

## ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE BEFORE AL-GHAZALI: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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### **Abstract**

*Before al-Ghazali's influential works, Islamic philosophical thought was profoundly shaped by the Quran's stress on seeking knowledge and critical thinking. The trailblazing efforts of Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, and Ibn Sina harmonized Greek philosophical ideas with Islamic theological principles, establishing a foundation for subsequent breakthroughs. Through the Abbasid-era translation initiative, intellectual treasures from Greece, Persia and India converged, cultivating a vibrant cultural and intellectual landscape. This paper delves into the seminal contributions of notable philosophers, explores theological controversies and examines the intricate relationship between philosophy and Kalam, underscoring the remarkable evolution of Islamic philosophy prior to al-Ghazali's paradigm-shifting influence.*

### **Key words**

*Islam, philosophy, history.*

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## Introduction

The Holy *Qur'an* is the foundational source of Islamic thought and philosophy, making it crucial to understand pre-Islamic Arabia before exploring Islamic philosophy's growth and development. Pre-Islamic Arabs relied on ancestral traditions and oral authority, lacking critical examination of their beliefs and practices, characterized by ignorant (*Umi'en*). Despite exceptional poetry, eloquence, wisdom, and intelligence, they hadn't established a distinct civilization, similar to Persian, Indian and Greek nations, which also hadn't developed rules of eloquence (*Balagah*), semantics (*Ma'ani*) or rhetoric (*Badih*). Islamic scholars pioneered these sciences post-Islam's advent, as noted in Hadith, "Arabs were illiterate and could neither write nor count."<sup>1</sup> While erudite poets existed, philosophers akin to Indian and Greek thinkers were absent, leaving Arab wisdom scarce and largely imaginative. Their period of ignorance saw worship of inanimate objects like idols, stars, and trees. The Qur'an's revelation was the catalyst for Arab progress, influencing politics, economy, and civilization. Marhabah aptly notes, "The Qur'an was not a philosophical book... But it freed the human mind and thought and lifted all."<sup>2</sup> Despite not being a technical philosophy book, the Qur'an solved philosophical problems, prescribed rational vision, and rejected opponents with sound arguments, giving birth to Arab thought and Islamic philosophy. The Qur'an addresses human intellect, inviting contemplation on creations and the divine, pondering over the heavens, earth, and the all-powerful, single, Divine Being. Its verses encourage knowledge acquisition, research, and critical thinking, exemplified in phrases like, "The home of the Hereafter is best for those who do right."<sup>3</sup> The Qur'an played a pivotal role in Islam's transformative impact on the Arabs, unifying them, establishing a cohesive community, and shifting their societal structure from tribal to humanistic. This profound transformation instilled a culture of knowledge, research, and contemplation, elevating their way of life.

The Qur'an provides a comprehensive philosophical framework, particularly in metaphysics, dividing the universe into two realms: the unseen (*Alam al-Ghayb*) and the visible (*Alam al-Shahadah*). Although humans cannot directly comprehend the unseen, reflective thinking enables understanding of the visible world. The unseen realm encompasses metaphysical concepts like God, the Hereafter, and revelation. Al-Farabi aptly notes, "A true philosopher possesses total knowledge and demonstrates competence in its application."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Ibn Sina asserts that theoretical philosophy's foundations harmonize with religion, as both seek truth. Ibn Sina's perspective integrates faith and reason, encouraging Muslims to study the universe as a religious obligation. The Qur'an's emphasis on reflective thinking

and knowledge acquisition sparked a philosophical awakening, addressing fundamental questions of Divinity, power, and existence. The Qur'an's emphasis on critical thinking, coupled with the Prophet's (Pbuh) teachings, fostered intellectual inquiry, exemplified by the *Muta'zilites*. They championed monotheism, justice, and reason, recognizing it as the heart's guiding light to distinguish truth from falsehood. The Qur'an's profound impact on Islamic philosophy's growth and development is undeniable, transforming ignorant Arab societies. Subsequent thinkers refined philosophical concepts, aligning them with Qur'anic and Prophetic guidance.

**Objectives:** The paper's primary goals are:

- i. Exploring pre-Islamic Arabia's social, cultural, and intellectual landscape, setting the stage for Islam's emergence.
- ii. Investigating the Quran's influence on promoting critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and knowledge-seeking, shaping Islamic philosophy and scholarship.
- iii. Analyzing Islam's transformative impact on Arab society, fostering unity, intellectual growth, and contemplation, and redefining social and cultural norms.

### **Methodology**

The research adopts a qualitative methodology, combining historical analysis with textual interpretation of foundational texts, including the Quran and works of prominent Islamic scholars, to explore the development of Islamic philosophical thought. The study's analytical framework is informed by a critical review of existing literature and academic discussions.

### **Discussion and findings**

Before delve into the problem, it is important to note that prior to the emergence of various Islamic sects, Islam's fundamental principles remained simple and uncomplicated during the Prophet Muhammad's (Pbuh) lifetime and shortly after. The Prophet's passing was swiftly followed by conflicts with Roman and Persian empires, consuming Arab energies. Early Muslims focused primarily on spreading their faith, leaving little room for abstract theological debates. However, a group of companions, known as 'The People of the Bench' (*Ashab-al-Sufa*), devoted themselves to theological studies and scholarly pursuits, separate from military campaigns. This group, including notable companions like Ali, Ibn Masud, Aa'isha and Muadh Ibn Jabal, applied reason to understand religious doctrines' practical implications while avoiding unchecked rationalism. According to Shibli, these

pioneers laid foundational groundwork for Islamic rationalism, paving the way for *Muta'zilism's* emergence.

Before delving into *Muta'zilit* and *Ash'arite* doctrines, the pivotal role of translation efforts in shaping Muslim sectarian and doctrinal differences must be examined. Islamic theologians (*Mutakallimin*) were exposed to Greek sciences and philosophy, profoundly impacting *Ilm-ul-Kalam* (Islamic theology) and informing their discussions. Neo-Platonism significantly influenced Hadith literature, yet Shibli argues that *Ilm-ul-Kalam* wasn't solely derived from Greek philosophy, citing *Mutakallimin* misinterpretations due to inadequate Arabic translations. Nonetheless, Shibli acknowledges their familiarity with Greek philosophers, demonstrating substantial Greek scientific knowledge. This exposure shaped *Kalam* debates, spawning opposing camps addressing philosophical issues like substance and space, and intersecting theological and philosophical inquiry, as evident in *Kalam* texts tackling problems explored by Muslim philosophers.

The dynamic interplay between Islam, philosophy and *Kalam* has yielded profound mutual influences, fostering a rich intellectual synergy. *Ilm-ul-Kalam*, the science of divine discourse, introduced novel philosophical themes like *Tawhid* (God's unity), while philosophy expanded *Kalam's* scope to explore diverse issues, blurring boundaries between philosophical inquiry and theological discourse. Scholars like Shibli recognize Islamic philosophers and *Mutakallimin* as part of a shared intellectual tradition, addressing philosophical problems despite methodological differences. Inspired by Greek philosophers, *Mutakallimin* employed rational arguments to defend Islam, liberating Muslim thought from Greek dominance, exemplified by Plato and Aristotle, and paving the way for indigenous intellectual growth. Al-Farabi exemplified this reverence, saying, "Had I lived during Aristotle's time, I would have preferred being his obedient student."<sup>5</sup> Ibn Sina echoed, After the Golden Age of Greek thought, nothing noteworthy would be added to Aristotle's discoveries. However, *Ilm-ul-Kalam* scholars' critical examination of philosophy introduced nuanced perspectives, ending unwavering adherence.

Exploring Muslim philosophy before Al-Ghazali and *Ilm-ul-Kalam* requires examining Greek text translations, sparking diverse interpretations. Here, Ziauddin Sardar<sup>6</sup> is notable for his insightful perspective, which situates this endeavour within Islam's unique epistemological framework, promoting genuine scholarship, intellectual growth, and balanced knowledge pursuit. This framework seamlessly integrates varied knowledge forms, reflecting Islam's cosmopolitan character, equalizing all knowledge forms to foster holistic understanding. Moreover, it provides a middle path for knowledge pursuit, synthesizing ancient civilizations' sciences -

Greek treasures, Indian wisdom, Chinese discoveries, Persian insights and Egyptian knowledge - facilitating the harmonization of diverse traditions and enriching Islamic intellectual heritage.

In addition to other factors, two civilizations played a pivotal role in shaping Islamic thought: Indian and Greek. The Indian civilization's uniqueness was diluted by external influences, whereas Greek civilization flourished, spreading its intellectual wings across Alexandria, Rome, and Syria for fifteen centuries. This extensive presence facilitated the convergence of Greek and Islamic ideas, yielding a rich synthesis. Consequently, Muslim scholars effortlessly incorporated Greek philosophy, merging Islamic and Greek thought. "Prior to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Islamic world and India were the dual epicentres of intellectual excellence, shaping global knowledge traditions."<sup>7</sup>

Van Den Bergh astutely observes, "Maria Sopra Minerva symbolizes European culture, yet we must remember the mosque's construction on a Greek temple site. Christian Western theology gradually assimilated Greek, particularly Aristotelian, ideas. In contrast, Islam's impact was sudden, violent and brief."<sup>8</sup> This observation highlights a pivotal phenomenon. Muslims strategically translated Greek texts, transforming classical thought into innovative Islamic scholarship. These translations facilitated rapid European absorption of Islamic principles, sparking a strong counter-reaction as European thinkers grasped Islamic thought's nuances. Ultimately, Western thinkers deliberately dissociated their intellectual heritage from Islamic roots after adopting valuable Islamic knowledge.

The medieval Arab translation endeavour was motivated by multiple factors, primarily the Quran's fervent advocacy for knowledge pursuit, critical thinking and intellectual exploration. This scriptural imperative sparked a profound impact, propelling Muslims, particularly during the Abbasid era (750-1258 CE), to enthusiastically engage with Greek scientific and philosophical thought. The confluence of Persian, Indian and Arab civilizations under Abbasid rule fostered a rich cultural exchange, resulting in unprecedented advancements in sciences and philosophy. Key drivers of this progress included the Quran's emphasis on knowledge acquisition, strategic patronage by Abbasid rulers and interactions among diverse civilizations, culminating in a golden age of intellectual growth and discovery.

The 7th-century Islamic expansion into Syria, Iraq and Egypt sparked a profound cultural exchange, introducing Muslims to Greek philosophy and Hellenistic sciences. Through Arabic translations from Greek and Syriac sources, facilitated by Syrian scholars, works of Aristotle, Galen and Hippocrates were rendered into Arabic, laying the groundwork for a vibrant intellectual movement.

Under Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur (754-775 CE), translations expanded beyond medicine, alchemy and astrology, fueling debates and innovations. Baghdad, established in 762 and ruled by Harun al-Rashid from 786, emerged as a hub of scientific and philosophical advancements. During this period, Arabic translations of Greek, Sanskrit and Persian texts flourished, including Aristotle's philosophical works, Neo-Platonic commentaries and Galen's medical treatises. "This translation movement, initiated in the Umayyad era, culminated in the 4<sup>th</sup> century *Hijra* (10<sup>th</sup> century CE), earning the designation "Golden Age" of Islamic scholarship,"<sup>9</sup> marked by an unprecedented surge in intellectual pursuits and cross-cultural exchange.

Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833 CE) played a pivotal role in introducing Greek philosophy to Islamic cultural centres. A scholar and author himself, he brought unparalleled intellectual fervour to the caliphate, earning recognition as Islam's greatest patron of philosophy and science. His visionary endeavour, *Bayt-al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom), became a hub of scholarly activity. This esteemed institute housed a translation centre, library and think tank, where eminent scholars translated and copied key texts. Al-Ma'mun dispatched emissaries to the Byzantine Empire to acquire Greek philosophical and scientific works, which were then translated by *Bayt-al-Hikmah* scholars. This renowned centre of learning and translation remains an iconic milestone in Arab history.

Undoubtedly, the fusion of Greek philosophy and Islamic learning flourished during the Abbasid Caliphate, profoundly shaping Muslim life. Initiated in the Umayyad era, translations of Greek texts became a collaborative project under Caliph al-Ma'mun, with Christian scholars rendering key works into Arabic, influencing Muslim thought and sparking diverse philosophical schools. This convergence culminated in the rise of the *Muta'zilites*, an influential 8th-century Islamic school founded by Abu Hudayfah Wasil ibn Ata, emphasizing free will, divine justice and human reason. The *Muta'zilites* adhered to five core principles: Divine unity (*al-Tawhid*), Divine justice (*al-'Adl*), human accountability (*al-Wa'd wal-Wa'id*), the intermediate state (*al-Manzilan Bayna al-Manzilatayn*) and promoting virtue (*Amr bil Ma'ruf wa al-Nahi 'an al-Munkar*). Briefly speaking, their nuanced "Quranic interpretation, harmonizing with the *Tawhid* doctrine, asserted God's attribute-free essence, eternity and non-contingency, differing from the Salafis and *Ahl-al-Sunnah's* literal understanding of scripture and traditions."<sup>10</sup>

The late 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a profound transformation in Islamic thought with the emergence of **Ash'arism**, pioneered by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari. Trained under Qadi 'Abd al-Jabar in *Mutazilite* teachings, al-Ash'ari diverged from these principles, embracing *Ahl-al-Sunnah* doctrines and

integrating his expertise to develop a cohesive Islamic jurisprudence. At this juncture, it can be stated that contrasting with predecessors like Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, al-Ash'ari validated theological debate and logical argumentation, supported by Quranic and prophetic evidence in his seminal treatise "*Risalah fi Istihsan al-Khawd fi 'Ilm-ul-Kalam*."<sup>11</sup> His innovative work marked a pivotal moment, consolidating a gradual ideological shift and reconciling disparate views into a globally recognized doctrinal framework. Theologian T.J. De Boer observed, "Al-Ash'ari understood how to render to God the things that are God's, and to man the things that are men,"<sup>12</sup> highlighting al-Ash'ari's nuanced comprehension of divine and human spheres. Here is Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari's theological framework encompasses 17 key principles:

1. Divine attributes differ from God's essence.
2. God's will governs all events through providence and predestination.
3. God is the source of good and evil.
4. Human actions are created by God, negating free will.
5. Moral value is determined by divine decree, not reason.
6. Human power coincides with actions.
7. Rejection of absolute deanthropomorphism (*Tanzih-al-Mutlaq*).
8. Humans acquire or earn actions.
9. Possibility of beatific vision.
10. Sinful Muslims remain believers (*Mu'min*).
11. God's forgiveness and chastisement are permissible.
12. Intercession (*Shifah*) is justified.
13. God cannot lie or break promises.
14. World's creation in time (non-eternal).
15. The Quran has an eternal meaning, but its spoken form is created.
16. Divine acts may lack discernible purpose.
17. God assigns duties beyond human capability.

Thus, in a nutshell, it can be said that Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari's theology seamlessly integrates divine omnipotence, human limited agency and the dynamic interplay between divine will and human actions.

Furthermore, three visionary philosophers - **Al-Kindi**, **Al-Farabi** and **Ibn Sina** - laid the groundwork for Islamic intellectual advancement prior to al-Ghazali's contributions. To fully appreciate their impact, it is essential to examine their seminal works, which significantly enriched Islamic thought and paved the way for subsequent scholars.

**Al-Kindi**, fully known as Abu Yusuf Yaqub ibn Ishaq ibn al-Sabbath ibn Imran ibn Ismail ibn al-Ashath ibn Qays al-Kindi, was born around 185 AH/801 CE and died in 258 AH/873 CE. His life spanned approximately 70 years, as noted by Abdul Munyim Hammudah: “The strong evidence about his birth and death is that he was born in the beginning of the ninth century.”<sup>13</sup> This dating is corroborated by T.J. De Boer. Al-Kindi’s early life in Kufah was marked by rigorous intellectual pursuits. As Ibn al-Nadim records: “He memorized the Quran, studied Arabic grammar, literature, and elementary arithmetic.”<sup>14</sup>

Al-Kindi, a visionary polymath, had assimilated the vast knowledge and culture of his era, recognizing a unifying thread across diverse religious systems: the concept of a singular, eternal *First Cause*. His expertise in Greek, Persian and Indian literature garnered unparalleled respect during his Baghdad tenure. His magnum opus, *On the First Philosophy* (one of 265 works), provides profound insights into his philosophy, exploring philosophy’s meaning and applications, ontological categories, causality, unity and metaphor. This treatise traverses physics, metaphysics, finitude and infinity, culminating in a nuanced discussion on the necessity of a non-material *First Cause* and the complexities of unity, cementing al-Kindi’s philosophical legacy.

Renowned scholar Dr. Fawad Ehwany notes: “Al-Kindi pioneered scholarly writing among Arabs, categorizing knowledge into religious and philosophical disciplines, inspiring esteemed thinkers from al-Farabi to Ibn Khaldun.”<sup>15</sup> Al-Kindi’s visionary approach built upon this legacy, transforming Islamic philosophy and expanding scientific contributions to include prophecy, religious principles, *Fiqh*, *Hadith and Tafsir* etc. His integrative work laid the groundwork for luminaries like **Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ghazali**, solidifying his status as a timeless thought leader. Al-Kindi’s philosophy had two primary objectives: establishing the existence of the True One (*al-Wahid-al Haqq*) and reconciling Plato and Aristotle’s philosophical perspectives, a challenge previously attempted by Alexander and Plotinus. Although Al-Kindi’s synthesis didn’t fully resolve the dichotomy, his innovative fusion forged a groundbreaking concordance framework. Ultimately, his philosophical journey led him significantly beyond his initial Mutazilite *Mutakallim* stance.

**Al-Farabi**, a pioneering Turkish philosopher born circa 258/259 AH (870 CE) and deceased in 339 AH (950 CE)<sup>16</sup>, harmonized Greek philosophy with Islamic thought, building upon Al-Kindi’s legacy. Initially educated in *jurisprudence, Hadith and Quranic exegesis*, he mastered Arabic, Turkish and Persian. As a prominent Sufi in Aleppo’s court of Sayf al-Dawla al-Hamadani, Al-Farabi explored prophethood, positing the human soul’s resemblance to God’s singular nature. He

conceived God as simple, composition-free and accessible through withdrawal from the physical world. Integrating Aristotle's motion, Neo-platonic emanation, Platonic eternal ideas and Epicurean views on the rational soul, Al-Farabi's magnum opus, *Ihsa al-Ulum*, classified sciences. His philosophy culminated in the concept of the *First Cause* (al-'Illah al-'Ula), where God, as the Necessary Existence (*al-Wajib al-Wujud*), causes contingent beings (*al-Mumkinat*) to exist.

Al-Farabi's metaphysical and eternal concept of God's causality, drawing from Aristotelian, Neo-platonic and Islamic theology, synthesized Greek philosophy with Islamic thought. This foundational synthesis **paved the way for Ibn Sina** (980-1037 CE), who expanded upon Al-Farabi's ideas. Ibn Miskawayh's *al-Fawz al-Ashgar* echoed Al-Farabi's arguments on God's existence and attributes. Notably, Al-Farabi's emphasis on causality and determinism, extending to effects without apparent causes, provoked devastating criticism from Ghazali. Ghazali's critique targeted Al-Farabi's views on causation, highlighting tensions between philosophical determinism and theological free will. This debate underscored Al-Farabi's profound impact on Islamic philosophy, shaping subsequent thinkers' engagement with Greek philosophy and Islamic theology.

**Abu Ali al-Hussein Ibn Abdullah Ibn Sina**, renowned as Avicenna, was born circa 980 CE in Afshana, near Bukhara, Uzbekistan, and passed away on June 22, 1037. His intellectual journey began with early home education, followed by philosophical and medical studies in Bukhara. As a polymath, Ibn Sina shaped philosophy, medicine, astronomy and mathematics, influencing European thinkers through his commentaries on Aristotle. He challenged Aristotelianism, concurring on timeless creation and disagreeing with theologians on *creation ex nihilo* (out of nothing), solidifying his status as the most influential Islamic philosopher. According to George Sarton, "Ibn Sina is the most famous scientist and philosopher of Islam and one of the greatest of all races, places, and times."<sup>17</sup>

Ibn Sina's literary legacy comprises approximately 100 works, including *Kitab al-Shifa* (The Book of Healing), a philosophic encyclopaedia synthesizing Greek, Persian and Islamic thought, and *Kitab al-Nijat* (The Book of Salvation). His magnum opus explores metaphysics, epistemology and reality, introducing *Wahdat al-Wujud* (Unity of Existence). This philosophical framework underpinned his medical innovations, such as *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* (The Canon of Medicine), which revolutionized disease classification, clinical trials and preventive medicine. His scientific works challenged Ptolemaic theories, advanced mathematics and explored optics, physics and chemistry.

Ibn Sina's enduring legacy extends far beyond the Islamic world. Western philosophers like Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham and Rene Descartes drew inspiration from his ideas. His synthesis shaped Islamic philosophical and theological debates, embodying Islamic scholarship's commitment to intellectual curiosity and critical thinking. Today, Ibn Sina remains a revered figure in Islamic intellectual history, his contributions continuing to inspire scholars and ensuring his legacy remains vibrant and relevant. This is, in brief, all about growth and development of Islamic philosophy before al-Ghazali.

### Conclusion

In view of the above, it can be said that the evolution of Islamic philosophy before Al-Ghazali was a dynamic process shaped by the confluence of Greek, Persian and Indian intellectual traditions. The Quran's emphasis on knowledge pursuit and critical thinking sparked a vibrant cultural and intellectual landscape, fostering groundbreaking contributions from pioneering thinkers like Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. As Islamic thought engaged with Greek philosophy, it not only assimilated but also transformed and expanded upon it, yielding novel insights and perspectives. The debates and controversies surrounding free will, determinism, and divine justice laid the groundwork for the development of distinct Islamic philosophical schools, including the Muta'zilites and Ash'arites. As a result, the synthesis of Islamic and Greek thought produced a rich intellectual heritage, cementing Islam's position as a major force in the global pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

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