

PART TWO

PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING AND IDEOLOGY

Chapter III

Historical Dynamics of the Arab-Islamic Philosophy

No great moment in human thought has, without doubt, been—and remains—more unfairly treated by philosophical historians than the moment of Islamic philosophy. The ancient historians and doxographers consider it like a foreign object and like a set of “imported sciences” against which they protested, and treated it like an orphan child, perhaps even like an illegitimate one. Some contemporary Arab authors, while rehashing past conflicts in their writings and while consciously or unconsciously engaging in them, continue to echo such judgment and take the same position against Islamic philosophy as the ancient theologians did, sometimes assuming the persona of a Ghazali¹, sometimes that of an Ibn Taymiyya², but very rarely the less partial persona of a Shahrastani. As for the orientalists and those Arab scholars who followed their path, they merely consider it as a continuation of Greek philosophy during the Hellenic era which amounts once again to making it a foreign “body” totally isolated inside the Arab-Islamic society. Some of these orientalists themselves do not hesitate to resuscitate, in their own way, the tensions amongst Medieval Arab thinkers, accusing Islamic thought of inconsistency and sterility, and taking a partial stance with theology and with Sufism. As for the leftist Arab intellectuals, their research in the end only stands out by the way it rechannels the broad outline of the theses that inspire historical materialism. They sometimes speak of class struggle, other times of “historical conspiracy,” and yet other



times of the struggle between “materialism” and “idealism,” without ever going beyond the general framework of their preconceived schema.

Although all these positions may differ as to the origins of their inspiration or as to their goals, they ultimately lead to the same outcome: dissociating philosophical thinking in Islam from its cultural, political, social and civilization contexts, which means disfiguring its identity and its role and suppressing the true course of its evolution.

In order to de-alienate the consciousness that the Arabs have of their history, we must “put things back in place,” in the very heart of this history and first rethink all those ahistorical conceptions that have been shaping Arab consciousness to this day, imposing on it a representation of its history that disseminates its coherence. The Arab-Islamic philosophy, one of the fragments of this history, is the first victim of those conceptions. Its “story” was always written outside of its own history, the one it contributed to construct. That thought which, earlier on, we asked the reader to examine as a whole, as a unity, since it does revolve around one and the same problematic, belonged itself during its heyday to a larger entity and was a component within a whole: that of the medieval Arab-Islamic society, a whole that encompasses the economic, the social, the cultural, the religious aspects, etc. We must therefore look at this philosophy within the framework of this unity and in light of its contradictions and its conflicts if we really want to write its “story” within history itself rather than within an indefinite elsewhere.

Arab-Islamic philosophy, if understood along these lines, will prove to be a militant ideological discourse that is committed to the service of science, progress and a dynamic conception of society; which means that its enemies in the past had always come from among the reactionary and conservative elements of society, often among those whose ethnic or class interests forced history to move backwards.



This phenomenon could be seen as early as the period when the first Arabic translations of the great texts from Greek philosophy had been commissioned. This work, carried out at the beginning of the Abbassid era, mostly under the reign of the Caliph al-Ma'mun,³ was by no means an "innocent" operation or a "neutral" educational endeavor naturally flowing from the intellectual evolution of the time. Instead, it was part of a broader strategy used by the—newly established—Abbassid dynasty to confront hostile forces, namely the Persian aristocracy who, anxious for revenge, had resolved to fight on the ideological front following their failed attempts on the political and social fronts.⁴

This aristocracy, which had espoused the cause of the "descendants of the Prophet's family" (*ahl al-bayt*)⁵ during their revolution against the Omeyyad State, had understood very well that power, within the Arab-Islamic society of those days, was of an ideological order. It was ideology, in this case Islam, that secured secular domination, by helping to attenuate or sublimate tribal conflicts, quell or avert social conflicts [through conquests]. This aristocracy therefore decided to go into action on the very [battle]field where the strength of the Arab State resided, the [battle]field of ideology. The weapon it chose to use was its own cultural and religious heritage based upon gnosticism, i.e., the belief in the existence of a source of knowledge other than reason, illumination, or divine inspiration that does not cease with the end of the prophecy,⁶ a "continuous revelation" that does not leave any room for either reason or transmission.

The Persian aristocracy thus launched a large ideological offensive, using a religious-cultural heritage that drew its inspiration from Zoroastrianism⁷, Manicheism,⁸ and Mazdaism⁹ in order to discredit the religion of the Arabs and undermine its foundations and thus overthrow the Arab power-state. In retaliation to these attacks, the early Abbassid state encouraged the Mu'tazilite theologians by officially adopting their doctrine, and by importing, translating and distributing scientific and philosophical works produced by the heredi-



tary foes of the Persians (the Byzantine Greeks). Caliph al-Ma'mun's "dream," real or not, was in any case by no means innocent. It did not come about out of pure interest for Aristotle, but rather to thwart Zoroaster and Manes.

The task of the Arab-Islamic philosophy of the future was therefore clearly defined from the time when it was only a project, the time of the early translations. It had to become a weapon against the ideological offensive of gnosticism which was aimed at the very foundations of the state.

On the other hand, it was natural that the support lent to the Mu'tazilites by the Abbassid caliphs—which support was said to have been originally motivated by the necessity to resist the gnostic offensive—would provoke the wrath of the "partisans of the Prophet's Tradition" (*ahl al-sunna*),¹⁰ opponents of the Mu'tazilites, and the rage of the literalist jurists (*fuqaha*). All of these angry opponents used their diatribes against the sciences of the "ancient ones"¹¹ and against philosophy as a convenient means to express a veiled opposition to the state that had sponsored the translations of scientific texts and the spread of philosophy. Philosophy was thus forced to face two indomitable enemies simultaneously: gnosticism (which later became Sufism) and the traditionalist jurists. The gnostics realized that their theses could very easily be sullied and discredited by the Mu'tazilites' dialectical logic. This logic was based on the reasoning method that establishes the legitimacy of the knowledge of an *in absentia* element, the object-to-know, from an *in praesentia* element that can be observed in the world of empirical data. Any knowledge that is based on illumination¹² could not compete with such [reasoning] method. Consequently, the gnostics, aware of the superiority that their opponents alone had in the area of "ancient sciences," once again shielded themselves behind Shi'ism and, this time, succeeded in using it to their ideological advantage. They, in turn, resorted to the "sciences of the ancient ones" (particularly the magical sciences) and used them in the Shi'ite thought under whose cover



they were now working. It was from this that Isma‘ilism¹³ and the *Epistles of the Brothers of Purity*¹⁴ had emerged. Now, the two opponents were holding the same weapon in hand and as a result, the “partisans of tradition” were able to stand as a third force, the alternative as it were. This explains the “coup d’etat”—against the Mu‘tazilites—under the caliphate of al-Murawakkil.¹⁵ Hence, the debate began to form around the opposition between partisans of “transmission” and partisans of “reason,” between the reactionary and conservative forces that held the power and the opposition forces represented by society’s upwardly mobile strata who aspired to a state built on reason, brotherhood and justice. It was philosophy which helped articulate this debate.

¹ Cf. note 4 of Chapter II

² Taqiy al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (661-728/1263-1328) was born in Harran (northern Mesopotamia) and died in prison in Damascus. He was a major figure of the Hanbalite traditionalist theology and therefore a most vehement opponent to the philosophers’ position. He is the author of *al-Radd ‘ala al-mantiqiyyin* (Refutation of the Logicians), which spoke against the abuses of philosophy and theology and against the major theses of the great philosophers (Farabi, Avicenna), while advocating a return to the ancient scholars’ (*salaf*) orthodox methods. He became famous for his virulent criticism of Shi‘ism and of Sufism (Ibn ‘Arabi). A few centuries later, he inspired what they called the modern Hanbalite renewal, namely the Wahhabite movement in the eighteenth century, then the Salafite fundamentalist reform in the nineteenth century.

³ He was the seventh Abbassid caliph (198-218/813-833), son of Harun al-Rashid and of a Persian concubine. In 211/827, he proclaimed Mu‘tazilism (cf. note 11 of chapter 2) as state doctrine and thus became at odds with the traditionalist circles. He founded a prestigious scientific institution, called the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikma*), to push for the translation and the distribution of Greek science texts.

⁴ The ancient Arab scholars report that Caliph al-Ma‘mun had presumably commissioned the translation of Aristotle’s works after seeing the latter in a dream. This story is reported by Ibn al-Nadiim (died 385/995), author of *The Fihrist* (The Catalogue), as follows: Caliph al-Ma‘mun saw, in his dream, a light-skin,



red-faced man, with a wide forehead and conjoined eyebrows. He was bald with dark-blue eyes, had friendly manners and was sitting in a chair. "I was," said al-Ma'mun, "almost touching him, so to speak, and that made me feel a great fear. I asked him: 'Who are you?' 'I am Aristotle,' he answered. This made me rejoice so I told him: 'Oh wise one I am going to ask you something.' He said: 'Ask.' I told him: 'What is good?' 'What is good according to reason,' he answered. I told him: 'And after?' 'What is good according to the revelation,' he answered. I told him: 'And after?' 'What is good in the eyes of all,' he answered. I told him: 'And after?' 'After, there is no after,' he answered." (Ibn al-Nadiim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*, ed. Flügel, p. 343).

M. A. al-Jabri notes that Aristotle's answers come in appropriately handy in support of the Mu'tazilites' position: [that] reason is first, then [comes] the revelation, then [comes] collective opinion. As for the sentence "after, there is no after," it means that there is no other access to knowledge. This is a clear refutation of gnosticism and illuminism. This dream is therefore aimed at the gnosticism of the Manicheans...

⁵ The expression "descendants of the Prophet's family" or "people of the House" (*ahl al-bayt*) refers to the descendance of 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and that of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet. A wing of this political-religious opposition to the Omeyyad rule, having taken shape around the claim to the "Imamate" by members of this lineage, is at the origin of the Shi'ite branch of Islam. During the period that preceded the Abbassid revolt against the Omeyyad rule in Damascus, feelings of loyalty to the Prophet's descendants began to spread in Iran by way of secret propagandists (*da'i*) coming from Iraq. Several networks of diverse persuasions had become involved in this action which was the work of a revolutionary movement and which gave hopes to pretenders to various titles, ranging from 'Ali's descendants to those of Al-'Abbas, the Prophet's uncle. It was the latter who, after ousting 'Ali's followers, founded the Abbassid's dynasty.

⁶ In the Islamic tradition, the Qur'anic revelation is designated as the last of all revelations sent by God to humans and the prophet Muhammad is referred to as the "seal of prophets."

⁷ Ancient religion of Iran, born of a reform of Indo-Iranian Mazdaism. It was the official religion during the Sassanid era before the Islamic conquest. Its origins go back to around 700 or 800 B.C. and its founder, Zoroaster (Zarathustra), is the author of the *Gatha* hymns that were subsequently included in the Zoroastrian holy book, the (Zend) *Avesta*. His teachings influenced some of the later religions, namely his doctrine of *post mortem* resurrection, the existence of the soul, of Heaven and Hell, the end of times and of the world following a battle between the forces



of good and those of evil and the belief in a universal doomsday. The Koran calls Zoroastrians *Majus*. From the time of 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab's caliphate on, the Muslim authorities recognized the status of Zoroastrians as "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*), endowed with a revealed religion. Their status was that of tributaries (*dhimmis*) and were thus not forced to embrace Islam.

⁸ The religion of Manes, a Persian prophet who was born in 216 A.D. He was originally from Mesopotamia and was raised among a "Baptist" Judeo-Christian sect; and just before the Sassanid Persian empire was established, he founded his own religion. Manes was backed by the early Sassanid leaders who saw in his "syncretist" doctrine a potential support for their imperial and supranational rule, but he later had to face a reactionary movement by the Mazdean clergy who accused supporters of Manes of being heretics (*zindiqs*). Manes was imprisoned and, according to his followers, probably "made-martyr" in 277. Manes' doctrine purported to be the inner and secret truth of all religions. It encompassed elements from Christianity, from Zoroastrianism, from Greek paganism, from Buddhism and from Taoism. It was based on the principle of duality which considers that good and evil are both active poles of the same reality, both possessing an essence and a reality that is independent from the other one's reality. The Manichean cosmology calls for the idea of a creation by emanation of the "good God" in the darkness. Light and darkness coexist in the world, and man's salvation consists in safeguarding the light that is buried within him. Manicheism survived as a belief and as a highly structured "clandestine" organization. It became a real threat to Muslim rule at the beginning of the Abbassid era when it was considered as *zandaqa* (nonbelief) and was combatted.

⁹ The religion of Mazdak (sixth century A.D.), a Mazdean priest who became a dissident from the Zoroastrian orthodoxy. He preached the communal sharing of women and wealth as well as duality like Manes. The Persian Emperor Kavadh, known to the Arabs as Qubadh (488-531), first adhered to this form of worship but ended up being convinced of its unorthodox character. Mazdak and his followers were put to death by Khosraw Anusharvan.

¹⁰ That is to say the traditionalists who asserted the primacy of tradition over reason. This trend was represented by masters like Ibn Hanbal (died 241/855), who was persecuted under al-Ma'mun's reign for having refused to subscribe to the Mu'tazilite thesis of the created Koran.

¹¹ *'Ulum al-'awa'il* or *'Ulum al-'aqdamin*. The Muslims of those days used these terms to refer to the sciences (i.e., philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astrology etc.) inherited from ancient civilizations (e.g., Greek, Persian, Indian, etc.).

¹² Regarding the notions of "indication" (*bayan*), "demonstration" (*burhan*) and "illumination" (*irfan*) as used by M.A. al-Jabri.

¹³ It is an offshoot of Shi'ism born from the split that occurred following the death of al-Sadiq (died 148/765), the sixth "imam" in Ali's lineage who had designated his son Isma'il as successor. But Isma'il prematurely died before his father. Consequently, al-Sadiq, shortly before his own death, had re-assigned his succession to one of his other children, Musa al-Kadhim. A group of disciples, who were especially drawn to the esoteric scientific work of Imam Ja'far, had formed around Imam Isma'il. This group gave birth to the seven-imam system within the Isma'ilian Shi'ism. The majority of Shi'ites, who recognize the legitimacy of Musa al-Kadhim and his descendants up to the twelfth imam ("disappeared" in 329/940 and "expected" at the end of times), represent the twelve-imam system in Shi'ism.

¹⁴ These were scientific and philosophical texts that came out around the time of the Buyid protectorate in Iraq (fourth/tenth century). They were thought to have been written by the "Brothers of Purity" (*Ikhwan al-Safa'*), a philosophical-religious society from Basra. This group had sprung from among those Isma'ilians who had dedicated themselves to secret propaganda from around 148/765. These epistles, a kind of Shi'ite propagandist encyclopedia, were divided in four types: mathematics, physics, psychological-intellectual and theological-juridical. The philosophical vision of the "Brothers" shows a neo-platonist emanationist character with a pronounced neo-Pythagoreanism. Some sources attribute the writing of the *Epistles* to a descendant of "Imam" Isma'il who may have lived during the period of "occultation" in the Isma'ilian lineage. He is said to have written the texts to counter al-Ma'mun, his Abbassid contemporary, who used Greek sciences in the service of his political-religious project. According to this hypothesis, the *Epistles* go back to the third/ninth century.

¹⁵ This caliph, who ruled from 232/847-247/861, reversed his uncle al-Ma'mun's religious policy. He used the traditionalists' help to strengthen his rule and in return freed Ibn Hanbal, their spiritual leader (cf. note 10) and persecuted the Mu'tazilites.

