

GENESIS OF MUSLIM PHILOSOPHY*ABDUL KHALIQ**

The point at which a story of the development of Muslim philosophy can be started is the thought-structure of the Arabs who happened to be the torch-bearers of Islam. It is true that before the advent of Islam they were a practical sort of people having no 'philosophy' in the conventional sense of the term but it is also a patent fact that they did have some visions of life and values which later on developed into a systematic, well laid down, point of view regarding the constitution of the universe and man's attitude towards it. These visions, which, for one thing, provided a room for the assimilation of alien cultures, proved to be so important and persistent that Muslim philosophy has sometimes been justifiably termed 'Arabic philosophy'. The Qur'an tells us that they had a naturalistic-cum-materialistic outlook on life. This world of sense-experience was for them the be-all and end-all of everything and there was no possibility of a life hereafter.¹ Things come and go and are subject to change and evolution, they said, but the world, on the whole, is eternal. The agents of change, whatever they may be, belong to the world itself and there are no supernatural factors involved.² In the absence of a supersensible scheme of things they did not believe in any overall system of rewards and punishments for the actions that we perform during our present lease of life. Specially, they did not have any concept of resurrection and of heaven and hell

*The author is President, Pakistan Philosophical Congress. He retired as Iqbal Professor and Chairman, Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore-54590 (Pakistan) in 1995.

in which an omnipotent, good God will dole out the appropriate recompense. Instead, they believed in the transmigration of souls according to which each soul, after the death of its body changes the material substratum and goes to the body of another organism. Further, they held on to polytheism and an anthropomorphic interpretation of the deities. Idol-worship was steeped in their natures. Almost every tribe had its own god or goddess which was the center of the religious activities of the tribe. There were no less than three hundred and sixty of them in and around the Ka'ba in the city of Makkah and some were placed on the roof of the sanctuary. Those who lived at the farthest places and could not come all the way to Makkah to pay their homage had their idols installed in their respective towns and even in their own houses. These idols were worshipped and most valuable sacrifices were offered to them. It may, however, be pointed out that the Arabs did prostrate before the idols with the hope that they would intercede for them with, and get them closer to, the one Supreme God. In opposition to this thesis, the Qur'an is firmly of the view that worship is due to God and God alone, unconditionally and uncompromisingly; worship of anyone besides Him, with whatever objective it may be carried out, is an unforgivable sin.³

Islam, as it appeared among the Arabs, not only revolutionized their metaphysics but also gave them a complete code of ethics based on an uncompromising monotheism and a strong sense of accountability towards God. In this process of moralization the personality of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) played an immense role. He was a perfect exemplar, an embodiment of the moral ideal *par excellence*. Through his preaching and through the grace of His mere presence he created a revolution and transformed the Arabian society into a morally and spiritually excellent people. They, in turn, became his ambassadors and spread the message of Islam to other areas of the world.

There is one thing more of far-reaching importance that Islam did. It inculcated among its devotees an urge for the acquisition of more and more knowledge and the assimilation of

wisdom. Period before the advent of Islam is known as the *jahiliyya* period. The word *jahiliyya* has two meanings. It means foolhardiness and obstinacy and it also means lack of knowledge, and the Arabs had both of these in abundance. They were so adamant in the carrying out of their false sense of prestige that, for instance, if once a quarrel was initiated even on a petty ground between two persons, it would easily develop into a full-blooded war involving their respective tribes and would continue for years together and lives of hundreds of persons would be sacrificed. They considered it a sign of weakness and positive disgrace for themselves to come to a mutual settlement with their enemies for the sake of a peaceful living. They not only believed in the 'blood for blood' principle but always craved for something more. There is no doubt that the resoluteness and determination of their character worked on the positive side also; if they took a vow to stand by someone or to achieve some goals. They would not fail to do so even against the heaviest odds. Secondly, illiteracy was almost universal among them, knowledgeable people being only the tip of the iceberg. They were totally occupied with satisfying the practical, material needs of daily life and found no time to pursue arts and sciences which are the products of a well-settled, civilized culture. They were thoroughly ignorant of the power which knowledge yields. It was Islam which introduced the Arabs to the finer virtues and declared them almost duty-bound to inculcate these virtues in themselves. They would travel for hundreds of miles in search of capable teachers. The Qur'an as well as *Hadith* literature have time and again impressed upon man the usefulness of sense-experience and reason for the exploitation of the world of nature within as also without him. If he does not take initiative in this regard he will have to give an account of the same before God.⁴ Herein lies, according to Iqbal, the essence of the finality of prophethood.

The Prophet of Islam seems to stand between the ancient and the modern world. In so far as the source of his revelation is concerned he belongs to the ancient world; in so far as the spirit of his revelation is concerned he belongs to the modern world. In him life

discovers other sources of knowledge suitable to its new direction. The birth of Islam ... is the birth of inductive intellect. In Islam prophecy reaches its perfection in discovering the need of its own abolition. This involves the keen perception that life cannot forever be kept in leading strings; that in order to achieve full self-consciousness, man must finally be thrown back on his own resources.⁵

Fired by an urge to know, the Muslims welcomed fruits of learning from whichever source these could be gleaned. They gathered the learning of the Chaldeans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks and Indians. Out of these, Greeks are the nation who had made the most prominent contribution in the philosophical disciplines. In them, therefore, Muslim philosophers evinced the keenest interest. In the account that follows we shall be especially concerned with Greek wisdom and particularly with the channels through which it came to be known by the Muslim thinkers.

To begin with, it should be clearly recognized that Greek philosophy did not reach the Muslim world as, clearly and distinctly, the philosophy of this or that philosopher – of Plato or Aristotle or anyone else. It rather reached them as a finished product and as a living force. After Aristotle, Greek philosophy, although still burdened with the metaphysical visions of the great thinkers of the past, assumed a religio-ethical character and it is specially this phase with which the earliest Muslim thinkers conversed initially. It is only later on that they were able to decipher what Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus individually contributed towards the fund of human thought. One channel through which Greek philosophy reached the Muslims was through its contact with Judaism and Christianity. This contact took place at Alexandria in Egypt. Ptolemy Soter who made Alexandria the capital of his state loved learning and the learned men. He established a museum in the capital city and a big library in which manuscripts of old books were kept. It almost became a kind of Hellenic university. Besides, books were translated there into various languages and lectures were

delivered to the students by capable teachers. Ptolemy Soter's successor Ptolemy Philadelphus developed it further still and made it almost the greatest library of the ancient world. Due to this atmosphere the city of Alexandria became a happy resort of learned people as well as students who came from far and near for the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom. Out of the triadic concussion of Greek learning, Judaism and Christianity, Christianity finally came out victorious but in this process it became coloured especially with Platonic metaphysics. Clement and Origen played an especially important role in bringing about the fusion between Christianity and Hellenism and developed a sort of philosophical theology, or, alternatively, theological philosophy. What they founded may in fact be called the Christian school of philosophical theology. Origen, later on, left Alexandria and opened a school at Caesarea in Palestine. Similar schools were opened at other places in Palestine and Asia Minor. These schools were opened in a Syriac speaking community. Works in Christian theology, which had already been smeared with Greek philosophy, were translated into the vernacular of the country. The scholars hated Greek language but, as they could not do without it, they had to learn it. They translated a great deal of it in the syriac and wrote commentaries. These translations and commentaries served as a convenient medium when the Muslim philosophers later on began to translate the works of Greek thinkers into Arabic.

Another channel through which Greek philosophy passed on to the Muslims was the school at Jundishapur in Persia. The Persian ruler Shapur who reigned in the middle of the third century AD had brought many prisoners as a result of his victory in a war with the Romans. The city founded for them was known after him Jundishapur – 'the Shapur's Camp'. King Chosroes Nushirwan made this city a very important intellectual center of the times. Greek scholars, who had left Athens after Justinian closed the philosophical school there in 529, migrated to this place and had a free contact with Syrian, Persian and Indian sages. Books on Greek learning were sent for from Greece in a large number and rendered into Persian and Syriac.

Besides the Christian and the Persian schools there also existed a Pagan school at Harran in Northern Syria which was the home of the school of star-worshippers. It was in due course instrumental in transferring much Hellenistic influence to the Arabs, especially in the fields of philosophy, medicine, mathematics and astronomy. Chief scholars at Harran were Thabit b. Qurra, his son Sinan and his two grandsons Thabit and Ibrahim.

Syria and Mesopotamia were conquered by the Muslims in 638 AD, Egypt was conquered in 649 AD and Persia in 641 AD. Thus, the entire Greek learning, already transferred into Syriac, Coptic and Persian languages, as shown above, became available to the Muslims who translated the whole literature into Arabic within the small span of a little more than one hundred years. The hectic period of these translations started almost with the accession of Al-Mansoor, the Abbaside, in 753 AD and may be supposed to have ended with the death of Al-Kindi in 873 AD or some time later. A special feature of this activity was the establishment of the well-known academy '*Bait al-Hikmat*' (literally, 'home of philosophy') by Harun al-Rashid. He gave active assistance to scholars who studied and translated works produced by Greek thinkers. Official arrangements were made to purchase a great number of Greek manuscripts for this purpose supplemented by a similar activity of private persons who spent generously on manuscripts.

Al-Mamun, who has been described as 'the greatest patron of philosophy and science in the whole checkered history of Islam',⁶ developed *Bait al-Hikmat* to a large extent and gave it immensely vast dimensions. He also attached to it an astronomical observatory where very useful observations were made. A similar observatory was later on established by him near Damascus. His immense interest in Greek learning is supposed to have been augmented by an encounter in dream with the great master Aristotle.⁷ Aristotle appeared to him as an old man of overwhelming dignity. A mutual discussion took place between them regarding the definition of good as to what is 'rationally good' or 'religiously good' or 'conventionally good'. The dream

ended up with the advice of Aristotle to the Muslim prince to remain sincere to the monotheistic creed.

Mamun sent a royal message to the Roman emperor asking him to send the books of ancient thinkers. The latter readily agreed and dispatched, as we are told, five camel-loads of books to Baghdad. This was a sizable addition to the already existing collection at the Academy. The quality of translation work was also improved. Idiomatic, instead of insipid, literal translations, were made and also explanatory and critical notes were added wherever the original was difficult and abstruse. Men like Hunayn and al-Kindi who knew both Greek and Arabic were appointed supervisors of the translation work. Hunayn, it has been reported, was so indispensably expert at his work and also so close to Mamun that, for every work of translation, he would be given in recompense gold equal to the weight of the book itself. He did his translations most accurately and on thoroughly scientific lines. Al-Kindi was specially assigned the job of translating Aristotle's works. Thus the translations were bound to be the closest possible to the originals. Under the aegis of *Bait al-Hikmat* and due to the activity of some individual learned scholars who translated some books exactly because they were personally interested in them, all the works of Empedocles, Pythagoras, Plutarch, Proclus and Plotinus were rendered into the Arabic language. Yahya b. Masawaih was the head of the Academy and played an effective role in its activities. Besides the large-scale translations work which Al-Mamun thus encouraged and supervised, he presided over meetings where philosophical and theological problems were discussed. In these discussions he displayed thorough open-mindedness and tolerance for the views of others and never imposed his own opinions on them.

The entire output of illustrious translators, only a few of whom have been mentioned above, constituted the climate of opinion which was inhaled by the Muslim philosophers, and thus they were bound to be influenced by Greek philosophy during the building up of their own thought-system. "There is a certain analogy," says De Boer, "between civilization (philosophical

speculations being a part of civilization) and an infectious disease. Both pass from one community to another by contact and, whenever either breaks out, one of our first thoughts is, where did the infection first come from?"⁸

Despite the 'infection', however, we don't have total justification for the opinion of some of the occidental writers that "Arabian philosophy ... (is) a hotchpotch of ancients into which heterogeneous matter of all kinds has been thrown and left to see the ... there is no such thing as 'Arabian philosophy' ... Arabic speaking peoples merely took over the Greek philosophy which was current among the Syrian Christians and the cultured pagan community of Harran and added thereto a few ingredients borrowed from Persia and India."⁹ or "Muslim philosophy has always continued to be an eclecticism which depended on their stock of works translated from the Greek. The course of its history has been a process of assimilation rather than of generation. It has not distinguished itself either by propounding new problems or by any peculiarity in its endeavours to solve the old ones. It has therefore no important advances in thought to register ... We can hardly speak of a Muslim philosophy in the proper sense of the term."¹⁰

Muslim philosophers had as their chief source of inspiration the teachings of the Qur'an which, as shown above, perpetually urges its readers to know more and more about the nature of existence in man as well as outside him and also about the ideals involved in human behaviour; they are in fact duty-bound to use here and now their senses and their rational faculty towards that end. Greek philosophy served as, what Whitehead termed, 'the climate of opinion' and as a strong medium for the ventilation of the inspiration that came from elsewhere. It is also undeniably true that in the beginning the 'climate' was so overwhelming that the Muslim philosophers became, for some time, oblivious of – to coin the cognate phrase – their 'local weather'. This, however, could not continue for long. Muslim philosophers soon realized, as Iqbal would describe, that the thought of the Qur'an is anti-classical.¹¹ Greek philosophy, he was rightly of the opinion, was speculative in character and concerned itself primarily with

theorization whereas the Qur'an has a concrete spirit and also it emphasizes deed rather than idea.¹² It invites its readers to observe and experience, to speculate for the fruits of experience, and to have a critical attitude towards the judgements of sense and reason. Inspired by this realization, the Muslim thinkers abandoned the role of silent uncritical acceptance and revolted against many aspects of Greek philosophy. Even if – let us suppose for a moment – Muslim *hukama* had not put Greek philosophy to a thorough, critical examination, made improvements upon it and discovered new avenues of thought, their very role of translating and thus preserving the writings of Aristotle and other Greek thinkers would have been sufficient enough to giving them a place of immense importance in the history of development of ideas. Western scholarship owes to them a great deal for its conscious awareness as well as unconscious assimilation of Greek ideas.

Revolt of Muslim intellectuals against Greek philosophy was multi-dimensional in character. They specially rose against Aristotelian logic which was deductive almost through and through. The Greeks had no sufficient awareness of the fact that it is only by scientific induction, by the enumeration of instances and by searching causal connections and uniformities operative in the universe, that thought can make genuine progress. The only kind of induction with which Aristotle was conversant was what has been known as 'intuitive induction'. Intuition, according to him, was the 'immediate' apprehension of the universal element in the particular. In other words, knowledge of the universals which lies embedded in our reason is simply aroused or made explicit by experience. Ishraqi and Ibn Taimiyya were the pioneers among Muslims in recognizing the importance of 'Induction by Simple Enumeration'. The latter, particularly, in his *Al-Radd 'ala al-Mantiqiyyeen* proved that induction is the only reliable form of argumentation. This recognition made Muslim thinkers the harbingers of the use of experimental method in the realm of natural sciences, it was in fact they who introduced this method to the West. Says Briffault in his the *Making of Humanity*:

The debt of our science to that of the Arabs does not consist in startling discoveries or revolutionary theories; science owes a great deal more to Arab culture, it owes its existence. The ancient world was, as we saw, pre-scientific. The astronomy and mathematics of the Greeks were a foreign importation never thoroughly acclimatized in Greek culture. The Greeks systematized, generalized, and theorized, but the patient ways of investigation, the accumulation of positive knowledge, the minute methods of science, detailed and prolonged observation, experimental inquiry, were altogether alien in the Greek temperament. Only in Hellenistic Alexandria was any approach to scientific work conducted in the ancient classical world. What we call science arose in Europe as a result of a new spirit of inquiry, of new methods of investigation, of the methods of experiment, observation, measurement, of the development of mathematics in a form unknown to the Greeks. That spirit and those methods were introduced into the European world by the Arabs.¹³

Given the method of observation and experiment, Muslim philosophers registered important advances in scientific thinking. In this creative process, they were, of course, greatly helped by the knowledge they had assimilated from the Greeks during the course of the work of translations etc. mentioned above. We neither have time here nor space to describe in detail what they actually achieved in the fields of various natural sciences but they appear to have made special contributions in the subject of medicine. This is perhaps due to the prophetic tradition that permitted knowledge is only of two kinds: knowledge of religions, *i.e.* theology and knowledge of bodies, *i.e.* medicine. The pioneer in this regard was Abu Bakr Razi, the Latin Phazes, who has been reckoned as "the greatest and the most original of all the Muslim physicians and one of the most prolific as an author."¹⁴ He also wrote on anatomy as well we on alchemy, astronomy and mathematics. He is recorded to have written more than 200 books. One of his most celebrated works is *On Small-Pox and Measles* which was translated into many languages

including English and was widely read and used by medical theorists and practitioners. However, his detailed and immensely comprehensive work is *al-Hawi*, which comprised of more than 20 volumes dealing with various diseases, their symptoms and cures etc. Ibn Sina is less known as a physician than as a philosopher but his influence on European medicine has been overwhelmingly great. He is the author of, besides some fifteen other small tracts, the gigantic *al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* (Canons of Medicine). This encyclopedic work was so much in demand by students in universities and colleges for many years that a number of editions and reprints of it as a whole or in parts were published. Ibn Rushd too, besides his vast contributions in the realms of philosophy and law, produced a number of medical treatises including the well-known *Kulliyat fi al-Tibb* (General Rules of Medicine) which underwent several reprints and translations. Besides, a number of manuscripts were prepared by Muslim authors on specialized branches of the subjects like anatomy, ophthalmology, optics and so on. Ibn Masawayh has to his credit the oldest extant, systematic treatise on ophthalmology. A book entitled *al-'Ashr Maqalat fi al-'Ayn* (The Ten Treatises on the Eye) by Hunayn Ishaq has recently been published with an English translation. Ibn al-Haytham's excellence in optics is uncontested and well-established. Abu Raihan Mohammad al-Biruni is also one of the prominent Muslim scientists who wrote on medicine, astronomy, mathematics, physics, history and geography. Besides al-Biruni, philosophers who excelled particularly in mathematics and astronomy were al-Khawarizmi, Omar Khayyam, Nasir al-Din Tusi and so on. Jabir bin Hayyan is acclaimed as the greatest name in the field of chemical sciences. He acted on the assumption that metals like tin, lead, iron, copper etc. could be transmuted into gold or silver with the help of a substance towards the discovery of which principle he carried on his experimental investigations. He "described scientifically the two principal operations of chemistry: calcinations and reduction. He improved on the methods for evaporation, sublimation, melting and crystallization. But the claim that he knew how to prepare crude sulphuric and nitric acids and mix them supposedly with salt so as to produce

aqua regia is unsubstantiated. In general, Jabir modified the Aristotelian theory of the constituents of metal in a way that survived, with slight alterations, until the beginning of modern chemistry in the eighteenth century." Ikhwan al-Safa (Brethren of Purity) wrote an encyclopedia composed of fifty-two treatises, seventeen of which deal with natural sciences. Al-Farabi, Khawarizmi and Ibn al-Nadeem did very useful work in the classification of sciences. The last author's *al-Fihrist* is even today recognized as a treasure-house of information and is most profitably consulted by researchers and scholars.

The entire fund of knowledge and scientific information amassed by Muslim thinkers was in due course transmitted to the West through its Latin translations. Constantine, a Christian monk and scholar, was among the pioneers in this regard. He travelled through the east and made translations into Latin from the Arabic translations of Greek works as also from the original works of Muslim scholars especially in the fields of medical and alchemical sciences. During this act of transmittance no thinker appears to have influenced European medicine more than Razi and Ibn Sina. Not long after the death of Ibn Sina, his works reached Spain and Sicily where they were translated and interpreted and wherefrom their influence travelled to the entire European continent. Many students from Italy, Spain and France visited Muslim schools in order to study mathematics, medicine, cosmography, geography, natural sciences and so on. It is these students who ultimately became teachers in various universities in the West and thus became the ambassadors-at-large of Muslim learning and scholarship.

Toledo in Spain, which was one of the most illustrious centers of Muslim learning in the West, was conquered by the Christians in 1085 AD and thus Muslim learning was practically thrown open to the whole of Europe. A translation bureau was established there which can be conveniently compared to the celebrated *Bait al-Hikmat* earlier established in Baghdad by Harun al-Rashid, primarily for doing Arabic translations of Greek works. Archbishop Raymond I was the founder of the Toledo school of translations which functioned under the

direction of Archdeacon Dominico Gundisalvus. Chief translators of Arabic works into Latin were Ibn Dawud, Gerard of Cremona, Rufino, Abraham, Simon of Genoa and host of others. Gerard is specially reckoned as the 'real father of Arabism in Europe'.¹⁶ At this school not only the scientific works of Muslim thinkers, but also books on philosophy and metaphysics by Muslim philosophers like Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ghazali, Ibn Rushd and others were translated into Latin. Critics and scholars have done very useful work in tracing the influence of specific Muslim metaphysical doctrines on Western thinkers like Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz and Kant.¹⁷ This is an independent subject of great importance and needs a separate comprehensive treatment.

NOTES

- 1 The Arabs used to raise the question: Who will give life to the bones when they are rotten? (Qur'an, 36:78).
- 2 They used to say: There is naught but our life of the world; we die and we live and nothing destroys us but time. (Qur'an, 45:24)
- 3 The Qur'an says: Surely Allah forgives not that a partner should be set up with Him, and forgives all besides that to whom He pleases (5:48).
- 4 Qur'an, 17:36.
- 5 'Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 100-101.
- 6 Majid Fakhry, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 11.
- 7 See Maulana Mohammad Ishaq Bhatti (tr.), *Al-Fihrist*, pp. 569-570.
- 8 De Boer, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*, p. 1.
- 9 Sir Thomas Arnold and Alfred Guillaume (eds.), *The Legacy of Islam*, article by Alfred Guillaume, p. 239.
- 10 De Boer, *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, pp. 28-30.
- 11 'Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- 12 *Ibid*, p. xxi.
- 13 p. 191.
- 14 Edward Brown, *Arabian Medicine*, p. 44.
- 15 Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 381.
- 16 Sir Thomas Arnold and Alfred Guillaume (eds.), *op. cit.*, article by Max Meyerhof, p. 347.
- 17 For instance see M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Volume II, pp. 1349-1388.