seeing and speech; God's freedom from imperfection; the creation of the world; the validity of prophecy; the justice of God; and the resurrection on the Day of Judgement.⁷⁵

In *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, Ibn Rushd addressed each point made by al-Ghazali. He accused al-Ghazali of describing God as a kind of eternal 'man' because of his description of God's attributes of knowledge, will, habit and so on.⁷⁶ He argued against al-Ghazali's notion of causality, saying that the inability to specify causation would lead to our inability to say and name any 'thing' meaningfully. He said, 'Denial of cause implies denial of knowledge, and denial of knowledge implies that nothing in this world can be really known.'⁷⁷ He used the criticism of al-Ghazali's notion of causality to emphasize the natural nature of miracles (for Ibn Rushd, effects must follow causes), which allows the prophets to draw human beings closer to religion.⁷⁸

Mulla Sadra

Akhund Mulla Sadra or Sadr al-Din Shirazi (d. 1050/1640) was one of the most influential Persian thinkers, although he is relatively unknown outside Iran. A student of Mir Damad, Mulla Sadra developed a new philosophical approach which synthesized revelation, rational demonstration and '*irfan*' (gnosis). His most important work was the *The Four Journeys (Asfar)*, which dealt with the four stages of the gnostic journey.⁷⁹ Mulla Sadra's thought was influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, Neoplatonic doctrines, Ibn Sina's philosophy, the works of Ibn Arabi and Islamic religious texts, particularly those of Shi'i origin.⁸⁰

Mulla Sadra developed his theosophy (*hikmat*) on the basis of four major themes:

- *Unity and gradation of 'being'*: Mulla Sadra taught that 'being' is a single reality which has various gradations and degrees of intensity. Absolute being manifests itself to bring various orders of being and individual members of those orders into reality. Unlike Aristotle and Ibn Sina, Mulla Sadra held that there is an independent, archetypal reality. Imperfect beings necessitate the existence of higher states of being.⁸¹
- *Substantial motion*: For Mulla Sadra, change is motion and the world is continually recreated at every instant.⁸²
- *Knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the known*: Mulla Sadra held that knowledge and being (the knower and the known) are essentially the same.⁸³ 'God knows His own essence and His essence is none other than His Being, and since His Being and essence are the same, He is at once the knower, the knowledge, and the known.'⁸⁴
- *The characteristics and eschatology of the soul*: Mulla Sadra held that the soul moves through stages of transformation, acquiring new faculties,

which lead to its perfection. He used an analogy of the womb to describe the afterlife. As a child in the womb is in the material world, but does not yet know of its existence, so are human beings in the next world but most are unaware of it. Although Mulla Sadra accepted the concept of bodily resurrection, he held that it is the imaginative faculty of the soul, in the next world, which creates external forms. Souls in Paradise are able to create beautiful forms, while souls in Hell can only create painful forms, although this latter state is temporary and eventually all will return to God.⁸⁵

Modern philosophical thought

Muslim philosophers of the twentieth century did not lead movements or conceptualize social trends on the scale of nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures such as Muhammad Abduh, Ahmad Khan or Hasan al-Banna. Recent philosophers on the whole are 'intellectuals' whose ideas influence the academy more than the masses, although it is possible to detect an activist streak in some of them. Most recent Muslim philosophers have had formal training in the field of philosophy and obtained doctorates from renowned Western universities. To varying degrees, contemporary Muslim philosophers are critical of the early reformist or revivalist trends because they find their ideas unsystematic and philosophically flawed. The issue for many modern Muslim philosophers has been the challenge of modernity, and the questions this raises. In the next section we will look at three modern Muslim philosophers.

Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri

Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri was born in 1936 in southeastern Morocco. His early education was at a religious school and a private nationalist school. During his youth he developed close ties to the Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires party and its founder Mehdi Ben Barka (d. 1965).

In 1958, he commenced studying philosophy. In 1963, he was among members of the Union Socialiste who were imprisoned for sedition. After his release from prison he completed a doctorate in 1967 on the thought of Ibn Khaldun. Al-Jabiri was deeply dissatisfied with the way the Arab-Islamic society was evolving, particularly in his home country. These concerns led him to education. He occupied several teaching posts prior to and after the completion of his doctorate, and was therefore exposed to the problems within education; this became the main topic of his writings. Among his main works are *Dealing with Our Heritage* (*Nahnu wa al-turath*, 1980), *Contemporary Arab Discourse: a Critical and Analytical Study* (*al-Khitab al-arabi al-mu'asir*, 1982), and *Critique of Arab Reason* (*Naqd al-aql al-arabi*, 1984). Al-Jabiri considered modernity as follows:

Modernity . . . is not to refute tradition or break with the past, but rather to upgrade the manner in which we assume our relationship to tradition at the level of what we call ‘contemporaneity,’ which, for us, means catching up with the great strides that are being made worldwide.⁸⁶

This modernity does not call for a fundamentalism whose understanding of tradition is confined to the past:

Modernity, therefore, means first and foremost to develop a modern method and a modern vision of tradition. We could thus rid our conception of tradition from that ideological and emotional charge that weighs on our conscience and forces us to perceive tradition as an absolute reality that transcends history, instead of perceiving it in its relativity and its historicity.⁸⁷

According to al-Jabiri, Muslim scholars should not make the mistake of understanding modernity simply by mirroring European intellectuals, who come from a different historical context. That view of modernity followed the European Enlightenment, which itself followed the Renaissance.

In opposition to the idea that contemporary advances in knowledge, science in particular, may have rendered the substantive knowledge produced by Islamic philosophical and scientific thought irrelevant, al-Jabiri argued that the study of the ‘thinking apparatus’ (*al-jihaz al-tafkiri*) was still highly relevant for any society that is serious about understanding classical Islamic thought. Such study would reveal that Muslim philosophers of the past were not merely operating within the Aristotelian or Neoplatonic paradigm. This was particularly true for the philosophers of the western Islamic world (Andalusia and Morocco), who had had ‘an epistemological break’ with the eastern part. Al-Jabiri maintains that Ibn Sina represents neither Greek philosophy nor Islamic rationalism. He sees Ibn Sina’s philosophy (of the Muslim east) as ‘irrationalism’, and laments that al-Ghazali borrowed the same irrationalism from Ibn Sina, only to promote in the end a Sufism that is totally alien to the spirit of Islam. Both Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali used Aristotelian logic (demonstration based on inferential evidence) only to advance their illuminist vision (*ishraq*), which al-Jabiri considers part of hermetical thought: ‘The discourse of the Qur’an is of reason not of “gnosticism” or illuminism.’⁸⁸

In contrast, the ‘Averroist spirit’, as al-Jabiri calls it, presents Muslims with a stronghold from which to engage with modernity. Ibn Rushd’s rationalist approach considers issues from the point of view of mathematics and logic, and thus avoids the polemics raised by theologians and jurists alike through their defective analogical reasoning (*qiyas*).⁸⁹ Instead of analogical reasoning, Ibn Rushd uses hermeneutical interpretation (*ta’wil*) which for al-Jabiri is the only sound method: analogical reasoning distorts reality and

prevents reason from carrying out its function. It confuses the religious and philosophical realms, thus breaching the meaning of the text, while hermeneutical interpretation ensures that the religious and philosophical are kept apart.⁹⁰

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas was born in 1931 in Bogor, Java. He comes from a scholarly tradition firmly grounded in the traditional Islamic sciences, particularly metaphysics, theology, philosophy, history and Malay literature. His education was extremely varied. In Java he attended a madrasa, where he studied Arabic. After finishing secondary school in 1951, he entered the Malay Regiment as a cadet. He was selected to study at Eton Hall, Wales, and then later at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, England. He later commenced undergraduate studies at the University of Malaya.

His education did not stop at the University of Malaya. In 1962, he received a Master's degree (with distinction) from McGill University, Montreal, in Islamic philosophy, for a thesis entitled 'Raniri and the Wujudiyya of Seventeenth-Century Aceh'. His doctoral thesis was then undertaken at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, on the mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri. After this significant educational journey, al-Attas returned to Malaysia and in 1965 became head of Malay literature at the University of Malaya. Later he was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the National University of Malaysia. In 1987, al-Attas founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur and acted as its director until 2000. The institute worked towards creating the principles and methodology of an 'islamization project'.

Al-Attas believed that the duty of the Muslim intellectual was to take a stand against the false claims of European modernity. There was to be no negotiation with the modern Western scientific spirit or a reinterpretation of Islam in light of that spirit. He believed that such apologetics through the intellectual enterprise of picking and choosing was wishful thinking and served only to undermine the traditional understanding of religion.

For al-Attas, Sufism ought to play a central part in islamization, for it is in the Sufi heritage that we are most likely to find the most important contributions on the ultimate nature of reality. Islamic metaphysics, particularly from the perspective of philosophical Sufism, is a unified system revealing the ultimate nature of reality. It shows that there are other levels of existence beside the horizontal, worldly dimension, and Sufism discloses those higher levels of consciousness.⁹¹

Al-Attas maintains that modern science sees things as mere things and has reduced the study of the phenomenal world to an end in itself. Certainly

this has brought material benefits, but this is accompanied by an uncontrollable and insatiable propensity to destroy nature itself. Al-Attas maintains a firm critique that studying and using nature without a higher spiritual end has brought humankind to the state of thinking that people are gods or God's co-partners. He states: 'Devoid of real purpose, the pursuit of knowledge becomes a deviation from the truth, which necessarily puts into question the validity of such knowledge.'⁹² Modern sciences ought to be acquired, but their philosophical foundations must be recast in the Islamic metaphysical framework.

We do affirm that religion is in harmony with science. But this does not mean that religion is in harmony with modern scientific methodology and philosophy of science. Since there is no science that is free of value, we must intelligently investigate and study the values and judgments that are inherent in, or aligned to, the presuppositions and interpretations of modern science. We must not indifferently and uncritically accept each new scientific or philosophical theory without first understanding its implication and testing the validity of values that go along with the theory. Islam possesses within itself the source of its claim to truth, and does not need scientific or philosophical theories to justify such a claim. Moreover, it is not the concern of Islam to fear scientific discoveries that could contradict the validity of its truth.⁹³

Contemporary knowledge needs to be understood within the intellectual framework of the secular ideology upon which it is based. Therefore, in educational terms, this required

a critical examination of the methods of modern science; its concepts, presuppositions, and symbols; its empirical and rational aspects, and those impinging upon values and ethics; its interpretations of origins; its theory of knowledge; its presuppositions on the existence of an external world, of the uniformity of nature and of the rationality of natural processes; its theory of the universe; its classification of the sciences; its limitations and inter-relations with one another of the sciences, and its social relations.⁹⁴

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Seyyed Hossein Nasr was born in 1931 in Tehran. His early education was in Iran. He then studied physics and mathematics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and undertook his doctorate at Harvard University, specializing in Islamic cosmology and science. He was professor of the history of science and philosophy at Tehran University.

In 1979, Nasr migrated to the United States and taught at several American universities, before finally joining the George Washington University, Washington DC, where he became Professor of Islamic Studies. His landmark work arose out of the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, which were published under the title *Knowledge and the Sacred*.

Nasr is one of the most prolific contemporary Muslim thinkers. His interests are diverse, but his central concern is the relation between religion and science. Both fundamentalist and modernist Muslim thinkers, he observes, tend to equate modern forms of knowledge with *ilm*, a traditional understanding of science, which has nothing to do with the one presented by the modern scientific mind:

[F]or anyone who understood the essence of modernism based on and originating in the secularizing and humanistic tendencies of the European Renaissance, it was easy to detect the confrontation between traditional and modern elements in the Islamic world.⁹⁵

Tradition for Nasr pertains to

both horizontal continuity with the Origin and the vertical nexus which relates each movement of the life of the tradition in question to the meta-historical Transcendent Reality. Tradition is at once *al-din* [religion] in the vastest sense of the word, which embraces all aspects of religion and its ramifications. . . . Tradition, therefore, is like a tree, the roots of which are sunk through revelation in the Divine nature and from which the trunk and branches have grown through the ages. . . . Tradition implies the sacred, the eternal, the immutable Truth; the perennial wisdom, as well as the continuous application of its immutable principles in various conditions of space and time.⁹⁶

Equally, for Nasr, no amount of legal probing addresses the malaise that Muslim societies are suffering from. The challenge is of a 'metaphysical' nature. Modernism, mainly through its rationalism and empiricism, sees the universe almost as an autonomous machine. This contrasts with the Islamic perspective of science which depicts nature as a 'book', a meaningful book, containing order and the signs of God. Science is, therefore, sacred. Nasr advocates this view in *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981) and *The Need for a Sacred Science* (1993), and endeavours to make a case for the religious view of the universe and for a sacred science. Nasr's exposition of *tawhid* brings him to discuss not only the spiritual dimension but how that dimension can serve as a metaphysical base for the cultivation of the natural sciences.

Nasr deplores modernism for having reared a human being whom he describes as the 'Promethean Man'. This is someone 'free' of heavenly guidance and master of his own life and destiny whilst completely alienated

from his surrounding spiritual universe. Several decades ago, Nasr warned humanity against the environmental crisis that was looming. The damage to the environment is a sign of a human ego gone astray and is symptomatic of the approach of the modern scientific mind, in his view.

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8 Philosophical thought

*I am grateful for Redha Ameur who helped me in utilising the following sources in French in several sections of this chapter.

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