



AVICENNA I. INTRODUCTORY NOTE

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The generally accepted view that the Islamic philosophic tradition established by Fārābī (d. 339/950) came to an end with Ebn Rošd (Averroes, fl. 520-95/1126-98) has been challenged by scholars who have pointed to the continuity of that tradition in the East, principally in Iran, to the present day. In order to understand the point at issue, one must begin with Avicenna, as a disciple of Fārābī, which in many ways he was, but also as a thinker who attempted to redefine the course of Islamic philosophy and channel it into new directions. For to the extent that the post-Averroistic tradition remained philosophic, it moved in the directions charted for it by Avicenna in the investigation of both theoretical and practical sciences.

If one looks at the broad movement of Islamic philosophy since Fārābī one can see that it began with the formulation of its principles and moved progressively toward greater elaboration and application of these principles to the study of the relation between philosophy and religion, but also toward a closer and more detailed examination of the various aspects of the phenomenon of religion, such as prophecy, revelation, the divine or religious law, and of what one might call the varieties of religious experience. Fārābī



avoided explicit examination of Islam or any other particular religion and always spoke of religion in general. (As far as the reader is concerned, he could have been speaking about someone else's religion or some hypothetical religion.) This enabled him to speak boldly, if cautiously, about the relation between philosophy and religion, state the principles of a philosophic or scientific approach to the study of religion, include the science of religion within political philosophy, and identify religion with the city.

With Avicenna one finds the beginnings of a movement away from explicitness about the central question of the relation between philosophy and religion, and toward treating this question either in the form of myths, poems, and stories, or else obliquely by means of suggestive hints. Instead, there emerges what might be called a philosophic interpretation of religion: The various aspects of the phenomenon of religion in general, and of Islam in particular, are explained in a way that, broadly speaking, bears out Fārābī's view of religion, but without stating the original formulation of that view or its political framework. The Qur'ān, the Tradition of Mohammad (*Sonna*), the political history of the Muslim Community (*Omma*), the Islamic Law (*Šarī'a*), Islamic theology (*kalām*), and such questions as prophecy and revelation are now examined directly, not as a hypothetical case, or as the "universals" or "general rules," as was the case in Fārābī's political science, but as this specifically determined revelation and as these doctrines and texts and men and situations. This required him to make certain concessions, especially in areas such as the resurrection of the body, where reason can not validate religious doctrine. But it enabled him to domesticate philosophy in the Islamic world and present it in a way that could now be appreciated, not only by the select few, but by a wide range of educated Muslims.

Two generations after Avicenna, Abū Ḥāmed Ġazālī (fl. 450-505/1058-1111) testifies to the fact that no serious Muslim thinker could ignore the claim of philosophy as a way to the highest and most comprehensive knowledge available to man and as a way to the Truth. He also testifies to the fact that, at least as far as he was concerned, philosophy for all practical purposes meant Avicenna's philosophy. When he set about to learn what philosophy was, he read Avicenna's works. When he tried to present the intentions of the philosophers, he wrote a summary of Avicenna's philosophy. And when he tried to show the incoherence of the philosophers, he wrote a refutation of Avicenna's doctrines. Similarly, when Moḥammad Šahrestānī (d. 548/1153) came to give an account of the doctrines of "the philosophers of Islam"



(*falāsefat al-Eslām*), as distinguished from the doctrines of Greek or Indian philosophers, he simply summarized the doctrines of “the most distinguished . . . Avicenna” (ed. A. Fahmī Moḥammad, 3 vols., Cairo, 1368/1949, 3.3, 3.43). Most of the later Muslim theologians and mystics who tried to harmonize philosophy and theology, or philosophy and mysticism, and, later on, philosophy and theology and mysticism, also made use of Avicenna. All this testifies to his success in popularizing philosophy in the Islamic community. Later philosophers, especially in the Islamic West, perceived that Avicenna’s success was achieved at the expense of the integrity and purity of philosophy, by concessions to theology and mysticism, and by the creation of a hybrid mixture which led to confusion and exposed philosophy to attacks and criticisms by men like Ḡazālī. Within philosophic circles, there arose an anti-Avicennan, pro-Farabian tradition which accused Avicenna of engaging in too much rhetoric and dialectic and of making too many adjustments to popular views. His popularity with non-philosophers was matched, among his fellow philosophers, by a certain opposition to his temper, manner of writing, and lack of prudence. But the public did not, of course, listen to these philosophers. Avicenna’s writings spread like fire and continued until today to form the basis of philosophic education in the Islamic world.

However all this may be, the central question is how Avicenna took the crucial step or steps from Fārābī’s general science of religion to a science of this particular religion which is Islam. Avicenna wrote a vast body of specialized tracts on religious matters, including commentaries on Koranic passages, and discussions of subjects like prayer, prophecy, and the hereafter. Most of these, however, represent a movement from particular religious doctrines and ideas to their theoretical principles, without explaining the place of these specialized discussions within the whole body of human knowledge. And he wrote encyclopedic works on logic, natural sciences, mathematics, and metaphysics, in which practical science occupies a subordinate position.