

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Al-Kindi

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There are brief moments in history when nature lifts its veil to the human intellect so that it may witness the majesty of divine creation and pass on the wisdom gained from this encounter to succeeding generations. One such intellect was that of Al Kindi.

Abu Yusuf Yaqub Ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, one of the most celebrated of the philosophers and natural scientists of the classical age of Islam, was born in Kufa in the year 800 CE in the illustrious al Kindah clan from South Yemen. During the 5th and 6th centuries, the al Kindah had unified several tribes under its aegis. After the advent of Islam, some members of this tribe migrated to Southern Iraq, where they enjoyed the patronage of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphs. Al Kindi's father was the governor of Kufa, which at the time was a thriving commercial city, wherein people from Persia, Arabia, India and China met for trade and transaction. Al Kindi received his early education in Kufa.

Baghdad was ruled at the time by the fabled Harun ar Rasheed who had inherited the School of Translation established by Caliph al Mansur in 765 CE. This was a golden age for Muslims. It was a moment in history when the Islamic civilization opened its doors to new ideas from the East and the West. As the Abbasid Empire had grown, it had come into contact with ideas from classical Greek, Indian, Zoroastrian, Buddhist and Hindu civilizations. The confident Muslims took these ideas and remolded them in a uniquely Islamic mold. Out of this caldron came Islamic art, architecture, astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, music, philosophy and ethics.

What gave the Muslims the confidence to face other civilizations was their faith. With a confidence firmly rooted in revelation, the Muslims faced other civilizations, absorbing that which they found valid and transforming it in the image of their own belief. The Qur'an invites men and women to learn from nature, to reflect on the patterns therein, to mold and shape nature so that they may inculcate wisdom. "We shall show them our Signs on the horizon and within their souls until it is manifest unto them that it is the Truth" (Qur'an, 41:53). It is during this period that we see the emergence of the archetype of classical Islamic civilization, namely the Hakim (meaning, a person of wisdom). In Islam, a scientist is not a specialist who looks at nature from the outside, but a man of wisdom who looks at nature from within and integrates his knowledge into an essential whole. The quest of the Hakim is not just knowledge for the sake of knowledge but the realization of the essential Unity that pervades creation and the interrelationships that demonstrate the wisdom of God.

In 814 CE Al Kindi was sent to Baghdad for advanced education. Baghdad was now ruled by the Caliph al Mamun who was a scholar in his own right and had studied medicine, fiqh, logic, and was a Hafiz-e-Qur'an. Mamun went further than his predecessors in encouraging learning and scholarship. He elevated the House of Translation to Baitul Hikmah (House of Wisdom). Here he invited scholars from Greece, India and Persia to translate and further the work of the Greek philosophers, the Hindu mathematicians and Persian mystics. From Greece came the works of Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Galen, Hippocrates, Archimedes, Euclid, Ptolemy, Demosthenes, Anthemeus and Pythagoras. From India arrived scholars with knowledge of the Indian numerals, the concept of zero, Ayurvedic medicine, and the astronomical works of Aryabhatta and Brahmagupta. From China came the science of alchemy and the technologies of paper, silk and pottery. The Persians brought in the disciplines of administration, agriculture and irrigation. The scholars who were engaged in the work of translation included Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Hindus. The Muslims learned from these sources and gave to the world Algebra, Chemistry, Sociology and the concept of infinity.

The bright, young al-Kindi soon attracted the attention of al Mamun who appointed him a translator at the Baitul Hikmah. Here, al Kindi came into contact with the towering philosophers of the age, the likes of Ibn Hayyan (d 815), the inventor of the science of chemistry, and the mathematician Al Khwarizmi (d 863), the inventor of Algebra.

Al Kindi was a versatile genius. He stands tall even among the intellectual giants of the era. His contributions embrace logic, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, physics, geometry, medicine and music. He is credited with writing 241 books in the following disciplines: logic 9, mathematics 11, astronomy 16, physics 12, geometry 32, medicine 22, and music 7.

In mathematics, he further developed, together with Al Khwarizmi, the Indian number system, and applied it to decimals. He made original contributions to spherical geometry and applied it to astronomy. In chemistry, he showed that base metals could not be converted to gold, in opposition to the prevailing views of alchemists. In physics, he worked on the theory of sound and showed that the human voice creates waves which travel through the air and are received by the cochlea in the ear. In optics he experimented with the reflection of light and showed how a convex mirror focused incoming rays onto a single point. In medicine, he developed a systematic methodology for administering appropriate dosage of medicine. In music he studied harmony and pitch and showed how frequencies can be combined to produce harmonics. He studied time and space and held that they were both finite, as opposed to the views of Aristotle. He is best known for his study of the concept of infinity and "the paradox of the infinite" named after him.

Al Kindi developed his own ideas on akhlaq (character and ethics). Like the Sufi masters he advised the reader against attachment to the physical world. At the same time, like the Imams of fiqh, he prescribed temperance in the pursuit of happiness. He held courage and wisdom to be worthwhile attributes of the mind and soul but even here temperance was required. Happiness, he propounded, lay a wise balance between attachment and detachment, between courage and rashness. In his attempts to develop a science of akhlaq, he presaged Nasiruddin al Tusi (d 1274) of Persia by four hundred years.

Al Kindi was a principal bridge in the transmission of Greek and Arabic knowledge to Western Europe. In 1085 CE the city of Toledo, the old Gothic capital in the heart of Spain, fell to the crusaders. The conquering Christians established a school of translation wherein Greco-Arabic texts were translated into Latin. Among the books so translated were a large number written by al Kindi. Included in it were the manuscripts De Intellectu, Ilayiat e Aristu, al Mosiqa and Ikhtiyarat al Ayyam. His works influenced Roger Bacon (d 1292 CE) in the Latin West and Ibn Sina (d 1037 CE)and Ibn Rushd (d 1198 CE) in the Islamic world.

Al-Kindi, the Mu'tazalites and the crystallization of Islamic orthodoxy

Al Kindi was witness to the turbulence caused in the Islamic world by the introduction of Greek philosophy and its ultimate rejection in favor of empirical science. This phase of Islamic history needs to be clarified because it is often stated that the decay of science in Islamic civilization was due to the rejection of Greek rational thought. This was not the case. Science and civilization thrived in Muslim lands well after the rejection of Greek rationalism. Islamic civilization came in contact with Greek rationalism, found it wanting, and adopted the inductive method inherent in its own genius, as opposed to the deductive method of the Greeks.

It is appropriate in this paper to refer to the Mu'tazilite School of thought, and its counterpoint, the Asharite School. As the Muslims captured Syria, Egypt and North Africa, they became custodians of not just the people of those countries, but their ideas as well. Most of those lands had been under Eastern Roman or Byzantine control where Greek thought was dominant. Historically, the term "Greek thought" is applied to the collective wisdom and classical thinking of the people of the eastern Mediterranean, which includes a broad geographical arc extending from Athens in Greece through Anatolia, Syria, Egypt and Libya. Greek civilization extolled the nobility of man and placed human reason at the apex of creation. Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Euclid and Archimedes are some of the household names from the galaxy of thinkers produced by this civilization. The enduring achievement of Greek thought is that it perfected the rational process and left its lasting legacy for humankind.

The early Muslims not only adopted the rational approach but set out with enthusiasm to explain their own beliefs in rational terms. Questions relating to the nature of man, his relationship to creation, his obligations and responsibilities, as also the nature of Divine attributes were tackled. No Muslim scholar would embark on an intellectual effort unless his approach had a basis in the Qur'an. The rationalists saw a justification for their approach in Qur'anic verses (eg.: "Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, ... There are indeed signs for a people who have wisdom", Qur'an: 2,164) and in the Sunnah of the Prophet. Indeed, the Qur'an invites human reason to witness the majesty of creation and reflect on its meaning and understand the transcendence that suffuses it. The philosophical sciences that evolved as a result of this effort are referred to as Kalam (discourse, usually a religious discourse). Sometimes, Kalam is vaguely translated as theology, but theology as a science never caught on in Islamic learning as it did in Christianity, because the Muslims strove and succeeded in preserving the transcendence of God. Christianity adopted the position that God is knowable in person and is hence accessible to human perception. The Muslims, despite the philosophical challenges of the Greeks, succeeded in maintaining the position that God is knowable by His names, attributes and through the majesty of His creation, whereas His transcendence is hidden by His light.

The first Islamic scholar who tackled questions of Islamic belief from a rational perspective was Al Juhani (d. 699 CE). Note that the rational approach places human reason at the apex of creation and makes the world knowable. Al Juhani maintained that men and women not only have the capacity to know creation through their reason, but also have the capacity to act as free agents. Belief is the result of knowledge and understanding. Indeed, humankind has the moral imperative to understand God's creation. Man, as a rational being, is mandated not only to understand the world, but also to act on it using his free will. Thus Al Juhani's views bestowed upon humankind reason and responsibility. Heaven and hell were consequences of human action. This school was known as the Qadariya School (root word q-d-r, meaning power or free will).

The Qadariya approach, when pushed to the limit, takes God out of the picture of human affairs in as much as it makes heaven and hell mechanistic and solely predicated upon human action. This was unacceptable to the Muslim mind. Reaction from the more orthodox quarters was bound to surface and

this happened with the emergence of the Qida (pre-destination) School. The founder of this School was Ibn Safwan (d. 745). According to Ibn Safwan, all power belongs to God, and man is predetermined in his actions, good and evil, as well as his destination towards heaven or hell. Like the Qadariya School, the Qida School sought its justification in the Qur'an ("Say! I have no power over any good or harm to myself except as God wills", Qur'an, 7:188).

The battle lines were now drawn. Like the Christian civilization in earlier times, the Islamic civilization was just beginning to come to grips with Greek rationalism. What was going to be the outcome? The answers were not clear and were hidden in the womb of the unknown future. Both Imam Ja'afar-as-Sadiq and Imam Abu Haneefa were well aware of the arguments of qida and qadar, but stayed clear of being drawn into its controversies.

Wasil ibn Ata (d. 749 CE) combined, developed and articulated the Qadariya Schools into a coherent philosophy, which came to be known as the Mu'tazilah School. We may also look upon the Mu'tazilah School as the first response of Islamic civilization to the challenge of Greek thought. This School flourished for almost two hundred years, and at times was the dominant School of thought among Muslims. Its influence was comparable to the Schools of Imam Abu Haneefa, Imam Ja'afar as Saadiq or Imam Malik. The Mu'tazilite School was challenged by Imam Hanbal (d. 855 CE) and Hasan al Ashari (d. 935 CE) and was finally vanquished by al Gazzali (d. 1111 CE). This battle of ideas had a profound impact on Islamic history. It influences Muslim thinking even to this day.

The Mu'tazilite School placed its anchor on human reason and its capability to understand the relationship of man to man and of man to God. Necessarily, they based their arguments on the Qur'an. The principles of the Mu'tazilah Schools were:

- the Uniqueness of God ("Say! He is God, the One; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him", Qur'an, 112:1-5),
- the free will of man ("If it had been they Lord's Will, they would all have believed, all who are on earth! Will thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!", Qur'an, 10:99),
- the principle of human responsibility, and of reward and punishment as a consequence of human action ("On no soul does God place a burden greater than it can bear", Qur'an, 2: 286),
- The moral imperative to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong ("You are the most noble of people, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in God", Qur'an, 3:110).

The Mu'tazilites applied these principles to issues of relationship of man to man, of man to the created world and of man to God. By placing man at the center of creation, they sought to make him the architect of his own fortune and emphasized his moral imperative to fashion the world in the image of God's command.

Caliph Mamun adopted the Mu'tazilite School as the official dogma of the Empire. From Caliph Mansur to Caliph Al Mutawakkil (765-847 CE), the Mu'tazilites enjoyed official patronage. For almost a hundred years the Mu'tazilites guided the intellectual ship of Islam.

The undoing of the Mu'tazilites was their excessive zeal and their inability to comprehend the limitations of the methodology they championed. With official sanction, they punished those ulema who disagreed with them and tried to silence all opposition. They also overextended their methodology to attributes of God and of the Qur'an. In Islam, God is unique and there is none like unto Him. Therefore, the Mu'tazilites argued, the Qur'an cannot both be part of Him and apart from Him. To preserve the uniqueness of God (Tawhid), they placed the Qur'an in the created space. The issue of "createdness of

the Qur'an" caused a great deal of division and confusion among Muslims. Furthermore, by maintaining that reward and punishment flowed mechanistically from human action, they left their flank exposed for an intellectual attack. If humans are automatically rewarded for their good deeds, and automatically punished for their evil, then where is the need for Divine Grace? This deterministic approach was repugnant to Muslims, and a revolt was inevitable.

The challenge to the Mu'tazilites came from the Usuli (meaning, based on principles) ulema, the best known among whom was Imam Hanbal (d. 855). A great scholar, he learned the principles of fiqh from all the Schools prevalent in his generation, namely, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Ja'afariya, as well as the Kalam (philosophical) Schools. Mu'tazilite ideas were causing a great deal of confusion among the masses. Stability was required and innovation had to be combated. Imam Hanbal argued for strict adherence to the Qur'an and the verified Sunnah of the Prophet. He maintained that the Qur'an was the Word of God and was beyond time and space. His position was a direct challenge to the Mu'tazilites who enjoyed official patronage from the Caliphs. Consequently, Imam Hanbal was punished and jailed for most of his life. His sustained and determined opposition galvanized those who fought the Mu'tazilites. It was primarily through the efforts of Imam Hanbal that the Caliph Al Mutawakkil abandoned the Mu'tazilite School in 847 CE. In turn, when the Asharites gained the upper hand, the Mu'tazilites were punished, jailed and silenced. One of those who was so punished was al-Kindi who fell from official favor. His library was confiscated and distributed among his adversaries. Such is the fate that differing ideas have suffered at times in Islamic history!

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