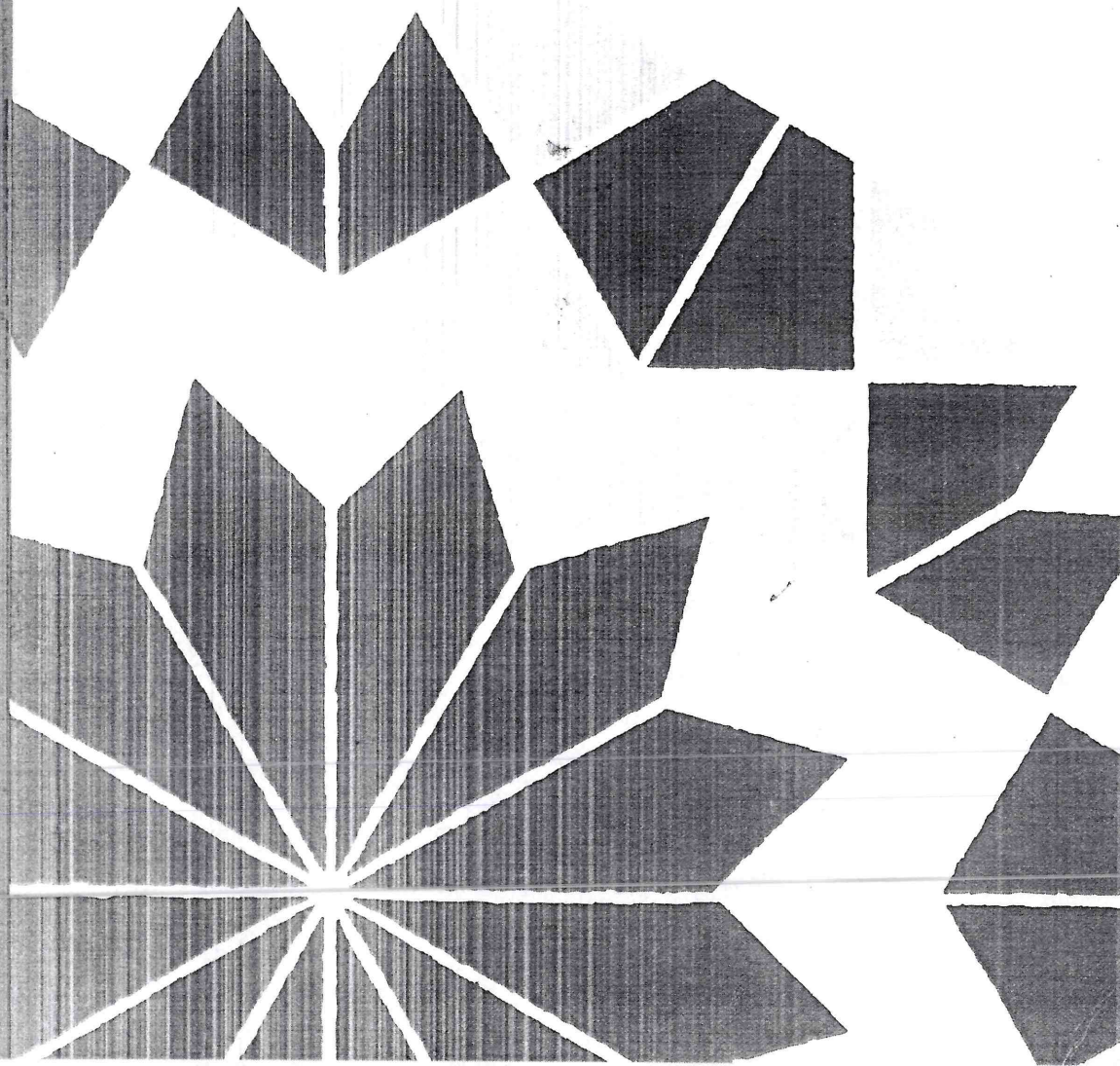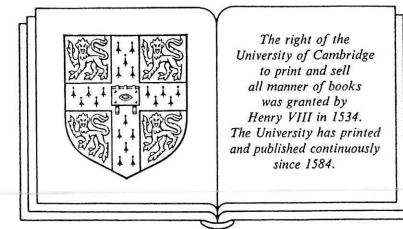An Introduction to
Medieval Islamic
Philosophy

An introduction to medieval Islamic philosophy

Oliver Leaman
Lecturer in Philosophy, Liverpool Polytechnic

To my father and the memory of my mother

U.P.

relevant to contemporary philosophical issues. It is not necessary to relate Islamic philosophy to modern philosophical thought, nor to the continuation of the themes of Islamic philosophy among the Scholastics such as Aquinas. It would be very interesting to carry out a detailed investigation of the relation between the arguments of Islamic philosophy and more recent arguments which proceed on roughly similar lines. It would also be interesting to see precisely how Scholastic thought was influenced by Islamic philosophy. It is not the purpose of this book to explore these fascinating issues, but rather to carry out a far more modest task. This is to discuss some of the leading themes of Islamic philosophy by analysing the arguments of some of the most important philosophers concerned, and by relating those arguments to Greek philosophy on the one hand and to the principles of religion on the other. In this way I hope that the book will be accessible and useful both to philosophers who know nothing about Islam and the Arabic language, and to orientalists who are unpractised in philosophy.

Introduction

Although this book is in no way a guide to the religion and history of Islam itself, it is as well to consider some of the main aspects of that religion before discussing the contribution which philosophy sought to make to it. We might naturally start by considering Muḥammad, the son of 'Abd Allah and Amīna, a member of the tribe of Quraish, who was born in Mecca in the late sixth century AD. Although his parents were of distinguished lineage, they were far from wealthy, and Muḥammad's father died before his son's birth while his mother died when he was about six years old. He was brought up first by his grandfather and later by his uncle, and spent a great deal of time as a youth and young man in the hills which are near to Mecca guarding his family's flocks of sheep. His fortunes improved when in his mid-twenties he married an older and wealthy widow, whose business affairs he came to manage. Yet it is said that he often spent time alone in the hills of his youth to consider the tribal warfare which caused such great loss of life in Arabia and the idolatry and loose behaviour which prevailed in the local towns. When he was about forty years old he started to hear a voice, interpreted as coming from the angel Gabriel, which commanded him to recite the revelations which were thus made to him.

The sum of those revelations were eventually written down in the Koran (or 'recitation'). This consists of a highly variegated set of elements, with pictures of heaven and hell and warnings about the consequences of immorality, legal regulations and accounts of the tasks of former prophets. The Koran is a confirmation of the teachings and messages of such prophets, including Abraham who is said to have built the shrine (Ka'ba) at Mecca, Moses the legislator of the Jews and Jesus son of Mary, who was not as the Christians insist killed upon the Cross at all, since God substituted a likeness of him at the last moment. The messages which Muḥammad transmitted were critical of the arrogance and egoism of the rich and powerful, and also of the gods whose shrines in Mecca made the town a place of pilgrimage and so were a source of economic power. It is hardly surprising that the messenger and his followers were eventually obliged to leave the city and take up residence in the oasis of Yathrib, afterwards named Medina (or 'the city') about two hundred miles to the north. This migration (*hijra*) is the event which initiated the Muslim calendar, and it is worth noting that the start of the Muslim era is not reckoned from the

birth of Muḥammad nor from the commencement of the revelation, but rather from the creation of an Islamic community. At first, this community represented just another community in the large mosaic of tribes at that time, yet by the time of Muḥammad's death his community controlled not just Mecca and Medina but was the most powerful force in Arabia. Only twenty years after his death it had overthrown the Persian empire and captured all the Asian territories of the Roman empire except the area that is now modern Turkey. Only a hundred years after his death there existed a considerable empire which extended from the Pyrenees to the Punjab, and from the Sahara to Samarkand.

While Muḥammad lived there was no doubt as to the rightful leadership of the community, but when he died it became necessary to select a *khalīfah*, or successor to the messenger of God. This person could not himself be a messenger, since Muḥammad was the last one, and the criteria for selection became a controversial issue in the community. One section of the Islamic community, which later turned out to be a minority, argued that the Prophet had appointed his successor – his son-in-law and cousin, 'Alī. This group came to be known as the Shī'a, or followers of 'Alī. The majority, on the contrary, took the view that Muḥammad had knowingly left the question of his succession open, passing the responsibility of deciding who would be best suited to assume the leadership to the community itself. These Muslims came to be known as the Sunnīs, or the adherents of tradition (Sunna), a description which is supposed to emphasize their following of principles rather than personalities. Yet the Shī'ī case is a good deal broader than a simple reliance upon Muḥammad's putative choice of 'Alī and the latter's personal qualities. There is also the theoretical principle that, given God's justice and grace towards human beings, it is inconceivable that he should have left the question of leadership open. The first civil war in the Islamic community occurred when 'Alī became fourth caliph in suspicious circumstances, the third caliph 'Uthmān from the Umayya tribe having been murdered in Medina in AD 656. When 'Alī died his supporters looked for a more appropriate representative of spiritual leadership than that available among the rich and worldly Umayyads. They naturally looked towards 'Alī's sons (and Muḥammad's grandsons) Ḥasan and Ḥusain, who were not powerful enough, however, to prevent the formation of an Umayyad dynasty. The Shī'ites argued that the legitimate authority in the Islamic community lay with the Prophet's family, and only the rule of Muḥammad's legitimate heir could bring to an end the injustice and exploitation of the existing régime and replace it with a political system based upon the Koran and the example of Muḥammad. At various times Shī'ite régimes have come to dominate some territories in the Islamic empire, and the basic principles of Shī'ism have become fragmented into

many different sects. The first few centuries of Islam have seen a large variety of movements who have all attempted to restore what they have interpreted as the authentic doctrine of Islam in place of the unsatisfactory status quo.

The principle task of Islamic government is to establish obedience to God and his law as laid down in the Koran, although in practice the Koran has had to be interpreted in particular ways to cope with new situations, situations which were dealt with in terms of the Traditions (*ḥadīth*) concerning the doings and sayings of Muḥammad. The political and social upheavals so prevalent in early Islam were not regarded as merely struggles for power by different groups but as religious disputes made concrete by political and military action. Apart from the caliphs, then, another source of power and influence was to be found in those learned individuals ('*ulamā*') who had considerable knowledge of Islamic law and who were capable of interpreting novel and difficult cases. The judgments of the '*ulamā*' were gradually built up into a system of law or *sharī'a*, which specified the way of life ordained for human beings by God. Of course, different schools of jurisprudence arose, yet within the Sunnī community no one of them was regarded as exclusively true, and where they agreed their judgments were held to be obligatory. Although the '*ulamā*' were certainly not regarded as priests, they did come to wield authority as legitimizers of régimes and witnesses to their doctrinal orthodoxy. Only the first four caliphs after Muḥammad came to be regarded as really orthodox, and many of the succeeding administrations clearly owed their position more to secular power than to religious authority. Nevertheless, the '*ulamā*' were frequently significant politically in providing particular rulers with their Islamic credentials, and as such their suspicion of philosophy became something of a thorn in the side of philosophers in the medieval Islamic world.

From the early years of Islam, then, the community was involved in a number of controversies which occasionally struck at the very essence of the religion. Disputes took place on all fronts, not just between different military powers, but also between different interpretations of the Koran and its law, different views on the legitimacy of government and religious behaviour, so that the notion of the Muslim way of life became something of an essentially contested concept. But none of these controversies were *philosophical* in the sense that they embodied the sort of philosophical thinking which came later to be transmitted from the Greeks to the Islamic world. This kind of philosophy first appeared in the ninth century AD under the 'Abbāsid dynasty, the successors of the Umayyads. The 'Abbāsids transferred the capital of the empire to Baghdad from Damascus, a significant move since the 'Abbāsids had gained control largely due to the

support of the Shī'ite Persians, a non-Arab people with a highly developed culture of their own. Since the Umayyad dynasty, the empire had contained the whole of the area in which Greek thought had spread, with the exception of Europe still under the control of Byzantium. Under the 'Abbāsids not only Syria and Egypt but also Persia came into the empire, all areas with a long history of Greek cultural and scientific influence. To a large extent the interest in Greek sciences such as medicine, astrology and mathematics was practical and regarded as useful among the administrative élite in these territories. It was within this context that the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Ma'mūn founded in AD 832 the House of Wisdom (*bayt al-ḥikma*), which was designed both to encourage and bring some order into the development of Greek influence on Islamic philosophy and science in his realms. This institution comprised not just an observatory but also a library, with a team of translators directed to transmitting originally Greek texts into Arabic.

We might wonder, though, how a basically Greek set of ideas, domesticated in Greek religion and culture, and expressed in the Greek language, came to fascinate intellectuals in a radically dissimilar society in which knowledge of Greek was lacking in Jews and Muslims and where the religions of Judaism and Islam were very different from the religious beliefs of the Greeks. The means of transmission were through the mediating force of Christianity and its eventual assimilation of Greek thought. Although for quite a lengthy period philosophy and Christianity were mutually antagonistic, Christian thinkers came to use philosophy, or at least philosophical techniques, in order to provide a rational justification for religion while still insisting on its divine origin. For example, the development of patristic theology in the fourth century AD by St Basil in the East and St Augustine in the West employed elements of Stoicism and Platonism in many of its arguments. The continuation of the traditional Greek philosophical curriculum in the schools of Athens, Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria made it available to the Muslim conquerors of these areas. Especially important was the way in which the competing Syriac churches, the Nestorians and the Jacobites, adapted various philosophical texts to further their doctrinal controversies and so made these available to the Muslims who lived in the same areas.

What motives did the Christians have for incorporating Greek ideas into their thinking? Since the Bible was regarded as the criterion of truth, those Greek ideas (and there are many of them) which are, at least superficially, incompatible with biblical truth were by and large discarded. Yet many Christians were eager to represent their faith in such a way that it was possible to maintain a notion of continuity between Christianity and Greek accounts of the correct way of living. This might seem a little surprising.

After all, the Christian revelation is a covenant of God's relation in history with a specific group of people, the Jews, and their spiritual successors, the Christians, with whom God has established a new covenant in place of the old. The specificity of the historical basis of this relationship is apparently opposed to the entirely general characteristics of philosophy, consisting as it does of universal rules of reasoning. The fact that Christians were interested in converting the world to their religion and thus broadening the particular relationship between God and his people to include everyone else meant that they became involved in presenting their religious doctrines in as universal a form as possible.

There were aspects of Platonism which Christians did reject out of hand as idolatrous. For example, the belief in the existence of a hierarchy of subordinate deities through whom God works in the world and communicates with his creatures was beyond the bounds of acceptability for orthodox Christians and Muslims. The orthodox position of both religions is that God is entirely apart from the world which he has made and is only available to us through such revelation of himself which he may provide. But many of the Islamic philosophers accepted the Greek view that God communicates his divinity as far as possible to the world and all its parts through the variety of immortal 'souls' lower than him, and so is accessible to a degree to all his creatures via their existing religious traditions. Despite a well-developed hostility to philosophical views which could be seen as offering competing religious hypotheses, Greek philosophy was studied by Christians seeking arguments and argument forms which would be useful in doctrinal disputes in Christianity itself and in disputes with followers of other faiths. What made the study of Greek philosophy by Muslims possible at all was the existence of more-or-less reliable translations of an eclectic range of philosophical texts into Arabic, chiefly by Christian scholars. From AD 750 to 1000, a large number of translations were made, some directly from the Greek and some from Syriac versions of the original. The standard is very variable, as is hardly surprising given the basic differences between Greek and Semitic languages, and the difficulty of the subject matter, yet some translations are impressive in their accuracy. The interest in Greek philosophy led to the commissioning of translations of a good deal of Plato and Aristotle, and a substantial body of Neoplatonic works. Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus and John Philoponous were well known, as were the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisias. Some books were described as by Aristotle which definitely were not, such as the *Theology of Aristotle* (in reality Books IV–VI of Plotinus' *Enneads*) and the *Liber de Causis* (by Proclus). Since many philosophers were also doctors and interested in science there were many translations too of Galen, Hippocrates, Euclid and Archimedes.

Yet it would be a mistake to regard philosophy in Islam as starting with

the translation of Greek texts. Interestingly, philosophical distinctions arose in Islamic theology without any apparent direct connection with philosophy, but rather through the development of appropriate rules of legal reasoning. When Islam was established in the seventh century the legal norms seemed rather elementary, with the right and wrong paths being determined by reference to the Koran and the Traditions (ḥadīth), which embody supposedly reliable accounts of the practices and beliefs of the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions. Interpretative difficulties were to be dealt with by a consensus of the learned and independent reasoning was frowned on. The text of the Koran was taken to be decisive, as opposed to independent sources and principles. But the rapid expansion of Islam and its rule over highly sophisticated civilizations made necessary the assimilation of a great number of foreign legal elements, which initially were often subjected to a process of Islamization and identification as Koranic. Foreign practices and customs were absorbed into Islam by means of legal devices. Yet Islamic law (sharī'a) is based on religious texts and supposedly requires no further justification. In the absence of a notion of natural law in most Islamic theology, and the corresponding idea of ethical and rational values which impose themselves on God, or which he imposes on himself or which are inherent in him, there is no a priori standard by which to assess human laws and norms other than reference to some religious criterion. Islamic law is flexible enough to accept that it is difficult to claim certainty in all cases, and many jurists are satisfied with solutions which are more just than other solutions.

There are some interesting legal devices which obviously have philosophical relevance. One of these is that a figurative meaning (ta'wīl) may be preferred to the apparent meaning (ẓāhir) of a religious text if the former is normally admissible for the expression in question, is required for the understanding of the text and is supported by a convincing piece of evidence. In fact, the application of this interpretative device was strictly controlled and very limited. Another philosophically relevant distinction is between terms which are equivocal and those which are unequivocal and so have only one sense. Thirdly, a text which is rather imprecise and loose can be taken, if there is appropriate evidence, in a more precise and determined sense. The movement from the particular to the general via analogy (qiyās) is also very important. The sorts of issues which arise here are legion. Do the texts which refer to 'Muslims' and 'believers' cover women and slaves? The Koran threatens with a 'painful punishment' those who store up gold and silver without spending them in the way of God (IX, 34): is this text supposed to establish a norm that implies the deduction of the tithe from all objects of gold and silver? Does this include jewellery and precious stones? There was a great deal of controversy in

Sunnite Islam over the appropriate use of analogy, with some strongly opposed to its use at all, and much argument over particular cases even when its use was agreed. The introduction of Greek logic as a rival to the established Islamic reasoning process of analogy led to a good deal of argument, too. But, clearly, even before Greek logic was available, there were philosophical arguments going on in the field of jurisprudence, disputes concerning the nature of law, analogy and meaning, and it is not unnatural to suppose that some Muslim jurists might have welcomed the contribution which Aristotelian logic could make to conceptual clarification in this area.

The development of theology became an issue when Muslims felt the need to systematize the metaphysical world-view of Islam, which meant that there was now a need to reconcile apparent contradictions and difficulties. A particular difficulty was the reconciliation of God's omnipotence and omniscience with his beneficence given the problem of the human capacity to do evil and to be punished accordingly. Another popular theological topic was the appropriate interpretation of anthropomorphic language in the Koran in spite of the fact that the Koran is clear in stating that God does not have a body. One might have expected that the development of interest in Greek philosophy would have led theologians to seek new logical instruments in their theoretical discussions which would be transformed by the import of powerful philosophical concepts. But this did not happen. The philosophers in the Islamic world (who were frequently known as falāsifa, a term significantly derived from the Greek language rather than native to Arabic) were rather contemptuous in their philosophical (although not necessarily in their theological) works of the dialectical and so inferior modes of reasoning which the theologians employed. However, the difference between demonstrative and dialectical reasoning is not between a valid and an invalid procedure, but merely between working with premisses which have already been established as certain and unchallengeable, in the case of demonstration, and working with premisses which are generally accepted but not logically established, in the case of dialectic. In theology the premisses are taken from a religious doctrine, which the philosophers assumed could not be logically proved to be true, and so the consequent reasoning is limited and reduced to a defence of those premisses without being in a position to prove them. From the middle of the ninth to the middle of the eleventh centuries, philosophers and theologians tended either to ignore each other or to swap insults.

The description of theology by the falāsifa as kalām or merely a dialectical and defensive line of reasoning is hardly fair. To a large extent, the difference between philosophy (falsafa) and kalām is merely a difference in subject matter: philosophers work with philosophical premisses while

theologians (*mutakallimūn*) apply themselves to religious texts. *Kalām* sets out to represent the speculative framework and the rational content and coherence of the principles of Islamic belief. It was necessary to resolve conflicts between revelation and practice, between for instance God's great power and the existence of innocent suffering in this world, and the issues raised are often philosophical, although not explicitly identified as such. Why not? Presumably the reason is that it was thought by many that the theoretical instruments of unbelievers could not explicitly be used to unravel problems in the doctrine of Islam. After all, *kalām* became important within a certain context. The term *kalām* means 'speech' or 'conversation' – it is based upon the idea that truth is found via a question and answer process. Someone proposes a thesis, and somebody else questions it, this form of disputation being apparent in the grammatical structure of the works of *kalām* themselves. This technique for solving dogmatic problems accurately represents the fact that from the beginning Muslim theology had to think very much in terms of defence and attack. The *mutakallimūn* had to struggle from the beginning against comparatively sophisticated Jewish, Christian and Manichean intellectual skills. Theology, says ibn Khaldūn (AD 1332–1406), 'merely wants to refute heretics'. It is 'a science which involves arguing with logical proofs in defence of the articles of faith and refuting innovators who deviate in their dogmas from the early Muslims and Muslim orthodoxy'.[1] It acts, according to Ghazali, like a protection troop at the pilgrim road.[2] Ghazali brings out in more detail what is unsatisfactory about *kalām*:

A group of the *mutakallimūn* did indeed perform the task assigned to them by God. They ably protected orthodoxy and defended the creed which had been readily accepted from the prophetic preaching and boldly counteracted the heretical innovations. But in so doing they relied on premises which they took over from their adversaries, being compelled to admit them either by uncritical acceptance, or because of the community's consensus, or by simple acceptance deriving from the Qur'ān and the Traditions. Most of their polemic was devoted to bringing out the inconsistencies of their adversaries and criticizing them for the logically absurd consequences of what they conceded. This, however, is of little use in the case of one who admits nothing at all except the primary and self-evident truths.[3]

A dramatic example of the confrontation between *kalām* and philosophy took place in Baghdad in AD 932 before the vizier. A discussion took place

[1] Ibn Khaldūn, *Al Muqaddimā* (*Prolegomena*), trans. F. Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah: an introduction to history* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1958), III, pp. 155 and 34.
[2] Ghazālī's critical view of *kalām* may be appreciated by the fact that his very last work, finished only a few days before his death, was titled *Curbing the masses from engaging in the science of kalām*.
[3] Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (*The deliverer from error*), trans. R. McCarthy, *Freedom and fulfillment* (Boston, Mass., Twayne, 1980), pp. 61–114; pp. 68–9.

between the Christian translator Abū Bishr Mattā (c. 870–940) and the theologian Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī (893–979) over the respective merits of the 'new learning' which came from the Greek philosophical tradition. Mattā puts the philosophical position in this way: 'I understand by logic an "instrument" of "speech" by which correct "speech" (*kalām*) is known from incorrect and unsound meaning from sound. It is like a balance, for by it I know overweight from underweight and what rises from what sinks'.[4] His opponent argues at length that each language is a conventional rather than natural system and that they each have different interpretative principles or 'instruments' which are relevant to that specific language. So Greek logic would only be appropriate to the Greek language, and wholly useless in analysing aspects of Arabic. Obviously, the Aristotelian move required to avoid this sort of objection is to deny that by 'speech' is meant the ordinary lexical meanings, but rather the logical principles inherent in linguistic structure and common to all languages. Al-Sīrāfī refuses to accept this point, reiterating his view that Aristotelian logic cannot do justice to the Arabic language. Al-Sīrāfī pushes the point that the philosophers do not even know the Greek language and the texts they adopt they only have at third-hand, from Greek to Arabic via Syriac. Mattā replies by expressing his confidence in the quality of the translations, and adds that it is not important that every linguistic nuance survives in translation, as long as the basic semantic values are accurately reproduced from Greek into Arabic. Yet al-Sīrāfī is so impressed with the importance of particular languages that he is not prepared to accept this suggestion, and insists again upon the uselessness of a logic being applied to anything but the language out of which it was derived.

Significantly, a strong theme throughout al-Sīrāfī's attack on the introduction of Greek philosophy into Muslim intellectual life is opposition to glorification of Greece and Greeks by comparison with the community of Islam. He suggests that admiration for Greek culture is overdone, and that no nation is superior to others in its complement of accomplishments. He also pokes a lot of fun at Mattā's failure to master Arabic itself, and thinks he would be better employed studying Arabic grammar and semantics rather than having anything to do with Greece. He does suggest, however, that a distinction can be made between speech and meaning, claiming that the former is 'natural' and mutable, while the latter is apprehensible by reason and is permanent. But he transforms the Aristotelian conception of the relation between logic and language, regarding logic as not a way of reasoning but rather a way of speaking

[4] D. Margoliouth (trans.), 'The discussion between Abū Bishr Mattā and Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī on the merits of logic and grammar', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* NS, XXXVII (1905), pp. 79–129; p. 112.

properly. Once the method of correct expression is mastered it can be transformed into a science, that of grammar, and translated into formal rules. It may well be that these formal rules and the intelligible meanings are the same for all languages, but they can only be grasped language by language and then compared, and Mattā has admitted that he does not know Greek (and his Arabic is not perfect, either). Given al-Sīrāfī's definition of logic (a highly question-begging definition, it must be admitted) he is able to claim that the true logician must be able to express himself correctly, and distinguish correct from incorrect expressions on all levels. He pours scorn on Mattā, firing off questions at him which express the implications of his disagreement with Mattā on the basic logic/grammar distinction. Mattā's silence is supposed to represent cowed defeat, no doubt, but perhaps it rather appropriately comes over as a dignified silence when confronted with a disputant who refuses to take seriously a reasonable philosophical argument. Al-Sīrāfī appropriately ends the discussion with a flood of praise about dialectic in both its legal and theological form. These sciences incorporate a complete knowledge of a language, its logic and grammar, and employ sound reasoning to go beyond the confines of language to determine the truth between two opposing positions.

The dispute between al-Sīrāfī and Mattā over the respective merits of *kalām* and *falsafa* brings to the surface an important explanation for the problematic nature of Greek philosophy in the Islamic community. Many of the questions which philosophy applied itself to already had answers provided within the context of Islam. For example, the question of how people ought to live and act had been answered in the Koran, which contains everything in the way of information required to ensure salvation and concerning religious and social behaviour. Islamic law provided details of personal and property relations, and the sorts of political structures which are acceptable. The Muslim had only to observe the Koran, the Traditions of the Prophet and his Companions, and the judgments of the early caliphs. More abstract issues were dealt with by *kalām*, which argued towards certain theoretical analyses of concepts such as power, fate, God and freedom. In addition there existed a well-developed science of language of long standing. The arrival of philosophy on the intellectual scene seemed to challenge many of these traditional Islamic sciences, and threatened those who were expert in such forms of knowledge. After all, philosophy covered a lot of the same ground as *kalām* but claimed greater surety for its methods and conclusions. Furthermore, on a number of important issues philosophy presents a contrary conclusion which might seem to challenge Islam itself. Aristotle, often referred to as the 'first master', appeared to argue that the world is eternal, that there can be no individual survival of the soul after death and that God is radically removed from connection

with his creation and creatures. The scene was clearly set for a major demarcation dispute between the philosophers and the rest of the Islamic intellectual community, a dispute which alternately raged and simmered in the Islamic world from the tenth to the twelfth centuries AD.

It is important to distinguish the controversy between *falsafa* and *kalām* from an important theological controversy which took place at around the same time as philosophy entered the Islamic world. The Mu'tazilites, who called themselves the 'people of unity and justice', presented a large number of theological doctrines which sought to define a more satisfactory *rational* basis for Islam. They argued for the unity and justice of God, for the responsibility of human beings for their actions and the necessity to try to justify the actions of God. Perhaps their most significant doctrine for our purposes was the importance of reason in guiding Muslims to a knowledge of God, and the belief in the agreement of reason with revelation. It is hardly surprising that the very same caliph al-Ma'mūn who encouraged the introduction of Greek philosophy and science was enthusiastic about the Mu'tazilite approach. Indeed, this theological school was made the official doctrine in Islam between 833 and 848, with a corresponding persecution of Muslims who could not accept the Mu'tazilite interpretation of Islam. However, the dominance of Mu'tazilite doctrine was relatively short-lived and in 912 al-Ash'arī (873–935) spearheaded the reaction by affirming the more traditional interpretation of Islam, which emphasizes the gap between the power and knowledge of God, and of his creatures. Al-Ash'arī argued that appropriate religious authority is enough to justify the basic theses of Islam, and that reason is not required to justify revelation. The Mu'tazilites insisted that reason is an important interpretative device in gaining profound insight into the Koran, and that it is a condition of true faith that one should by the use of reason alone know all the following: God's existence, essence and characteristics; the possibility of prophecy and revelation; what it is to act morally and immorally; and the structure of the physical world and its relation to its maker. These facts must be reached by the use of independent reason since otherwise they must rest on authority and tradition, which are imperfect grounds for holding such important beliefs. The Ash'arites challenged this set of theses and argued that reason alone is incapable of establishing satisfactorily the basic themes of Islam. (It is worth noting that both the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites hold reason in considerable regard as a means of discovering important facts – a point we shall establish later.) To give an example which helps bring out briefly the flavour of the controversy, we might look at the Koranic injunction against wine. The drinking of grape wine is forbidden in the Koran because it is intoxicating, and so by analogy date wine is forbidden too. The connection between the reason

and the rule is different for Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites. For the former, the cause or reason for the rule might help us discover the reason God had in mind when introducing the law. This would be based upon the idea of an objective system of ethics with which God would have to concur. Ash'arites, though, would argue that the cause is just used by God for a particular purpose, and it does not follow that he must use that cause or have that reason for promulgating the law.

Although the Mu'tazilites possibly derived some of their central concepts from philosophy, it would be a serious mistake to think that they came nearer to philosophy than their Ash'arite opponents. To take an example, al-Sīrāfī was a Mu'tazilite, and this did not prevent him from launching his attack upon the new philosophy. The dispute between the two theological schools frequently employed philosophical arguments, yet in its subject matter and methods it was clearly a theological dispute, characterized by dialectical rather than demonstrative forms of reasoning. Despite the strong insults and accusations of heresy which were thrown about in the dispute, it is difficult to argue that either party was involved in the defence of views which were incompatible with Islam itself.

As we shall come to see, the views of philosophers were condemned on occasion as heretical and beyond the limits of Muslim belief. It is important here to distinguish between two sorts of principle. One principle shared by both Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites is that reason is usefully employed in understanding religion. A principle that both would reject is that religion may be usefully analysed by the use of concepts derived from Greek, especially Aristotelian, philosophy. The use of such philosophical concepts were not regarded as helpful in an understanding of religion. But in rejecting philosophy the theologians were not rejecting reason; on the contrary, they were enthusiastic concerning the value of reason when employed in a suitably domesticated context. It is not difficult to find Koranic backing for this position. The Koran does not require that people believe in its teaching blindly. Both believers and unbelievers are invited to ponder, reflect and understand through the use of their reason. It warns against blind obedience to one's predecessors (II,170; V,104) and repeatedly addresses itself to the understanding of its audience (III,65; XII,2). Although the teachings of the Koran are based upon divine authority, they often seek by rational persuasion to bring about faith. There are a number of verses which seek to prove that God must be a unity, in particular the verse which argues that the whole universe would have perished if there existed several gods beside God (XXI,22). Similarly, the Koran seeks to establish by argument the veracity of the Prophet, referring to the pious life which he led prior to revelation (X,17).

The rituals mentioned in the Koran are often grounded in reason and Muslims are commanded to understand their spirit and purpose. Many of the rituals are designed to contribute to the welfare of Muslims themselves. For example, Muslims who pray are thereby less likely to fall into disfavour and dishonour, since Muslims who pray remember God (XX,14). The practice of *zakāt* or charity, although not a ritual, is designed to prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of only a few people and to spread some of it around the community (IX,60; LIX,7). We shall see later the different explanations which the philosophers give of such religious commandments and customs. The point here is to establish that rational understanding is a much-valued aspect of traditional Islam even where Muslims are suspicious of philosophy. Indeed, it might be argued that the Prophet implies the significance of reason when he abolished prophecy. The Prophet himself announced that he was the last of the prophets, and so there would be no more revelations or voices claiming divine authority. God has thus invited human beings to assume responsibility for their judgments and to employ their reason in establishing the way they ought to behave. Of course, they will be helped by the Koran and the rest of Islamic law and tradition, but there will frequently be occasions when these sources do not comment upon particular problems and situations. We can no longer expect a prophet to reveal the right way to us in these circumstances, and it might well be argued that we should then have to use reason to work out a solution.

If reason and rational explanation were held in such high esteem by some Muslim intellectuals, why then did they not enthusiastically embrace Greek philosophy as the acme of rationality and employ it to make sense of problems which arose in the interpretation of Islam? A variety of tentative answers may be offered. Firstly, as we have seen, the space which philosophy sought to occupy was *already* filled by theology, the theory of language and a well-developed jurisprudence. Philosophy appeared to be an interloper into a field of problems which were being taken care of quite adequately by other theoretical devices and from different speculative perspectives. Although some Muslim intellectuals had confidence in the value of reason, this confidence was not boundless, and they acknowledged that in the last analysis faith and religious practice are justified by non-rational criteria, i.e. the commands of God. Secondly, the conclusions which philosophy seemed to offer as the only demonstratively respectable conclusions often ran against the most important principles of Islamic theology, not to mention the Koran itself. When one looks at the character of the argument between al-Sīrāfī and Mattā, and arguments between theologians and philosophers in medieval Islam as a whole, one often finds yet another strain of contention emerging. This is a suspicion that philosophy is an essentially *alien* way of thinking. Muslim intellectuals

were, and indeed still are, sometimes wary about dealing with pre-Islamic and non-Islamic themes which have become incorporated in Islam. For example, some of the customs and rituals of Islam are assumed to have a non-Islamic origin, being reflections of older and pagan traditions, yet accepting that such practices have pagan precedents has seemed to some Muslims impious and unworthy of the considerable religious respect in which those practices are held by the community. Philosophy clearly bore the marks of its Greek creators, and it was transmitted to the Islamic world through the good offices of the Christian community, and so in some ways it was doubly alien in character due to its *origins* even before its content was considered. It is probably in reaction to this charge that philosophy is a radically alien activity that Farabi tried rather unconvincingly to provide philosophy with an Eastern pedigree, an Islamic pedigree being unfortunately unavailable: 'It is said that this science [Greek philosophy] existed anciently among the Chaldeans, who are the people of Iraq, later reaching the people of Egypt, from there passing to the Greeks, where it remained until it was transmitted to the Syrians and then to the Arabs. Everything composed by this science was expounded in the Greek language, later in Syriac and lastly in Arabic.'[5]

One of the characteristic aspects of Farabi's approach to philosophy is that he regarded himself as a member of a distinct school in a particular philosophical tradition. This school is a continuation of the Alexandrian tradition in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. He refers to an unbroken line of teachers and interpreters of Greek, and especially Aristotelian, philosophical texts with their ever-developing accretion of criticisms, agreements and arguments. Indeed, Farabi insists that the only genuine sort of philosophy is that which is transmitted from generation to generation.[6]

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī was probably of Turkish origin, and spent most of his long life at Aleppo, dying in Cairo in AD 950. He was largely responsible for the establishment of the philosophical curriculum with which we are concerned here, having a profound effect upon all his successors. His detailed knowledge of Aristotle and his high reputation led to his title as the 'second teacher', and he wrote additionally on many texts of Plato, psychology, science, music and political philosophy. Not a great deal is known of his life, which is reputed to have been rather austere and

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[5] Fārābī, *Attainment of happiness*, in M. Mahdi, *Alfarabi's philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 43.

[6] Fārābī, *Book of letters*, ed. M. Mahdi (Beirut, Dār al-Mashreq, 1970), p. 155. His point here could be regarded as the philosophical equivalent of the way in which the selection of correct *ḥadīth* was made, i.e. in terms of a justified chain of authorities leading down to the present time.

contemplative and mostly spent pursuing his theoretical interests within the confines of the court and its patron.

Farabi's thought was considerably extended and transformed by Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusain b. 'Abd Allah ibn Sīnā (Avicenna). He was a Persian, born in Bukhara in AD 980 and dying in Isfahan in 1037. His life was very different from Farabi's, being marked by great changes in his fortunes and heavy political involvement. Avicenna wrote on a very wide range of issues, and at great length, composing encyclopaedic works on philosophy, medicine and science. As an adult he was frequently in government service and on the move through Persia as conflict between the different rulers continued, even ending up in prison on one occasion. He finally established a relatively stable existence for the last thirteen years of his life at the court in Isfahan, where he is reported to have been extremely active in both intellectual and sensuous pursuits. He was obviously a highly energetic person who enjoyed competition with other intellectuals, and who managed at the same time to compose abstract and involved works in the field of metaphysics.

Another Persian thinker, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) set out systematically to dismantle by the use of argument the philosophical edifice constructed by his predecessors, especially Avicenna. Ghazali was brought up in conditions of relative stability, and received a detailed education in religious colleges until he was appointed to a chair in Islamic law at the Niẓāmiyya college in Baghdad when he was only thirty-two years old. At this time Iran, Iraq and most of Syria were under the control of the Seljūq empire, supporters of Sunnite Islam against the Shī'ite Fatimids of Cairo who were active in their attempts at subverting the Sunnite empire from within. Ghazali's skill as a writer and teacher made him very useful to the Seljūq rulers in their campaign to win the theological argument with the Shī'ites in their own empire and in that of the Fatimids. Ghazali defended the main tenets of Ash'arite thought and criticized the main aspects of *falsafa*, yet his critique does not replicate the familiar 'refutations' common among the theologians. His arguments are generally philosophical in nature, and display great respect for logic and clear analytical thought. In the midst of his academic success, he went through a spiritual crisis, feeling the need to give up his chair and leave Baghdad to lead a contemplative life as a Ṣūfī in a variety of different cities for about ten years. He clearly felt in this period that the life he had previously led was lacking in spiritual depth, and he was therefore obliged to seek a closer mystical relationship with God than can be achieved within a social setting.

Ghazali's attack upon philosophy was counter-attacked most vigorously

by Abū-l-Walīd ibn Rushd (Averroes) who lived in the far West of the Islamic world, in Andalusia and Morocco from 1126 to 1198. He was brought up within a distinguished legal family in the rich culture of Cordoba and received a thorough education in the various Islamic disciplines as well as in philosophy. He was supported by the Almohad rulers of his time, and achieved high office as *qāḍī* (judge) and royal physician until reaction towards the end of his life against apparent heterodoxy led to his temporary exile until the feeling against philosophy had died down and it was safe to return. He was obviously very hard-working and serious, and his devotion to Aristotle was expressed in the large number of carefully constructed commentaries which he wrote on Aristotle's thought. He defended philosophy against the charges of Ghazali and others which purported to demonstrate that Islam and philosophy were incompatible. He also tried to present genuinely Aristotelian arguments in his philosophical work, being rather sceptical of the more Neoplatonic tendencies of *falāsifa* such as Avicenna. His work came to wield considerable influence in Christian Europe, but despite its inherent value did not have much effect upon the Islamic world. The relatively short period in which Greek philosophy impinged upon thought in the Islamic world among Muslims came to an end with Averroes. It is important to recognize, though, that this style of philosophizing did not come to an end because it was defeated in argument by those hostile towards it, and there were indeed Muslims who continued to write and think in the tradition represented by *falsafa*. But the standard of Islamic philosophical thought after Averroes did not manage to match the level of argument which the period from Farabi to Averroes had seen.

The last philosopher whose work we shall consider in some detail is the Jewish thinker Mūsā b. Maimūn (Maimonides). He was born in Cordoba in AD 1135 and was obliged to leave when the Almohads drove the Jews and Christians out of the city. In 1159 he went to North Africa, but Almohad influence at Fez proved too great, and he finally travelled to Cairo, where he died in 1204. Like so many of the *falāsifa*, Maimonides was a famous physician and author of medical texts, but he is still notable for his systematization and codification of the Jewish law. Our interest here is in the tantalizingly complex *Guide of the perplexed*, which he wrote for readers who had some knowledge of philosophy but who did not see how it could be made compatible with Jewish religious doctrine and law. Although Maimonides presents his arguments within the context of Judaism and Jewish law, he is so deeply imbued with the methods and style of the *falāsifa* that it is important to include him in a discussion of some of their central arguments. Maimonides' thought was strongly influenced by Aristotle and Farabi, and apparently hardly at all by his contemporary

Averroes, and some of his arguments represent the culmination of particular themes in *falsafa*. Like many of his philosophical predecessors, he took an active part in the political events of his time, becoming head of the Jewish community in Egypt and having influence which spread far wider. It is important to note too that he was not without detractors within his own community, and philosophy was under just as much suspicion among orthodox Jews as it was among orthodox Muslims.

When one considers the work of these highly active individuals in both their public and their intellectual lives, one cannot but be impressed by their ability to produce so much excellent philosophical (and other scholarly) argument and commentary. When one considers the instability of the times, the danger in which they were sometimes placing themselves and the vocal opposition from the 'ulamā' and the generally conservative Muslim and Jewish communities, their devotion to philosophy must have been considerable. After all, in the case of most of these thinkers their adherence to philosophy was an obstacle rather than an aid to their success in their communities. They could have achieved political influence in the state and intellectual influence within the fields of law, medicine and science, and theology without indulging in philosophical speculation which then lay them open to criticism and persecution. There are other thinkers whom we might have included from this period and who also produced interesting arguments, and where it is relevant their views will be briefly considered. In this book, though, we are largely concerned with Farabi, Avicenna, Ghazali, Averroes, Maimonides and of course Plato and Aristotle, because we can use them to follow through particular issues and arguments in a clear and coherent way.

What are these issues and arguments? There are a great number we might have considered, but we have limited ourselves to two broad themes. The first is to take up Ghazali's challenge that the philosophers' adherence to three theses – that the world is eternal, that God cannot know individuals and that there is no bodily resurrection – constitutes opposition to Islam because they are entirely incompatible with basic religious doctrine. We shall see how these philosophical positions were built up by Aristotle, Farabi and Avicenna, and how Ghazali seeks to marshal philosophical arguments to disprove them and theological arguments to show they are equivalent to unbelief. Then we shall consider the counter-attacks of Averroes and the attempt to reconcile religion with Aristotelian metaphysics. Secondly, we shall concentrate on the conflict between reason and revelation in the area of moral philosophy, and especially over the issue of what constitutes human happiness. There exists in both these broad topics a very important hidden agenda, namely, the idea that the philosophers are not really being frank in their representation of their views, a point which Ghazali and later

commentators have pushed very firmly. This hidden agenda will be considered very carefully.

As far as the question of the *falāsifa*'s orthodoxy goes, it must be admitted that the absence of a priesthood in Islam meant that the question of which beliefs are heretical and which are acceptable could never be precisely settled. Belief in the divine character of the Koran itself is a vital aspect of Muslim belief, and any belief or practice which is a candidate for acceptance by the community of Islam must be shown to be compatible with the Koran, and sometimes this compatibility is very difficult to establish. This is hardly surprising given the very different societies which the Koran eventually was called upon to regulate. Even looking for relevant sayings of the Prophet and his Companions to justify decisions became difficult without the large-scale manufacturing of such sayings to suit particular purposes. This involved passing off invented sayings as genuine sayings in order to establish the Islamic credentials of a practice or belief. A good deal of the 'wisdom' which was popular in the Middle East and which derived from non-Islamic religions and traditions became incorporated into acceptable Muslim thinking by the attribution of appropriate attitudes to the Prophet and his Companions. This free-for-all was eventually brought to an end by a strict selection from among the great mass of supposed *ḥadīth* to arrive at an orthodox corpus. This tidying-up process also involved restrictions on independent reasoning applied to scripture and on the relatively free use of interpretation. Yet the suspicion often existed that the orthodox views which thinkers might express were not really their own views, the latter involving all sorts of heretical and innovative principles which their adherents were too cautious to admit.

When one looks at the writings of theologians and philosophers one cannot but notice the frequent references they make to the necessity of concealing aspects of their approaches to doctrine in order both to escape the wrath of the powerful (either rulers, religious authorities or the masses) and to leave the masses secure in their uncomplicated faith. When one considers the extreme breadth of varieties of Islam, ranging from mystical Ṣūfīs, highly legalistic Sunnīs, Ismāʿīlis, Zaidīs and so on it is indeed remarkable that they all chose to describe their beliefs as Muslim. It is often emphasized by Muslims how little persecution there was of heterodox sects and of the main religious minorities in the territory of Islam, and indeed by comparison with the history of much of Christian Europe this is true. Nonetheless, persecution did exist for both philosophers and theologians and was a very real factor in their thinking, making them recognize the desirability of caution in the expression and direction of their views. This caution is certainly present in their writings, yet the texts we shall be

considering in detail here are not diminished in their philosophical acuity by this factor. The issue of discretion should not, it will be argued, be taken to negate the philosophical interest of what the *falāsifa* and their opponents say, provided that this is expressed in the form of arguments which can be assessed and analysed.

This concentration on philosophical arguments is the reason for the inclusion of Ghazali and Maimonides. The former certainly did not regard himself as a philosopher, yet did think it important to master philosophy before criticizing it and presented his criticisms in clear and challenging arguments. Although he opposed Greek philosophy and its development in Islam he was a passionate advocate of logic, claiming that Aristotelian syllogisms are already used and recommended in the Koran, and even illustrating Aristotelian logic with examples from Islamic law.[7] He agrees with the philosophers that there are cases where concealment (*taqīya*) of the truth is no bad thing, that lying is not intrinsically wrong and may be employed if a praiseworthy end is unattainable by other means.[8] Although Ghazali would no doubt have been horrified to find himself referred to as a philosopher, it is the interest and importance of his arguments which make it vital to include him in this book. A similar line of reasoning would justify Maimonides' place. Although not a Muslim, his arguments are excellent examples of *falsafa*. The topics he is concerned with are often the same as those of *falsafa* and he has a well-developed skill of summarizing neatly the philosophical debate up to his time. His arguments are interesting and mesh closely with those of the other thinkers discussed. He is very much part of the continuing debate which took place in the Islamic world in a philosophical form, a debate which more or less came to an end with the death of Averroes. This is not to say that there was no more philosophy but that interesting and novel arguments in Aristotelian form were no longer produced.

Commentators on Islamic philosophy have to avoid many pitfalls. One obstacle is the tendency to assess *falsafa* in terms of its after-life in Latin in the medieval Christian world. Greek philosophy was initially introduced to that world via translations of Arabic texts into Hebrew and then into Latin, or directly from Arabic to Latin, and these translations formed an important part of the disputes and metaphysics of significant Christian thinkers. But often they were incompletely understood and used for argumentative purposes which were foreign to their origins. Sometimes there is an explicit or implicit assumption that Islamic philosophy is only

[7] Especially in his *The correct balance*, trans. R. McCarthy, *Freedom and fulfillment*, pp. 287–332.
[8] Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (*The renaissance of the sciences of religion*), ed. ʿIrāqī (Cairo, ʿUthmāniyya Press, 1933), xxiv.

important in so far as it throws light on Western Scholastic philosophy. This sort of approach is firmly rejected here.

Another pitfall is to over-emphasize the oblique view which the *falāsifa* had of Plato and Aristotle. As we have seen, they were obliged to study their works in translation and with the accretion of some Neoplatonic texts passing as Aristotelian. In addition, the philosophical curriculum which was passed onto them came from a wide variety of different and conflicting sources, with an approach to the interpretation of Aristotle very different from that which exists today. Some commentators conclude from this that the *falāsifa* really failed to make contact with genuine philosophical controversies as the Greeks knew them, and that their thought is only interesting from the point of view of the history of ideas as opposed to philosophy itself. Those who accept this view would then be involved far more in an historical analysis of *falsafa* than in an analysis and evaluation of the arguments themselves. I shall criticize this approach and suggest that the arguments themselves are interesting and important, and that they do succeed in dealing with crucial issues in Greek philosophy. The addition of Islamic issues to Greek philosophy makes for a fascinating combination and is well worth philosophical as well as historical attention.

But, it is important to avoid yet another pitfall, which is to exaggerate the importance of Islamic philosophy to such an extent that it is seen as the catalyst for much modern Western thought. Although *falsafa* is well worth studying, it is not philosophically very creative. The philosophical distinctions it took from the Greeks were not transformed radically to construct entirely new systems of thought. Yet these distinctions were intriguingly combined with issues in Islamic theology and medieval religious life via subtle arguments, and some of these are the subject of this book. No doubt the arguments presented here have their own pitfalls, but hopefully they will avoid those criticized above.

In the second part of this study, an important issue in both Islamic theology and philosophy will be discussed, namely, whether an action is right because God says it is right or whether God says it is right because it is right. This controversy provides a good opportunity to outline some of the features of the different views of the reason/revelation relationship in Islamic philosophy, and to explore the implications for political philosophy. There will also be an account of recent approaches to the interpretation of Islamic philosophy which take a different direction to that of this study. In the first part the agenda has been very much established by the attacks of Ghazali on Islamic philosophy, in particular:

In the three questions...they were opposed to [the belief of] all Muslims, viz. in their affirming (I) that men's bodies will not be assembled on the Last Day, but only disembodied spirits will be rewarded and punished, and the rewards and

punishments will be spiritual, not corporal...they falsely denied the corporal rewards and punishments and blasphemed the revealed Law in their stated views. (2) The second question is their declaration: 'God Most High knows universals, but not particulars.' This also is out-and-out unbelief...(3) The third question is their maintaining the eternity of the world, past and future. No Muslim has ever professed any of their views on these questions.[9]

In the first part we shall see what arguments the Islamic philosophers could put up to disprove Ghazali's subtle arguments in these, and other, areas of importance.

[9] Ghazālī, *Munqidh*, trans. McCarthy, pp. 76–77.

This book is an introduction to debates in philosophy within the
medieval Islamic world. It discusses a number of themes which
were controversial within the philosophical community of that
period: the creation of the world out of nothing, immortality,
resurrection, the nature of ethics, and the relationship between
natural and religious law. The author provides an account of the
arguments of Farabi, Avicenna, Ghazali, Averroes and
Maimonides on these and related topics. His argument takes
into account the significance of the conflict between faith and
reason, religion and philosophy. The book sets out to show how
interesting these philosophical debates are, and criticizes the
view that these arguments are of no more than historical interest.

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