INTRODUCTION

Islam is the youngest of the great world religions. Although Arabia is its cradle and its inspiration, it owes in its theology a good deal to Judaism and Christianity, and its way of life centred in and regulated by an all-embracing law has many features in common with the Jewish way of life. Muḥammad, its founder-prophet, grew to maturity in daily contact with Jews and Christians.

Yet, although Jewish and Christian elements can be found in Muḥammad’s teaching and in Muslim ritual and law, Islam is not simply the sum total of foreign elements. For Muḥammad brought his own personality to bear upon what he saw and heard and argued about. In their transformation these foreign elements blended with Arabian features into something peculiarly its own, another child of the desert, of the Semitic genius for religion.

From its beginnings in the Arabian desert, Islam looked out on the world that surrounded the Arabs. Religious zeal increased the power of its arms and brought it victory over many lands and nations of different cultures and civilizations, of different faiths and customs. It has always been willing to accept ideas and institutions from those it vanquished. But in acceptance it has adapted and transformed its inheritance. Not always able to work the various strands into a harmonious whole, Islam has never yet lost its identity, even if instead of fusion and synthesis there resulted only fruitful and peaceful co-existence. This holds good for every manifestation of Muslim life and thought. The hard core of Muḥammad’s teaching and its interpretation gave Islam that coherence and stability which enabled it to control its receptiveness, and to draw into its Arabian foundation, elements from highly developed nations and systems which enriched and ennobled it. In Arabia in the first place, Judaism and Christianity had to be faced in matters of doctrine and ritual; Zoroastrianism offered the next challenge in Iran, as did Sassanian ideas and practice of government; Byzantium supplied more than administrators. Indian and especially Persian literature, Persian historiography, Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, Jewish and Roman law, Greek medicine and natural sciences, not to mention Indian and Byzantine art and architecture,
POLITICAL THOUGHT IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM

all have a share in the complex fabric of Islamic civilization. It is not the least important and attractive feature of the Muslim genius that it was able to accommodate all these strangers and make them feel at home. It made no great demands on converts: “There is no God but Allah and Muḥammad is his prophet” were the magic words that opened the gates of the spacious house of Islam to the ahl al-kitāb, those who possessed a book, that is, a revelation. Refusal to accept Islam was not punished by death in their case; they were granted protection against payment of poll-tax, which helped to fill the coffers of the Muslim treasury. With the others it was conversion or the sword. The Oneness and Unity of God and Muḥammad as his prophet had to be acknowledged, a reasonable enough price to pay for a share in the privileges of the Muslim community, especially in the time of its empire-building, with the promise of rich booty and high office.

Mutual adaptation proceeded apace, naturally not without opposition. The astonishing result, Islamic culture and civilization, justified Arab open-mindedness, generosity, desert hospitality carried into urban life, and intellectual curiosity of beduins who were attracted by the refinement and glitter of Iran and Byzantium. The title of a remarkable book by A. Mez, The Renaissance of Islam, reflects the rich flowering of the spirit at the height of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad.

Islam is a religious way of life which contains diverse elements all bound together in a certain unity of outlook by the common belief in God and his prophet who had received a revelation—the final revelation—in the form of the Qur’ān, “the precious Book”. The exemplary life of the prophet, his Sunna, and Hadith, a body of authentic traditions going back to Muḥammad, and his work for the Muslim “Community of the Faithful”, were combined with the Qur’ān, and all three served as sources of the Shari‘a, the prophetically revealed law of Islam. This law bound and united all Muslims, were they Arabs, Persians or Turks, and others who had embraced Islam either by force or of their own free will. This Shari‘a is the rock of Islam, or to be more precise, of Sunnī or orthodox Islam, to the exclusion of the Shi‘a, which owes allegiance to ‘Alī and not to the orthodox caliphs. It comprises many sects differentiated by their recognition of different descendants of ‘Alī as their imams, and by different doctrines.
INTRODUCTION

Political thought in medieval Islam, the subject of this book, offers a classic example of the power of Islam to develop a system and a theory of its own and to relate to them systems, theories and ideas which are brought to Muslims from without. Political thought at first centres round the caliphate and is, in fact, a theory of the caliphate, its origin and purpose. Naturally this theory of the Khilâfa, developed by the jurists, is also our starting point; we take our bearings from it, just as the Muslims did, and in relation to it we describe and evaluate theories of Muslim writers on history and government. The art of government, as distinct from its theory, does not concern us directly, but only in so far as the writers of the so-called “Mirrors for Princes” offer advice to rulers on the basis of a political theory.

The inclusion of Ibn Khaldûn, the only political thinker in the strict sense of the term in Islam, requires no justification. In the first place, he bases his theory on observation of past and present Muslim states; in the second place, or rather on a par with the first reason, he is convinced of the superiority of the Khilâfa, based on the Shari‘a, over the power state, which he analyses and defines. That his investigation has led him to develop general principles of government going beyond the confines of Islam only adds to the importance of his theories, and brings into clearer relief their Islamic background.

The “Mirrors” illustrate the adaptability of Islam in the direction of Iran and of a typically Persian literary genre; but the Falâsîfa, that is, the Muslim religious philosophers, are in a very special way the best qualified exponents of an attempted synthesis between two cultures and ways of life. The relatively large space allotted to a discussion of their views is justified for several reasons. First, their political philosophy represents the encounter of the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle with the theory of the Khilâfa on home ground, that is, on the sure foundation and against the rock-like background of the Shari‘a, which is equally binding for all Muslims. Next, their political philosophy is, like that of their Greek masters, an integral part of their general philosophy, but is at the same time largely conditioned by their recognition of the authority of the Shari‘a. Further, and as a result, they make a determined attempt at a real synthesis between Platonic and Islamic concepts on the basis of the common ground.
POLITICAL THOUGHT IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM

of the central position of law in the state, and despite the existence of fundamental differences. They make this attempt as philosophers and as students of Aristotle’s theoretical and Plato’s practical philosophy rather than as theologians or jurists. There are differences among them, and variations will be noted in the reception of Plato’s political philosophy by various thinkers, ranging from mere illustration in Avempce to almost complete synthesis in Averroes, who is at the same time perhaps the most thorough and convinced Muslim of them all. Lastly, they are considered as Muslim philosophers, which means that their metaphysical standpoint is not one of complete independence, but is conditioned by the Sharī’a of Islam. This results in a limitation in the character, quality and range of their speculation imposed by the overriding authority of the Sharī’a. If inconsistencies are viewed with the eyes of Muslims, it will be found that they are more apparent than real.

Consequently, my starting point in the treatment of the political philosophy of Al-Fārābī, Avicenna and Averroes, excepting Avempce, is Islam, not Aristotle, because I am convinced that they were Muslim philosophers first and followers of their masters Plato and Aristotle second. Two sovereign worlds of the spirit meet in their minds and they try to harmonize revelation, in the form of prophetic law, with reason, in the form of the Nomos of the Greek city-state. If priorities must be established, supremacy belongs to the revealed law of Islam. In this sense only have the Falāsifa a place in a study which deals with political thought in medieval Islam. What is more, from the point of view of political theory their importance cannot be exaggerated, although they have had no influence on the course of events in the Islamic state at all, so far as our present knowledge allows us to judge. Their impact on the political thought of later jurists is, however, not negligible. But we do not measure ideas and their value by the impact they have made on the general run of humanity alone. It is in this field of political thought that the challenge of sovereign reason in the shape of philosophy has been met most vigorously and successfully by the Falāsifa. They were more than theologians and jurists; and they were also more than independently speculating philosophers in the wake of Plato, Aristotle and their Hellenistic commentators and continuators. Their independence as philosophers may, however, be questioned in the field of metaphysics.
INTRODUCTION

I have had to restrict my range of inquiry to representative exponents of Sunnî Islam as far as constitutional law is concerned. Shi‘î doctrine is mixed with a number of extra-Islamic ideas and notions and is too complicated to be treated in this first conspectus of political thought in Islam without further research on the lines of R. Strothmann’s work.

In explanation of the sub-title of the book I would say that at the present stage of our knowledge of the relevant texts a more ambitious undertaking is out of the question. Many of these texts are not available in critical editions; and even where we have them they have not yet been sufficiently studied under the aspect of politics. With the Falāṣīfa there are additional difficulties to be met. The correct and definitive evaluation of their work requires a varied expert knowledge such as hardly any student of Islamic thought possesses. One has to be Arabist, classicist, historian of ancient and medieval philosophy and expert in Islamic and general medieval history to grasp fully the antecedents of Islamic philosophy and the combinations of ideas stemming from Greek and Hellenistic philosophy.

A precise knowledge of the many elements, some of them from Iran and even from India, which have gone into Hellenistic philosophy and theosophy, is especially important. For they have a large share in the mystical branch of Islamic philosophy which in its theory of knowledge is relevant to the theory of prophecy as evolved by Al-Fārābī and developed by Avicenna, and to the latter’s own theory of knowledge. Political philosophy is only a branch of general philosophy; its greater importance is due to the religio-political, unitary character of Islam.

For all these reasons, the interpretation of the political theories of the Muslim religious philosophers, offered under the general heading of “The Platonic Legacy”, is provisional. But I hope by isolating, as far as this is possible, the political ideas properly so called, to give the reader an introduction to the more detailed study and appreciation of the subject in Islam. For this reason I have included a discussion of the theory of the caliphate (as evolved by some of the principal jurists), of government, and of the power-state. It would be pleasing to an orderly mind, especially one attuned to the concept of evolution, if it were possible to show that there is a steady evolution from the theological-juristic by way
POLITICAL THOUGHT IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM

of the political-historical to the scientific-realistic approach to politics in Islam. But this cannot be established without clear documentary evidence which I have not so far discovered. Students of, and experts in Fiqh, among the writers on politics other than the jurists, are naturally aware of the existence of the acknowledged interpretation of constitutional law, the more so since they as Muslims are themselves guided in their thinking and investigations into politics by the Shari‘a. Ibn Khaldūn was certainly familiar with the theory of the Khilāfa no less than with some writings of the Falāsīfa. This holds good at least for Avicenna, it applies much less, if at all, to the political treatises of Al-Fārābī, and certainly does not extend to Averroes’ commentaries on the Republic and the Nicomachean Ethics.

The Falāsīfa, with the exception of Avempace, are strongly under the influence of the Shari‘a, but also under that of Plato and Aristotle. That their thought is considered against the background and under the aspect of the Platonic legacy seems justified in view of the nature of their writings on politics, which are all based on Plato’s Republic and Laws. This is not to deny or minimize the importance of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, which is so evident in the case of Al-Fārābī and Averroes. But, apart from serving as the theoretical basis for their reception and adaptation of Platonic ideas, this work as a part of Aristotle’s whole philosophy is used mainly as a corrective of Plato’s views, as expressed in the Republic. It is no exaggeration to speak of a renaissance of Plato’s political philosophy in Islam. The danger of isolating political from general philosophy is, I trust, much reduced by a treatment such as I have adopted.

Moreover, by confining myself to an investigation into the documentary evidence for Platonic ideas and arguments in the political writings of the principal Falāsīfa, I hope to show the impact which Plato’s political philosophy made on Islam. It has been accepted in some of its fundamental features without some of its basic assumptions. For example, the existence of slavery and Plato’s neglect of the third class of citizens of his Republic, a point noted with disapproval by Averroes, found as little favour with the Falāsīfa as Plato’s idea of the community of women. The Falāsīfa were equally conscious of the gulf between their superior intellectual powers and the inability of the masses to rise beyond persuasion
and imagination, to the exclusion of real intellectual understanding. But as Muslims the Falāsifa accepted the masses as their equals in faith, albeit a naïve, unquestioning, even an unintelligent faith, and they shared with them, as far as we know, the observances of Muslim ritual. Nor did they deny them a share in the happiness and bliss promised to all Muslims in return for obedience to the will of God, as laid down in the teachings and regulations of the divinely revealed law. But Plato’s political philosophy helped them all to see the political character and significance of their own law more clearly.

It has often been stressed that Islam is like a vast mansion containing many rooms, not all of which are interconnected. There is good reason to assume that Muslim theology and law developed long after Muḥammad, and that his immediate successors, the first four caliphs, were idealized by later generations of Muslim theologians, jurists and historians. This applies particularly to the Sunnī theory of the Khilāfa, and it is well known what a gulf separates this ideal theory from political reality. But it should be emphasized that this book is concerned with political theory only, which was worked out at a time when the actual caliphate little resembled the ideal picture drawn by writers on constitutional law. But it is precisely this picture of the Khilāfa, as demanded by the (ideal) Sharīʿa, which is the centre of gravity and the point of reference for all Muslim writers who are concerned with political theory. Unless this is realized neither the religious philosophers of Islam, the Falāsifa, nor Ibn Khaldūn can be properly understood.

Since a large part of this book is devoted to an exposition of the political thought of the Falāsifa and of Ibn Khaldūn the results of historical and literary criticism cannot enter our discussion, the more so since they in no way affect the attitude of these authors; not only the ideal, but also the authoritative character of the Sharīʿa as the ideal constitution of the ideal state is an axiom with them no less than with the jurists. We must realize that no matter what modern research has established with regard to the origin and development of Muslim law and its threefold foundation in Qur’ān, Sunna and Hadith, it is, in a Muslim’s consciousness, divine law, perfect and binding on all members of the Muslim community. Otherwise we cannot hope to understand what was in the minds of the Muslim writers whose political thought we
consider. Our interpretation must take full account of their basic attitude.

A final observation concerns the character of Islam in relation to politics as understood by Western students. Unless we grasp this character we cannot appreciate the significance of the caliphate as it is presented in the theory of the Khilāfa, which serves as introduction and background to this book.

Islam knows no distinction between a spiritual and a temporal realm, between religious and secular activities. Both realms form a unity under the all-embracing authority of the Šhari‘a. L. Mascagnon’s definition of Islam as “une théocratie laïque égalitaire” correctly expresses this idea of Allah’s sovereign law revealed through his messenger, the prophet Muhammad, to mankind. Spiritual and temporal are the two complementary sides of the religious law. The caliph or imām is as viceroy of the prophet the defender of the faith, charged with the implementation of the law by safeguarding the welfare of the believers in this world and, by enforcing obedience to it, ensuring their salvation in the world to come. All believers, caliph as well as labourer, are equal before the law of God. Muslims owe obedience to the caliph only inasmuch as he is instrumental in applying this law. At least in theory, the power of the caliph is conditional upon his faithful discharge of his duty: to guard the law and enforce its application in the life of the Community of the Faithful founded by Muhammad. The Prophet is credited with the Hadith: dīn wadāwola (or dīn wāmulk or dīn wāsultān), “religion and (‘secular’) power are twins”. This means that dīn wadāwola are the two sides of the Šhari‘a. Usually the complement of dīn is dunya (this world); dīn means religion, not church, and is not contrasted with dunya which it comprises. The opposite of dunya is ākhira, the world to come. Both are contained in the dīn. It is unfortunate that we must use Western terms to translate the Arabic ones, for in so doing we distort their original meaning and give them a Christian connotation. A Muslim’s life—ideally at least—is ruled in its entirety by the Šhari‘a, which lays down precise rules and regulations governing his relations with God as well as with his fellow-Muslims and non-Muslims. We are used to term the former ‘religious’ and the latter ‘secular’. But where a religious law is all-comprehensive, this distinction falls to the ground. Politics is part of religion, so
INTRODUCTION

to speak; in other words, politics, siyāsa, or siyāsat al-dunyā, is the scene of religion as life on this earth as long as the law of the state is the Šariʿa. This state is the Khilāfa or Imāma, and if we must operate with our Western terms, it may be defined as a spiritual and temporal unity. Hence where the phrase “religious and political” is used in this book, this special unity should be taken as implied.

In further justification of the introductory and provisional nature of this study I would point to the paucity of existing literature on the theology, law and philosophy of Islam in so far as it affects the subject under review.

A. von Kremer’s Geschichte der herrschenden Ideen des Islam (1868) and Culturgeschichte des Orients (1875), an excellent pioneering effort at a time when many important and essential Arabic texts were unknown or not available in critical editions, have held the field for many years. Advance has been slow and followed the emergence of textual, historical and literary criticism. Many a distinguished scholar preferred the self-sacrificing task of providing the student of Islam with reliable critical editions of the vast source material dispersed over the libraries of three continents, to an exposition of the various aspects of Islamic culture. The more texts are made available and evaluated the greater becomes our insight into the origin and development of Islam. We need think only of the epoch-making researches of Wellhausen, Winckler, Goldziher, Noeldke, V. V. Bartold and C. H. Becker to realize the complex fabric of Islamic civilization. In our context, Goldziher’s critical understanding of the development of Muslim theology and law has led later scholars in the field to the important recognition of the predominantly theoretical character of the Šariʿa as the ideal norm of the Umma (Muslim nation). J. Schacht has developed Goldziher’s ideas in his important book, The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence, and A. Guillaume’s The Traditions of Islam is indispensable for the correct understanding of the Hadith (tradition). When we add Sir T. W. Arnold’s The Caliphate, which is based, as he says himself, on Goldziher’s and Becker’s researches, we have reliable means at our disposal to study the caliphate in its constitutional aspects. We are further helped in this task by D. Santillana’s Istituzioni, Sir Hamilton Gibb’s study of Al-Māwardi, M. Henri Laoust’s monograph on and translation of Ibn Taymiyya, E. Tyan’s Le Caliphat and Louis Gardet’s important La cité musulmane, which appeared after I had already drafted the whole book and, in particular, completed the chapter on the caliphate. (See my review of La cité musulmane: vie sociale et politique in The
POLITICAL THOUGHT IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM


To turn to the Falāṣifa, it will be remembered that their political thought has attracted the attention of scholars only for the last two decades. The absence of critical editions of some of their writings is acutely felt. Fr. Dieterici edited in 1895 Al-Fārābī’s Ideal State from the then known manuscripts in London and Oxford, and although we know from M. Steinschneider’s invaluable monograph Alfarabi, published in 1869, how important this Muslim philosopher is for the history of philosophy in Islam and for the history of the reception of Platonic and Aristotelian ideas by the Falāṣifa, the description and evaluation of Al-Fārābī’s political philosophy has only begun with L. Strauss’s Philosophie und Gesetz and my Maimonides’ Conception of State and Society, both published in 1935. Reference to preliminary studies is made in the appropriate sections in this book. Important contributions by the greatly missed Paul Kraus, by Fr. Rosenthal, R. Walzer and S. Pines (Nature et Société: problèmes de philosophie politique des Arabes) will be published soon. A critical edition of Al-Fārābī’s Compendium Legum Platonis by F. Gabrieli has recently added an important text for study (Plato Arabus III of the Corpus Platonicum Medii Aevi, ed. R. Klibansky, Warburg Institute, London, 1952). We owe to Asin Palacios editions of Ibn Bājja’s treatises which allow us, within the limits of their intelligibility, to assess their significance for political philosophy in Islam. The position is better in the case of Ibn Rushd thanks to Mueller, Gauthier, Bouyges, S. van den Bergh and others.

My edition of the Hebrew version of Ibn Rushd’s commentary on Plato’s Republic has now appeared. This text is the basis for the subsequent chapter on Ibn Rushd.

Lastly, my Ibn Khaldūn’s Gedanken über den Staat (1932) forms the basis of the chapter “The Theory of the Power-State”, supplemented by a fresh study of the Muqaddima, a critical edition of which, based on Quatremère’s, is being prepared by Prof. Ṭanji. A reliable text is not only essential for a correct understanding of Ibn Khaldūn’s thought, but also for the evaluation of his influence on modernist thinkers like ‘Alī ‘Abdu-l-Rāziq and Rashid Riḍā. An English translation by Prof. Fr. Rosenthal will appear very soon, together with an Ibn Khaldūn bibliography, compiled by Prof. W. J. Fischel.