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 ʿAbd Allah and Amīna, a member of the tribe of Quraish, who was born in Mecca in the late sixth century CE. 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 Qur'ān (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 Qur'ān is a confirmation of the teachings and messages of such prophets, including Abraham who is said to have built the shrine (Kaʿba) 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 200 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 100 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 35 AH / 655 CE. 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 ʿAlī's sons (and Muḥammad's grandsons) Ḥasan and Ḥusain, who were not powerful enough, however, to prevent the formation of an Umayyad dynasty. The Shīʿites 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 Qur'ān and the example of Muḥammad. At various times Shīʿite régimes have come to dominate some territories in the Islamic empire, and the basic principles of Shīʿism 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.

It is often argued that the Shīʿa has a much more committed attitude to philosophy than do Sunnī Muslims. It is certainly true that Islamic philosophy has continued to flourish in the Shīʿi world as compared with many centuries of neglect in the Sunni world, and the Persian-speaking world has played a highly significant role in continuing the tradition initiated in the classical period. One reason might be because the sources of authority in Shīʿism do not tend to pay a great deal of attention to the *sunna* (practice) of the Prophet or the Traditions or the *madhhāb* (schools of law) of the Sunni tradition. So reason comes to be an important principle, albeit in its role as a gift of God, and was regarded as both legitimate and necessary.

Of particular significance is *ta'wīl* or interpretation, which involves understanding the nature of revelation by returning to the original meaning and going behind the apparent meaning. This approach suggests that the divine language of the Qur'ān uses symbolic and allegorical language and needs to be interpreted if it is to be really understood. For example, the Ismāʿīli thinker Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. *c.* 412 AH/1021 CE) has a theory of language which accounts for the different forms of expression in the Qur'ān. He contrasts the contingency of language with the necessity of God, and suggests that this means that language cannot define God. But we have to use language to describe God, there is nothing else available, and we should understand that language is just a starting point, not where we should stop. We can use our intelligence to work out some features of what it means to live in a world created by God, but we must be aware of the limits of that language. It is our reason which gets us to this conclusion. This should be placed within the context of a wider debate in the fourth/tenth century among Muslim theologians

and philosophers dealing with the relation between God's attributes and his essence. Many thinkers came to argue that the problems of defining God should be resolved by concluding that he is beyond existence and non-existence, that only negative properties should be applied to him (i.e. he is not finite, he is not mutable, and so on).

The notion of creation as a process is taken very seriously by many Shī'ī thinkers, and the command by God to the world to be (*kūn*) is not seen as just issued once, but part of a continual set of instructions and orders. This came to be part and parcel of the normal way in which the *falāsifa* saw creation, as is hardly surprising given their general commitment to a Neoplatonic way of interpreting the nature of reality. Of course, with Shī'ism comes the idea of divine intervention being ever-present as a direct possibility through the influence of particular imams or representatives of God. But it is important to distinguish between this and the main position of the *falāsifa*. For the latter the constant creation is not a result of a deity who intends to bring about certain results and who is as a result keeping the tap flowing, as it were. Nor is the eternal dependence of the world on the creator a sign that our fates and that of our world is at the command of a personal deity. On the contrary, the descriptions of the connection we have with God rule out such direct kinds of relationship, and the world flows from God automatically without his direct intervention at all. So there is no scope for arguing that Shī'ism is more attuned to *falsafa* at all. On the contrary, the emphasis in Sunnīsm on general institutions such as the caliphate and the consensus (*ijmā'*) of the community might be seen as more in line with the adherence of the *falāsifa* to general principles such as the necessary status of causality and the ability of logic to analyze the deep structure of language.

But what this shows is how misguided the question of which type of Islam is more friendly to Islam is. It is just as foolish as associating particular theological schools of thought with philosophy (Mu'tazilite) and others as antagonistic (Ash'arite). We shall see from the case of Abū Sa'īd al-Sīrāfī that it is perfectly possible for a Mu'tazili to be opposed to *falsafa*, and we shall also see that there is no difficulty in seeing al-Ghazālī as a *failasūf* malgré lui.

The principal task of Islamic government is to establish obedience to God and his law as laid down in the Qur'ān, although in practice the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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 third/ninth century under the 'Abbāsid dynasty, the successors of the Umayyads. The 'Abbāsids transferred the capital of the empire from Damascus to Baghdad, 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 217/832 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 CE 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 150/750 to 400/1000 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 Philoponus 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān 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 Qur'ānic. Foreign practices and customs were absorbed into Islam by means of legal devices. Yet Islamic law 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 Qur'ān 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 worldview 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 Qur'ān in spite of the fact that the Qur'ān 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 CE, philosophers and theologians who were not both 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 (732/1332–808/1406), '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 al-Ghāzalī, like a protection troop at the pilgrim road.[2] Al-Ghāzalī 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 premisses 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

[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] Al-Ghāzalī'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*.