

**METAPHYSICAL  
PHILOSOPHY – AN  
ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE**

By

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## ABSTRACT

The centuries old debate between religion and philosophy cannot be assumed to have ended, in so far as it affects the fundamental conflict between what is regarded as divinely revealed facts and philosophical findings in some particular disciplines of philosophy like metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, politics etc. The natural sciences that have been proven fundamental to human life as evident in the technological advancements of our days, and which have been embraced by Muslim scientists of old, is out of this conflict. This article is therefore meant to shed light on the stance of classical Islamic teachings on philosophy in its disciplines other than the natural sciences, to be more precise, in the field of theology, the believe in the Unseen, ethics, social values, political thoughts etc. The article looks into the negative impact of Greek philosophy on the early Muslim philosophers who, following Aristotle, delved into those fields of knowledge, the accuracy of which could not be ascertained through practical experiments, but rather rely wholly on revelation and received facts. It also brings to light that those Muslim philosophers who excelled in the field of natural sciences and contributed in a great deal to humanity by upholding the teachings of their Greek masters in those fields of sciences, at the time Europe discarded it under the pretense that it was against the teachings of the Church, were not free from deviation in their own religious beliefs and practices as a result of their acceptance of Greek philosophy in all its teachings, hook, line and sinker.

## Introduction

The word 'philosophy', literally, meaning 'love of wisdom', from the Greek root *philo* (meaning love) and *sophia* (meaning wisdom), has been variously defined in its technical sense by many philosophers past and contemporary. So, philosophy historically has been understood in different ways by different philosophers and outsiders to philosophy. It has been put by some to mean love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means and moral self-discipline, while others assert that philosophy is a system of thought based on or involving such inquiry. Others say: it is the critical analysis of fundamental assumptions or beliefs. It is also said to refer to the discipline comprising logic, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemology, or a set of ideas or beliefs relating to a particular field or activity; an underlying theory: an original philosophy of advertising, or a system of values by which one lives: has an unusual philosophy of life. The definition more relevant to this discussion is the one which refers to philosophy as investigation of the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, or values, based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods. The main theme of the knowledge and values here of course, comprises the disciplines mentioned above, i.e. logic, ethics aesthetics, metaphysics and epistemology.

Ancient philosophy stemmed out from what the Greek called their quest for truth through inquiry independent of theological creeds. This made the most distinguishing characteristics of philosophy to be that it rejects dogma and deals with speculation rather than faith, as against theology which is wholly based on received truths and sets of creeds. Philosophy calls upon man to search for the reality of almost everything, tangible and intangible, seen and the unseen. The main subject matter of philosophy is put by some in the following questions:

- What is truth? How or why do we identify a statement as correct or false, and how do we reason?
- Is knowledge possible? How do we know what we know?
- Is there a difference between morally right and wrong actions (or values, or institutions)? If so, what is that difference? Which actions are right, and which wrong? Are values absolute, or relative? In general or particular terms, how should I live?

- What is reality, and what things can be described as real? What is the nature of those things? Do some things exist independently of our perception? What is the nature of space and time? What is the nature of thought and thinking? What is it to be a person?
- What is it to be beautiful? How do beautiful things differ from the everyday? What is Art?
- Does free will exist, or are our lives determined through a destiny planned long before we were even born?
- How did this world come to be? Who is 'god' or 'God'. Does he or He really exist?

Al-Kindi (d. 258 or 260 A.H.), the famous philosopher we will come to discuss about, puts philosophy to mean: 'the knowledge of the realities of things according to human capacity', and metaphysics according to him is 'knowledge of the First Reality which is the Cause of every reality'<sup>1</sup>.

As regards the above questions he puts them this way:

Philosophy is concerned with four questions also, since ... the philosopher inquires into 'the whether, the what, the which, and the why', or the existence, the genus (or species), the differentia, and the final cause of things. Thus whoever knows the matter knows the genus, whoever knows the form knows the species, as well as the differentia which it entails; and once the matter, form and final cause are known, the definition, and eo ipso, the reality of the definiendum are known also<sup>2</sup>.

These questions, as important as they are, the philosopher turns to his own intellect in search of their answers, and if subjected to tight scrutiny these questions are meant to challenge any given knowledge especially that which is divinely revealed, and deride it by giving it the title 'dogma', thereby paving the way for them to wholly rely on the human intellect as the only source of knowledge, and as seen in the aforementioned examples, they pose these questions in a logical manner, historically using syllogisms of traditional logic.

Philosophy is also distinct from science in that both the natural and the social sciences base their theories wholly on established fact, whereas philosophy also covers areas of

inquiry where no facts as such are available. Originally, science as such did not exist and philosophy covered the entire field, but as facts became available and tentative certainties emerged, the sciences broke away from metaphysical speculation to pursue their different aims. That is why we don't find Islam frowning at the natural and social sciences in so far as they are in agreement with its established laws that are based on revelation from Allah to the infallible Messenger.

### **Islamic Philosophy**

This brings us to the issue of what some people call 'Islamic Philosophy'. From the outset, it is highly imperative to assert, with utmost certainty, of course, that Islam, as taught and embodied by the *Qur'an* (the Holy Word of Allah) and the Prophetic traditions of the Prophet Muhammad *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam* has nothing called 'philosophy' born and bred by it, or claimed to be its own. On another side there is also nothing called 'Islamic Philosophers', if the genitive manner of the two words here means that Islam professes philosophy and has a group of 'scholars' whom it charges with the responsibility of learning, expounding and teaching what is called philosophy and allows them bear the nomenclature 'philosophers', and endorses all the ideas and beliefs they teach, such that one may eventually ascribe that to Islam. This is not found anywhere in the vast literature of classical and orthodox Islam based on the teachings of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. Yes one may address it: 'The philosophy that is ascribed to Islam' and the men 'Muslim Philosophers', or philosophers among the Muslims.

In the life time of the Prophet Muhammad *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam*, the Companions never tried to search for any other source of guidance apart from the *Qur'an* and the practical teachings of the Prophet himself. By mere listening to him reciting the words of Allah, they comprehended the message, they believed the whole of it to be true, upholding its teachings to be superior to and surpassing the ancient beliefs and customs they inherited from their forefathers. They considered any other source running counter to the *Qur'an* and the Prophet's teachings to be a negation of the message and the messenger. No foreign knowledge or philosophy was ever ascribed to them. They lived and died according to Allah's message. It was only after the conquest of Persia in the days of 'Umar bn Al-Khattab *radiyallahu 'anhu* when the Muslims entered the Persian lands, they found among the huge number of its

treasures, large amounts of books. At that time, Sa'ad bn abi Waqqas *radiyallahu 'anhu*, the Muslim Jihad commander, wrote to 'Umar asking him of what to do with them. 'Umar wrote him saying: 'Throw the whole of them in the sea. If there is any guidance in them, we are content that Allah has guided us to what is better. And if they contain falsehood and deviation, then we are pleased that Allah saved us from their evil'. All the books were instantly drown and nothing was left<sup>3</sup>.

This stern action from Umar is of course, a practical application of a personal lesson he got from the Prophet *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam*, when one day 'Umar was holding a piece of writing he got from a Jew, which turned out to be a portion of the Torah. At the sight of that the Prophet *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam* was enraged, and said:

“Are you people that reckless about it (the message of Islam), O, Bn Al-Khattab? I swear by Allah, I have brought it to you perfect and pure. Do not ask them (the Jews) anything, for they may tell you something that is true and you reject it, or they may tell you what is false and you believe them. I swear by Allah, if Moses were alive, he would have no choice but to follow me!”<sup>4</sup>.

So, if the Prophet *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam* will prohibit the Muslims from following a book once revealed by Allah to Musa *alaihis salam*, how can they be subjected later on to the dictates of the star-worshipping Greeks?

This perfect and pure character of Muhammad's *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam* message continued to guide the whole Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula, and the former Byzantine and Persian empires that were brought under the rule of Islam.

The coming together of Islamic teachings with Greek Philosophy did not happen overnight. It rather materialized through two important stages that need to be studied in detail:

**Stage One:** The Emergence of foreign fields of knowledge and sciences into the Muslim community, and this owes itself to the following factors:

I. The role played by the University of Alexandria and other institutes that engaged in teaching and spreading philosophy as a special field of knowledge. As an important and strategic centre economically, industrially and culturally, the city of Alexandria

became the greatest oriental civilization centre where various nations – from the Greeks, the Egyptians, Jews, Italians, Arabs, the Persians, Ethiopians, Indians, Syrians, the Nubians etc. - came together, and its inhabitants were well versed in Philosophical studies, so eventually its university was the first centre in the world for the studies of Greek philosophy<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to its important place in philosophy Alexandria reached its peak in cultural development under the influence of a government professing the Christian religion at that time, and this naturally indicates why Neo-Platonism gained ground, as a result of its founders strive to harmonize Christian religion with the Greek schools especially that of Plato. It could be rightly asserted that Neo-Platonism represents a selective systematisation of the works of Plato, plus elements from Aristotle and Stoicism. The Neo-Platonists did not see themselves as following a new philosophy: they believed that they had re-discovered the true meaning of Plato's teachings. This school, originally founded by, and popularly ascribed to Plotinus (205-270 C.E) gave rise to different schools of thought whose main aim was to search deeply into religious facts but through allegorical methods founded by Greek philosophers. So, it was Neo-Platonism that had the greatest influence upon Christian theology from the fourth century until it was displaced by Aristotelianism in the Middle ages.

But before Plotinus, Philo (20 BCE – 40 CE), a Hellenised Jewish philosopher born in Alexandria, did a lot to pave the way for other philosophers after him for the project of bridging the wide gap between revelation and Greek philosophy, as he included in his philosophy both Greek wisdom and Judaism which he sought to fuse and harmonize by means of the art of allegory that he had learned as much from Jewish exegesis as from the Stoics.

These philosophers were overwhelmed by the 'accuracy' of Plato's idealism that they sought to necessarily bring the revealed facts to come to consent with them. This job, they found easy for the fact that Plato's ideas differed from others in that they were mystic in nature, so their influence on Christianity was apparent. It is believed that Pauline Christianity was a direct result of Philo, whose teachings some of the Christians accepted whole-heartedly. It was he who laid the foundations for the development of Christianity in the West and in the East, as we know it today. So it

was upon this solid foundation Plotinus laid his teachings in the days when Christianity was the religion of the government in Alexandria.

Alexandria continued to be the world's centre of civilization up to the Muslim conquest of Egypt, when it came under Islam. Its university also continued to be the centre of Greek philosophy the world over. Al-Mas'udi suggests that it was during the reign of 'Umar bn Abd Al-'Aziz that the school in Alexandria was relocated to Antioch (Antakia) (a boarder city between the former Byzantine and the Muslim world at that time). Muslims therefore found themselves amidst a stronghold of Greek philosophy that was camouflaged in a religious form, a factor that facilitated their being attracted so easily. One other important factor that influenced the spread of Greek philosophy was the tolerant attitude of the caliphs of those days who let the adherents of all religions to practice their religion without hindrance. So, many Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Magians and all kinds of pagans were left to freely spread their religion among the Muslims, and were brought so close to the government that some of them even threw challenges for debates in matters of belief between them and the Muslims.

One of the notable communities that enjoyed this 'tolerance' to a very large extent was the Syriacs (i.e. members of the Eastern Syrian Church). These people played a vital role in the spread of Greek philosophy in the Eastern Muslim world, for they had instituted many schools before the Muslim conquest of the area, in Edessa (al-Ruha) (now in Turkey), Nasibis (now in Syria) and Jundishapur (now in Iran) through which they disseminated philosophical studies in Syria and Mesopotamia (Iraq). So when the Muslims conquered the area they met those schools and witnessed Greek philosophy flourishing amidst the inhabitants of the areas. Some Muslims therefore showed their interest in learning from the Syriacs what that 'mysterious' sort of knowledge entails. This is where the Muslims started to get in contact with the Greek philosophy. De Purr concludes that: "The Syriacs and the Arabs started philosophy where the Greeks stopped"<sup>6</sup>.

Before concluding this part, it is imperative to emphasis the importance of the School of Jundishapur, founded by Chosroes I *Anusharwan* around the year 555, for it stands out as a major institution of Hellenic learning in Western Asia whose influence was destined to extend to the world of Islam in 'Abbasid times. For after Justinian closed



the school in Athens, in 529, seven of the most influential philosophers of the time were cordially welcomed by Anusharwan to serve in his school. The school, with its medical faculty, its academy and observatory, achieved great fame and was still flourishing when Baghdad was founded in 762 by the 'Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur. Since Jundishapur was near Baghdad, the Persians were in close political contact with the 'Abbasid caliphate. Consequently, it is from this school that important scientific and other intellectual developments spread throughout the Muslim empire<sup>7</sup>.

The caliphs used to seek from the school expert court physicians to assist them in their courts. Most of those physicians sent by the school were members of the Christian Nestorian family of Bakhtishu, and they served the caliphs loyally for over two centuries. This explains the role played by those schools in the spread of Greek philosophy among the Muslims.

II. The Muslim conquest of the various countries of the East and West brought them into contact with many nations with differing cultures and customs that negate the message of Muhammad *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam*. The 'intellectuals' of those communities were at that time free either to profess Islam openly and become Muslims, or only declare being Muslims openly but retain their old pagan practices secretly, or out-rightly declare to remain non-Muslims. Those people had surely played a vital role in bringing Greek philosophy near the Muslims. The most notable among them are: the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (Musa bn Maimun bn Yusuf Abu 'Imran Al-Qurtubi. This is one of the greatest philosophers that influenced some Muslims of his time, for he was born in Cordova in 529 A.H. and traveled to various parts of Andalusia (Spain). He lived in Fez for nine years pretending to be a Muslim, memorized the Qur'an and became well versed in the Maliki law predominant in the region. But on returning to Egypt, he publicly declared his Jewish religion and became the spiritual leader of the Egyptian Jews for about thirty four years. He became so close to the famous Muslim ruler of the time Salah ad-Deen al-Ayyubi (Saladen) and was made the personal medical doctor of his eldest son, Nur ad-Deen, and al-Qadi al-Basyani, one of the viziers of Salah add-Deen. He used his position to raise the level of the Jews in Egypt. In fact when Salah ad-Deen recaptured Jerusalem from the Christians and intended to drive the Jews away from the land, Maimonides convinced him to let them stay and he did.

As for his role in spreading philosophy among the Muslims, he did that through about thirteen of his writings the most important of which is “The Guide for the Perplexed”. This book was studied by Muslims of his time under close supervision of outstanding Jewish teachers. He was the first to declare that the Bible must be brought to consent with human reasoning<sup>8</sup>. He lived for about twenty years never carried away from his treatise on expounding on the Mishna for which he was raised by the Jews to the highest level among the expounders of the Talmud.

His sons carried on with his assignment of spreading philosophy among the Muslims and Jews alike, among whom are Ibrahim bn Musa, his grandsons Dawud bn Ibrahim and Sulaiman bn Ibrahim.

Mention must also be made of the role played by The Zoroastrian Philosopher and astrologer, Nobakht, who was one of the closest people to Abu Ja’far al-Mansur, the ‘Abbasid caliph (D. 158 A.H.). He engaged fully in the study of astrology and spread of philosophy. When he was too old, Al-Mansur, who was deeply fond of philosophy and astrology, demanded him to bring his son to pick from where he stopped. He brought his son Abu Sahl. (This name was given to him by Al-Mansur, as a result of his amazement with his ridiculous original name, which was ‘Khurshmadh Mah Taimadh Ma Baazaar Daabad Khusro Nahshah’.

As noted above, this slack and too ‘tolerant’ attitude of the caliphs in matters of belief, contributed so much to the spread of philosophy among the Muslims.

III. Bn An-Nadeem, the most ancient source in this respect traced the earliest efforts of translating alchemical, astrological and medical works to Khalid bn Yazid (d. 85 or 90 AH), the Umayyad prince who turned to the study of alchemy., and was highly fond of it. He was the first to bring foreign translators to render chemical works into Arabic, and that was the first translation that occurred in Islam, although it was confined at that time to some fields like wisdom and general history of philosophy, without getting into the deeper aspects of the metaphysical studies of Greek philosophy.

Then came the era of the ‘Abbasids when those steps were continuously taken seriously to import foreign books and translators to a very large extent, starting in the time of Abu Ja’afar Al-Mansur. One of the most notable contributors in the field of

translation during the reign of Al-Mansur was Abdullah bn al-Muqaffa', a Persian convert from Zoroastrianism, who was killed in the year 142 A.H., and who translated to Arabic many works of Aristotle on logic. He also translated the fables of the Indian sage Bidpai, known as *Kalilah Wa Dimnah*, a literary classic which continues even now to be regarded as a model of Arabic prose. It was alleged that he translated it in order to replace the Qur'an that occupied the minds of the Muslims.

In the time of Harun Al-Rashid (d. 198 A.H.) a special translation academy was founded called *Bait al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom). The preponderance of astronomical and astrological works is linked to a significant feature of the reign of this caliph, who assigned his vizier, Yahya bn Khalid al-Barmaki (d. 190 A.H.), a notorious *Zindiq* known for his secret conspiracies against Islam<sup>9</sup>. He was known to have sent to the Roman ruler of that time asking for the huge amount of Greek literature in their possession to be sent to the Muslim lands. The Roman ruler himself, as it was related, had packed those books in a secure place underground and blocked it from the top with a solid building, for fear of his people getting into contact with them so as not to divert them from their Christian faith. Abu Muhammad bn abi Zaid al-Qirawani (the renown Maliki scholar and author of *al-Risalah*, d. 386 A.H.), referred to this incident as reported by al-Maqisi, where he commended the Umayyads for not employing the services of non-Arabs in their courts as such their reign was free from serious innovations, as against the Abbasids whose closest associates were Persians most of whom were accused of *Zandaqah*. He then listed the innovations that found their ways into Islam during the reign of the Abbasids, among which is the act of importing Greek literature to Muslim lands. He then mentioned when the books were brought to Yahya bn Khalid Al-Barmaki, he called on all philosophers to come and get to acquaint themselves with them, and free inter-religious and inter-denominational debates were conducted in his house for a long period. Among the books imported was one "Definition of Logistics" on which Bnu Abi Zaidin Al-Qirawaani commented: "Hardly will one go through this book and remain free from *Zandaqah* (hypocrisy)..."<sup>10</sup>.

This is as far as the reign of Harun al-Rashid is concerned. In the time of al-Ma'mun, the seventh 'Abbasid caliph, the issue of translating Greek literature reached its apogee, when he sent to various foreign leaders asking for the books to be sent to him,

and he was known to personally oversee the practice himself under curious and regular supervision. Suyuti comments on this:

“... Be that as it may, the knowledge of the ancients came to Muslims in the first century after they conquered the *A'ajim* (non-Arabs), but it was not rampant between them as the *Salaf* were warning and prohibiting people from plunging into reading them. It was later in the time of al-Barmaki that they were made prevalent, and their spread was strengthened by al-Ma'mun”<sup>11</sup>.

Al-Ma'mun did not only encourage the translations of Greek books, but he boldly imposed applications of their contents on his subjects. Scholars among the *Salaf*, like al-Imam Ahmad bn Hanbal, Muhammad bn Nuh and others were repressed and tortured for refusing to endorse the misguidance that was found in the Greek literature. But despite all this, one finds some contemporary pseudo-philosophers calling al-Ma'mun the most liberal and tolerant Muslim leader in history who gave people their right of thought and expression and set them free from the bonds of irrational dogma. One of them, Muhammad Lutfy Jumu'ah<sup>12</sup>, considered this to be one of the prides of Islam as it gave rise to the development of 'Islamic thought' in the form of the various innovated sects and religious denominations, each contributing with his own 'interpretation' of Islam, and asserted that al-Ma'mun's greatest contribution to Islamic thought was his support of the Mu'tazilah. Majid Fakhry, another contemporary philosopher calls him 'the most enlightened caliph of the period'<sup>13</sup>.

Some of the books translated from Greek to Arabic within those periods of time included: 8 works written by Plato on philosophy, 19 works for Aristotle in philosophy and logic, 10 by Hippocrates in Medicine, 48 by Galin, 20 by Euclid and Ptolemy. From Syriac to Arabic, about 20 works, from Persian to Arabic about 20 other works, 20 from Latin and Hebrew to Arabic and 30 from Sanskrit to Arabic, all by a number of philosophers. This totals to around 195 books. Some researchers list the number of books translated in the reign of Ma'mun alone to about 256.

And all the translators were Christians of the Nestorian or Jacobite sect, except the pagan astrologer-philosopher Thabit bn Qurra, who hailed from Harran in north Syria, and settled in Baghdad.

### **The Impact of the Translations on Muslims**

The negative impact of these works on the Muslim mind cannot be overemphasized. To say the least, Muslims were occupied with the study of philosophy as against the study of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam*, a factor that gave rise to an enormous increase in the number of sects claiming to belong to Islam, and this eventually led to more divisions among Muslims.

### **Stage Two: Mixing Islam With Philosophy**

The study of all the different fields of Greek philosophy having gained ground within the Muslim community, a new type of Muslim emerged, dedicated to the ideal that he called *Falsafah*. At first, they concentrated on natural science, but then, inevitably, they turned to Greek metaphysics. They were so amazed with the logical systematization of the knowledge, the method of presenting its cases and arriving at results that, as the case with their Christian and Jewish predecessors, they found themselves amidst a gigantic problem: how can the revealed facts of Islam as contained in the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions be subjected to these logical laws and how can they be applied to arrive at results that are in line with human 'reasoning'? Allah has told us He created the worlds, the heavens, the earth and all that is between them. How can this be established through the principles of Greek logic? Nay, first and foremost, how do we 'prove' and 'establish' the existence of this 'Creator'?

The fundamental mistake of these new set of philosophers, as put by Karen Armstrong<sup>14</sup>, was that they believed that the God of the Greek philosophers was identical with Allah, unlike the Greek Christians had decided that the God of the Greeks must be modified by the more paradoxical God of the Bible, and eventually, they turned their backs on their own philosophical tradition in the belief that reason and logic had little to contribute to the study of God. The Faylasufs, however, came to the opposite conclusion: they believed that rationalism represented the most advanced

form of religion and had evolved a higher notion of God than the revealed God of scripture. ...

The new philosophers therefore set off in their search for ways of fusing the principles of Islam in the belief in One Creator, who created from nothing, who is omnipotent and omniscience. They want all these simple declarations from the Only One Who made such statement succumb to 'logical' laws by pagan Greeks.

We now take a look at the early philosophers among the Muslims and who were its exponents and flag-bearers, through whom the Muslim world came to be deluded and misguided.

### **(1) Al-Kindi**

He was Abu Yusuf Ya'qub bn Ishaq, a scion of the famous South Arabian tribe of *Kindah*, born in the year 185 A.H. in Kufah. He was titled the Arab philosopher because of his Arabian lineage. He got his early education in Basrah and Kufah, although the source of his patronage or tutelage in real Islamic education is still a mystery. The earliest information about him was that he was known to be a Mu'tazili, very much fond of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers. He was fluent in Syrian and Greek languages. He wrote a lot on philosophy. Bn al-Nadim<sup>15</sup> (d. 438 A.H.) attributed to him 242 works on logic, metaphysics, arithmetic, Spheris, music, astronomy, geometry, medicine, astrology, theology, psychology, politics, meteorology, topography, prognostics and alchemy.

He was so fond of the Greeks that he claimed one of his grandfathers to have been one. De Purr<sup>16</sup>, asserts that:

It is from this angle that Al-Kindi attached more importance to Persian and Greek civilizations more than he attached to the religion of the Arabs and their virtues. Nay, he opined that Qahtan, the grand patriarch of the Southern Arabs was a brother to Yunan who was a scion of Igreek.

Al-Kindi was so fond of Socrates that he wrote much on his person, works and views, in an effort to fuse his views with those of Aristotle within the bounds of Neo-Platonism.

As regards Al-Kindi's extent of commitment to 'his' religion of Islam, al-Dhahabi, the famous Muslim historian said:

“As regards wisdom of the Ancients (philosophy), Greek logic, astronomy, astrology, medicine etc, (Al-Kindi) was a head, second to none in that deserted knowledge. He was more excellent in engineering and music. As regards his religion, he was accused (of being a Zindiq). He was a miser, devoid of any sense of honour and virtue...He once attempted to compile a similitude of the Qur'an but gave up failingly after some days”<sup>17</sup>.

Al-Kindi is considered by many to be closer to Islam than the rest of major philosophers, especially in his view on creation, although not perfectly clear, but was not in agreement with that of Aristotle. But a good indication, looking at his closest student and successor, Ahmad bn At-Tayyib Al-Sarakhsi, will show how serious some of the negative impacts of his teachings have been, as this student of his used his closeness to Caliph al-Mu'tadid, to bring heretical themes in his discourses, where he openly doubted Islam in many aspects. He attacked, in some of his treatises those prophets whom he regarded as charlatans, an issue that cost him his life in the hands of the caliph<sup>18</sup>.

Another successor of al-Kindi, Bn Al-Rawandi (d. 910 CE) was one of the most notorious *malahidah*, although Majid Fakhry called him 'radical ... free thinker', to lighten his crimes against Islam. This philosopher was reported to have repudiated the supernatural nature of revelation and miracle, as well as answering the rational question of Allah's existence and the rationality of His ways<sup>19</sup>. Regarding the idea of revelation as superfluous, he argued that human reason was sufficient to determine the knowledge of Allah and the distinction between good and evil. Nay, to him, the Qur'an is not perfect and that there is nothing miraculous about it. He also professed the eternity of the world and the superiority of dualism (Manichaenism) over monotheism. He was reported to have also ridiculed the Qur'an and Muhammad *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam*.<sup>20</sup>

One other most notorious philosopher was Abu Bakr Muhammad bn Zakariyya Al-Razi, called Rhazes in Latin sources. He was believed by some, to be the greatest

nonconformist in the whole history of Islam. He was born in Rayy in Khurasan and died around 925 CE. He turned to philosophy and became one of the greatest medical doctors of his time. Some of his views include his belief, in emulation of Plato, that the soul is eternal as the creator, and that philosophy is the only pathway to the soul's purification and its release from the fetters of the body. He rejected outright the concept of revelation and the role of the prophets as mediators between God and man. He reasoned that prophecy was either superfluous, since the Allah-given light of Reason was sufficient for the knowledge of the truth, or obnoxious, since it has been the cause of so much bloodshed and warfare between the one people (meaning the Muslims) who believed itself to be favoured with divine revelation and the other less fortunate peoples<sup>21</sup>.

## **(2) Al-Farabi**

The second of those major '*Falasifas*' was Abu Nasr Muhammad bn Muhammad bn Tarkhan Al-Farabi. Born in Farab in Transoxiana in Turkistan in the year 259 or 260 A.H. Al-Farabi was hailed by most writers in this field as the leading logician and expositor of Plato and Aristotle in his day. He grew up in Damascus where he devoted himself to reading philosophical books at night by the 'watchman's torch', while working as a garden keeper by day<sup>22</sup>. He later went to Baghdad where he spent much of his time learning logic, philosophy, music and mathematics in the hands of the leading 'teachers' of the day: Matta bn Jonah and Yuhanna bn Hailan, two Christian philosophers. He then moved to Halab where he got associated with the Hamdani Shi'ite family, and was highly respected by Saif al-Daulah who was very fond of arts and letters. Al-Farabi died in Damascus in 339 A.H. He was believed to be fluent in 70 languages<sup>23</sup>.

Al-Farabi changed his direction towards studying the works of Aristotle, and was believed to excel in that. He wrote a lot of his works in expounding Aristotle's works. He wrote about 102 books.

As regards his effort of harmonizing religion with philosophy, he was believed to extract for himself a new methodology no one ever applied. For he started by trying to bring that deluded harmony between the works and ideas of his philosophic ancestors, Plato, Aristotle and their folks after which he tried to reconcile that knowledge with that of religion. It is in this regard and in trying to practically apply Plato's theory of



his Republic he said that a good society must be led by a philosopher who ruled according to rational principles, Al-Farabi, said that Muhammad *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam* had been exactly the kind of ruler that Plato had envisaged. He had expressed the timeless truths in an imaginative form that the people could understand; so Islam was ideally suited to create Plato's ideal society. One will critically point out the folly in al-Farabi's example here in his effort to bring Islam in consent with his ancestors' religion. That is because he knew quite alright that Muhammad *sallallahu alaihi wa sallam* did not rule according to rational principles, but according to a law revealed to him by the Creator of the heavens and earth.

One disturbing fact regarding the teachings of Al-Farabi is that he was not known to have a Muslim teacher, nor did he produce a close Muslim student; all the students that excelled and became his successors were Christians. Will Durant said:

This mysterious mixture, in addition to his writings, may have been the reason why he was accused of being a Zindiq<sup>24</sup>.

De Purr also asserted:

As for true Islamic scholars, they have indeed accused him of being a Zindiq, and it stays as a mark on him. And this might have definitely been supported by sound reasons<sup>25</sup>.

As regards his opinion on creation, Al-Farabi was totally with Aristotle in professing that this world was not actually created by Allah *ex nihilo*. Karen Armstrong spelt it out:

“But al-Farabi stayed close to Aristotle. He did not believe that God had ‘suddenly’ decided to create the world. That would have involved the eternal and static God in unseemly change. Like the Greeks, al-Farabi saw the chain of being proceeding eternally from the One in ten successive emanations or ‘intellects,’ each of which generates one of the Ptolemaic spheres: the outer heavens, the sphere of the fixed stars, the spheres of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun Venus, Mercury and the Moon.... There were obvious differences from the Koranic vision of reality, but al-Farabi saw

philosophy as a superior way of understanding truths which the prophets had expressed in a poetic, metaphorical way, in order to appeal to the people<sup>26</sup>.

### **(3) Bn Sina (known as Avicenna in the West).**

He is Abu 'Ali Husain bn 'Abdullah bn Al-Hasan bn 'Ali bn Sina, born in Afshinah, a village in Bukhara in the year 370 A.H., later on moved with his family to Bukhara, where he received his early instruction in writing, arithmetic, jurisprudence and logic. His father and his brother were *Isma'ili* (a *Batini Shi'ah* sect) propagandists of the high order, so Bn Sina was brought up as an *Isma'ili*. His interest in philosophy appears to have developed from listening to conversations between his father and another of his *Isma'ili* teachers. By the age of eighteen he had mastered logic, physics, and mathematics. This he said he did within a year after having the privilege of confining himself in the library of the Emir of his area when he was seventeen, and in just one year he read and memorized all the books in the library. He was said to have read the book of *Metaphysics* by Aristotle forty times, memorized it off head, but was still unable to comprehend the intent of its author until he lighted incidentally on a copy of al-Farabi's *Intentions of Aristotle's Metaphysics*, which at once illuminated for him Aristotle's meaning.

He was an expert medical practitioner and this led him to have association with the Samanid Sultan of Bukhara, Nuh bn Mansur, who was suffering from an incurable disease, which Bn Sina was able to cure.

Bn Sina himself did not live very long, for, he died at the age of 58 as a result of his excessive indulgence in wine and sex, after repeated efforts to cure himself of colic by unorthodox methods<sup>27</sup>.

The efforts of making religious facts come to consent with philosophy was best exemplified by Bn Sina, although failingly. The 'Abbasid caliphate was in decline, and it was no longer so easy to see the caliphal state as the ideal philosophic society described by Plato in the *Republic*. Naturally Bn Sina sympathized with the spiritual and political aspirations of the *Shi'ah*, but he was more attracted to the Neoplatonism of philosophy. Bn Sina worked out a rational demonstration of the existence of Allah based on Aristotle's proofs which became standard among later medieval

philosophers in both Judaism and Islam... Bn Sina saw it as a religious duty for those who had the intellectual ability to discover God for themselves in this way to do so, because reason could refine the conception of God and free it of superstition and anthropomorphism<sup>28</sup>.

As his predecessor, Al-Farabi, Bn Sina also rejects the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*<sup>29</sup>. Bn Sina is of the opinion that prophecy is attainable by anybody, as its basic prerequisites are: a sound sense of intuition, a strong sense of imagination such that whatever he imagines in his mind materializes in reality, and a spiritual power that makes him able to effectuate things<sup>30</sup>.

#### **(4) Bn Rushd (known in the West as Averroes).**

Abul Walid Muhammad bn Ahmad bn Rushd, known in Islamic literature as 'Bn Rushdin Al-Hafid', meaning the grandson, to differentiate him from his grandfather, Bn Rushdin Al-Jadd'. Al-Hafid was born in Cordova in Andalusia in the year 520 A.H. a month after the death of his grandfather. Abul Walid led a life full of controversy and died in 595 A.H. at the age of 75. Unlike his predecessors among the Muslims fond of philosophy, Bn Rushd was brought up in a *fiqhi* background. Himself and his forefathers were grand Maliki scholars and judges in Cordova. Bn Rushd has written one of the most vital books on fiqh on a comparative basis between the Maliki and other *mazhabs*. In his early years, therefore, he studied Islamic law, Arabic language and medicine. He later on turned to the 'knowledge of the ancients' (philosophy) and excelled in it<sup>31</sup>.

Among Muslim philosophers, Bn Rushd is the most celebrated in the sight of Western contemporary philosophers. It is on his works in which he expounded and improved the ideas of the ancient philosophers, most of them rely.

#### **Fallacies of Philosophy and the Philosophers**

Before looking at this point, it is important to make a clear distinction between the fields of knowledge in which the philosophers missed their steps and went counter to the principles of Islam, and those in which they are considered to have contributed immensely to the development of human life. I have shown above that sciences, considering its nature and field of study, 'gained' its independence from philosophy. Science is mostly based on factual findings that are or can be established through

practical experiments. Muslim philosophers have indeed contributed in various fields of physics, chemistry, engineering, mathematics, astronomy, medicine etc. Their intellectual brilliance has been correctly displayed in these fields that now become indispensable in the running of human life. This fact has been acknowledged by the strongest critics of philosophy, in the persons of Al-Ghazali and Bn Taimiyyah. The latter even mentions that a greater portion of the discussions of these philosophers relating to physics is quite clear, detailed and convincing, and that they possessed intellect and aptitude to understand these subjects<sup>32</sup>... Expressing similar views about the Greek mathematics he wrote:

The mathematical formulas dealing with numerals are quite convincing and are unanimously accepted by all scholars. ...

In fact, their equations are acceptable for they have no inexactness to which any objection could be raised. This is the beginning of their philosophy which is invented by Pythagoras<sup>33</sup>...

The fallacies of the philosophers are therefore to do with other than the natural sciences, to be precise, in the field of metaphysics, dealing with the origin of creation, and other fields like ethics, politics, and more especially what has to do with prophecy. Most of the surmises of the Greek metaphysical concepts are not only unreasonable but stupid due to their naked ignorance, for had their speculative thought been restricted to the natural sciences without blundering into its metaphysical domain of absurdity, they would have saved themselves from becoming a laughing stock. Bn Taimiyyah says:

So far as the knowledge of God is concerned, these unlucky people appear to be deprived of the truth. They have no knowledge of the angels, divine scriptures, and prophets of God, for they had heard nothing about these either in favour or against them. Only some of the later philosophers acquainted with the revealed religions have spoken about these matters<sup>34</sup>.

One reason Bn Taimiyyah mentions repeatedly is the fact that the Muslims came into contact with Greek philosophy and unfortunately their choice fell on the worst part of

it, that is, Aristotelian philosophy, the theories of which are more pagan than others. That is because discussions on theology in Aristotelian philosophy is limited and the mistakes found are grievous, for instance, Aristotle was the first to profess the eternity of the world and that there is no creator to it. These mistakes are seen by Ibn Taimiyyah to be mainly for the fact mentioned by some historians like Muhammad bn Yusuf Al-‘Amiri, that unlike other philosophers preceding Aristotle, like Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato, who were able to travel to the land of the Prophets, Syria and were believed to have met Luqman Al-Hakeem and other followers of Prophet Daud, and Sulaiman *alaihima as-salam*, Aristotle never traveled to the land of the Prophets, so his knowledge of the Prophets and their beliefs is nil. What he had was the knowledge of the Sabians upon which he drew his principles of philosophy<sup>35</sup>.

To list some of the most grievous fallacies of those Muslim philosophers, we mention the following:

- Their attitude of condoning shirk.
- They do not believe Allah to be the creator. Rather they believe that this world has been eternal together with whom they call the First Mover in every sense, neither before or after him.
- They believe that the world emanated from the first cause instantly at a time, not in a sequence.
- They mention nothing positively or negatively about the Angels. But their Muslim inheritors, having read from their predecessors the influence of the celestial spheres, the stars which they called ‘The Ten Intellects’, from whom emanate everything, they tried to fuse this idea into the Muslims’ belief in the Angels. They call the angels ‘the Ten Intellects’, Jibril *alaih as-salam*, being the active intellect and the tenth. As intellects they are perceived by the philosophers as non-entities, but rather imaginations.
- Their belief that Allah only knows things in a general sense not in their minute details.
- They believe that prophets are men with sound intellect that imagine things and relate them to their followers to serve their political interests.

- The philosophers claim that the Qur'an is full of anthropomorphic terms, so they must be given metaphorical meanings to purify the Qur'an from them.. This is the back bone of the issue of the term *Ta'weel* in Muslim literature, and it found its way through the *Mutakallimun* (speculative theologians) to some books of tafsir.
- In politics, the philosophers believe that a nation can only prosper if it is led by a philosopher and the principles of politics should be entirely philosophic and secular. Al-Farabi, the first to introduce the tradition of political philosophy into the world of Islam, goes to say that the principles and rules that constitute *siyasa* (politics) are to be sought, not in the Qur'an and the Traditions, but in Aristotle's *Politica* (*kitab fil siyasa*) and in Plato's *Republic* (also *Kitab fi al-Siyasa*)<sup>36</sup>. This is based on the philosophers' deluded assumption that the most important end in human life is the attainment of 'true happiness', not gaining Allah's pleasure through one's actions as taught by Islam. And due to the fact that they do not believe in the Prophets as guiders of human beings according to the dictates of the Shari'ah, they sought their happiness through what their ancient predecessors extracted for them in terms of political ideology. That is why you find most of the political systems used or came to be used in history bear Greek names, like Democracy, Aristocracy, etc.

### **The Stance of Early Muslim Scholars on Philosophy**

Many people have been deluded by the claim that Muslim scholars rejected philosophy because they could not understand it. This is totally false. The reason is that philosophy, in the fields shown above, teaches something that is contrary to Islamic teachings. Al-Imam Al-Shafi'ii, Muhammad bn Idris, believes that people became ignorant and divided in their religion only after they deserted the Arabic language and inclined to the language of Aristotle<sup>37</sup>.

An-Nawawi<sup>38</sup> listed philosophy among the types of knowledge prohibited in Islam.

Bn Al-Jauzi<sup>39</sup> believes that it was Satan who deluded some Muslims, that the right path is following the ways of the philosophers because they possess wisdom, and as a result of that they rejected the belief in a creator.

Bn as-Salah,<sup>40</sup> says:

Philosophy is the foundation of all stupidity, corruption, doubts in religion and main causes of *Zandaqah* (hypocrisy). Whoever engages in philosophy will be blinded from taking cognizance of the beauty of the pure Shari'ah.

Al-Dhahabi<sup>41</sup> after commenting on al-Ghazali and his *Tahafut al-Falasifah* advises that one should stay as far away as possible from these books of philosophy, and run away with his religion from the doubts of the ancients, otherwise he will fall into confusion.

The most gigantic effort in refuting philosophy and its principles came from the person of Bn Taimiyyah, who he came of age at a time Aristotelian philosophy dominated the intellectual and literary scene owing to the influence exerted by Tusi (a staunch Shi'ite that acted well for the spread of philosophy) and his followers. It was the time when a thorough grasp of Aristotelian logic and philosophy was deemed to be the summit of one's intellectual attainment, when nobody could dare raise a dissenting voice against the teaching of the Greek master. Bn Taimiyyah was surprised to see some philosophers equating the prophetic teachings with the metaphysical speculation of the Greek philosophers. So he devoted his time to refute the principles upon which philosophy was built, going by the teachings of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. He showed with utmost braveness, the contradictions in the sayings of the Greek philosophers, the discrepancies between the theories of the Greek philosophers and even correcting Al-Farabi, Bn Sina and Bn Rushd on some theories they ascribed wrongly to Aristotle or Plato. He believed that the philosophers were absolutely unfamiliar with the unseen realities taught by the prophets as such they deny them, and they are taken by surprise when they are told that numerous other objects such as prophets, angels, empyrean, heaven and hell also exist. They are surprised because they believe that nothing exists beyond what they know. He stresses that the arguments of the philosophers are really baseless for they have no positive evidence of the non-existence of things not known by them.

Bn Taimiyyah made a distinction between the philosophical concepts of antiquity and those of the later philosophers, which again affords a proof of the agility of his mind and the deep knowledge of Greek thought. He pointed out that it was Aristotle and the

later philosophers after him wedded to the view of rationality who denied their predecessors' concept in regard to the unseen realities and incorporeal objects.

After condemning and showing the fallacies entailed in Greek logic and arguments, Bn Taimiyah showed how rational are the arguments of the Qur'an. He writes:

The arguments put forth by the Qur'an are much more assuring and carry a deeper sense than the propositions of the philosophers and dialecticians. At the same time, the former do not suffer from paralognism which is a common feature of logical disputations<sup>42</sup>.

The most important of Bn Taimiyyah's writings in this regard are: ar-Radd 'al al-Mantiqiyyin, Naqd al-Mantiq, Dar'u Ta'arud al-Aql Wa an-Naql, Tafsir Surat al-Ikhlās, ar-Risalah as-Safadiyyah, Minhaj as-Sunnah, Bughyat al-Murtad, an-Nubuwwat, Naqd Asas at-Taqdees, etc.

## Conclusion

Philosophy, in the field of metaphysics, as seen from the research, should be subjected to a thorough check by revelation and where the two disagree, the Muslim should always prefer revelation and accept the fact that the philosophers have missed their steps and gone beyond the bounds. But where revelation is silent on an issue and philosophers happened to give an opinion, it is acceptable on condition that it entails a '*Maslahah*' for the Muslim ummah and negates none of the general rules of the religion of Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Kindi, Kitab al-Falsafah al-Ula, Rasa'il al-Kindi al-Falsafiyah, Book One, Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi (n. d.), edited by Muhammad Abd al-Hadi abu Ridah, p. 25

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 30, and Majid Fakhry, A History of Islamic Philosophy, Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Khaldun, al-Muqaddimah (n. d.) 2:603

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Hanbal, Ahmad bn Muhammad, al-Musnad 3:387; al-Darimi, as-Sunan 1:115; Bn Abi Shaibah, al-Musannaf hadith No. 2621; Bn Abd al-Barr, Jami' Bayan al-'Ilm Wa Fadlih 2:42.

<sup>5</sup> Durant, Will, History of Civilization, (Qissat al-Hadarah), Arabic Translation, Dar al-Jil 1990, vol. 11 p. 99-101

<sup>6</sup> Fakhry, 1983: 26



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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 4

<sup>8</sup> Durant, 1990:14:129

<sup>9</sup> As-Suyuti, Abd Ar-Rahman bn Abi Bakr (d. 911 a.h.), Saun al-Mantiq (n.d.) al-Baz Bookshop, Mecca, with comments by an-Nasshar, p. 7-8 .

<sup>10</sup> Al-Maqdisi, Abu Tahir, al-Hujjah 'ala Tarik al-Mahajjah p. 954-957

<sup>11</sup> Al-Suyuti, ibid., p. 11-12

<sup>12</sup> Jumu'ah, Muhammad Lutfy, Tarikh Falasifat al-Islam, intro.

<sup>13</sup> Fakhry, ibid., p. 8

<sup>14</sup> Armstrong, Karen, A History of God, Gramercy Books, 2004, p. 170-171

<sup>15</sup> Bn an-Nadim, Abu al-Faraj Muhammad bn Ishaq al-Baghdadi al-Mu'tazili as-Shi'i, al-Fihrisit, Edited by Ibrahim Ramadan, Dar al-Ma'rifah, Beirut 1997, p. 371-379.

<sup>16</sup> Tarikh al-Falsafah fi al-Islam p. 236.

<sup>17</sup> Ad-Dhahabi, Muhammad bn Ahmad bn Usman, Siyar A'lam an-Nubala', Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, vol. 12 p. 337.

<sup>18</sup> Fakhry, ibid., p. 95-96.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Khayyat, Kitab al-Intisar (n.d.), p. 11-12

<sup>20</sup> Fakhry, ibid., p. 96-97.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Bn abi 'Usaibah, 'Uyun al-Anba' (n.d.) vol. 2, p. 134.

<sup>23</sup> Ad-Dhahabi, ibid., vol. 15 p. 417.

<sup>24</sup> Durant, Will, ibid., vol. 13 p. 204.

<sup>25</sup> De Purr, Tarikh al-Falsafah fi al-Islam, p. 226

<sup>26</sup> Armstrong, Karen, ibid., p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> Fakhry, Majid, ibid., p. 129-130

<sup>28</sup> Armstrong, Karen, ibid., p. 182-183.

<sup>29</sup> Bn Sina, an-Najat, Cairo 1938, p. 213-214; Bn Sina al-Ilahiyyat vol. 266-267; Michael E. Marmura, Efficient Causality in Avicenna, An Essay in Islamic Theology and Philosophy, Studies in Honour of George F. Hourani, p. 181.

<sup>30</sup> Bn Sina, al-Shifaa p. 63-244; W. Montgomery Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology Edinburgh University Press, 1979, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> Ad-Dhahabi, ibid., vol. 21 p. 8

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- <sup>32</sup> Ibn Taimiyyah, al-Radd ala al-Bakri (n.d.), p. 143
- <sup>33</sup> Ibn Taimiyyah, al-Radd ala al-Mantiqiyyin, p. 134
- <sup>34</sup> Ibn Taimiyyah, Tafsir Surat al-Ikhlas, (n.d.), p. 57
- <sup>35</sup> Ibn Taimiyyah, Naqd al-Mantiq (n.d.) p. 113; ar-Radd 'ala al-Mantiqiyyin, p. 337
- <sup>36</sup> Fauzi M. Najjar, Islamic Political Philosophy, an Essay in Islamic Theology and Philosophy, Studies in Honour of George F. Hourani, p. 103.
- <sup>37</sup> Al-Suyuti, Saun al-Mantiq, p. 15.
- <sup>38</sup> An-Nawawi, Yahya bn Sharaf (d. 676 a.h.), al-Majmu' Sharh al-Muhaddhab (n. d.) vol. p. 27
- <sup>39</sup> Bn al-Jauzi, Abd Ar-Rahman (d. 597 a.h.), Talbis Iblis (n.d.) p. 65-77
- <sup>40</sup> Bn as-Salah, Fatawa bn as-Salah 1987, p. 209-210.
- <sup>41</sup> Ad-Dhahabi, ibid., vol. 19 p. 328-329
- <sup>42</sup> Bn Taimiyyah, ar-Radd 'ala al-Mantiqiyyin, p. 321.