

Thirty-Five Oriental Philosophers

Diane Collinson
and Robert Wilkinson



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INTRODUCTION

This book is designed to give the interested reader basic information about thirty-five major thinkers who belong with those several different traditions usually classed together by western culture as Oriental.

One of the major points which will become clear is that this classification is oversimple, since it blurs distinctions between a number of schools of thought, some as different from each other as they are from the schools of the West. We have organized the material, with the exception of that on Islamic philosophy, under headings which are broadly geographical, and this arrangement coincides, by and large, with organization by philosophical tradition. Within each group of philosophers the material is set out chronologically. For the sake of simplicity, all dates are given in terms of the Christian calendar.

Differences between them notwithstanding, there is one feature common to these traditions – at least before the modern period – which they do have in common and in which they do differ from philosophical thought in the West since the Renaissance. This common characteristic is the non-separation of philosophical from religious endeavour. Most western philosophers of the present day would regard their subject as distinct from religion, though this would not have been the case, for example, in the Middle Ages. This distinction or outlook has appeared in eastern traditions, if at all, only very recently. The consequence is that in much of what follows the subject-matter is in many cases, of necessity, deeply informed by religious ideas. Whilst the emphasis in what we have written is on what in western terms is the philosophical aspect of the work of the figures concerned, those within these traditions would generally regard this as a distinction marking no difference of importance.

This book does not pretend to be a history of the schools of thought concerned; several libraries would be needed for that, even were all the primary source materials available. Rather, our chief aim has been to indicate the most influential and important lines of thought of each philosopher by close reference to major works, though we hope in addition that an indication of broad changes and constant features within each tradition will emerge from a consideration of each group of philosophers taken together.

Each essay follows a common plan: a short statement describing the main thrust of the thought of the philosopher concerned; information about his life, and concise expositions of some central aspects of his thought, with cross-reference, where appropriate, to other

philosophers. These cross-references are not only to other Oriental thinkers but also to philosophers in the western tradition: the same philosophical problems have often generated similar lines of response wherever they have occurred, and we have indicated the most important of these in the text. Since, as we have indicated, the thinkers concerned belong to a number of traditions, we have included brief sub-introductions at appropriate points. These include basic historical and philosophical information needed to set the scene for the group of thinkers concerned. No living philosopher has been included in this book.

At the end of each essay we have provided information that can launch the interested reader into further, more detailed study. First, there are notes to which the numbers in the text refer; second, details of the philosopher's principal writings; third, a list of other philosophers considered in this book whose thought relates in one way or another to that of the philosopher in hand; and fourth, a list of books suitable for further reading.

At the end of the book there is a short glossary of philosophical terms. It contains brief explanations of technical or semi-technical terms that occur a number of times in the book, where necessary in more than one language. For the most part it has been possible to give a brief explanation of such a term with its first use in the text, but it was not feasible to repeat the explanation with each subsequent use. These terms therefore appear in **bold** print on the first occasion of their use in an essay, and this indicates that they are explained in the glossary at the end of the book. The glossary entries should not be taken to be either final definitions or complete explanations of the terms they describe. They are meant to provide only a first foothold for a reader not familiar with the philosophical terrain.

One of the difficulties facing any student of Oriental thought is the variety of competing systems for the transcription of the various languages concerned, chiefly Arabic, Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese. Our choices in this area have involved balancing a number of considerations, e.g. relative familiarity, pronounceability and scholarly authority. We have in the main followed options which will be familiar to scholars, e.g. Wade-Giles for Chinese, the Wylie system for Tibetan, and so on. However, we have not scrupled to deviate from any of the preferred systems in the interests of readability. Where alternative systems produce transcriptions so different as to be a source of possible confusion to those following paths indicated in the suggestions for further reading, we have included rival transcriptions in the notes. Words from foreign languages are printed in italics, except in the few cases where they are now used in English, e.g. Koran, Vedanta, Zen. Quite often, important terms have been translated into a number of the languages mentioned, especially as a result of the spread of Buddhism, and these equivalences are explained as necessary. In the text and glossary we have used the following shorthand to indicate the language

from which a given term comes: A = Arabic; C = Chinese; J = Japanese; P = Pali; S = Sanskrit; and T = Tibetan. In one or two cases, we have used one term throughout. Thus Zen is always referred to by means of this its Japanese name, even though its roots lie in Chinese and Indian thought. These cases are noted in detail at appropriate points in the text.

The need to keep this book to a reasonable length has meant that we have had to omit some figures of importance, e.g. the Tibetan philosopher Tsong kha pa (1357–1419 CE), the Islamic thinker Ibn Arabi (1165–1240 CE), and representatives of the Hua Yen or Pure Land schools of Buddhism. We hope, however, that the figures we have been able to include will give a sense of the richness, subtlety and penetration of these great philosophical traditions.

Diané Collinson
Robert Wilkinson

ZOROASTER (ZARATHUSTRA)

Probably some time between 1500 and 1000 BCE

The Zoroastrian conception of human existence is essentially a joyful and life-affirming one that has been adhered to with courage by its believers through times of severe persecution and rejection.

Zoroaster was a prophet of ancient Iran (Persia) who claimed to speak directly with his God.¹ His teaching proclaimed a state of eternal struggle between good and evil and he held that human beings are free to choose between right and wrong. It has been maintained that he was the first prophet of monotheism in that he rejected the polytheism of the early Iranian religion and elevated just one of its *ahuras*, or 'lords', to the position of a supreme deity. The claim that Zoroastrianism is monotheistic is a debatable one. It has been the subject of prolonged scholarly controversy and is still a live issue.² Zoroaster's doctrine is embodied in seventeen psalms, the *gathas*, which are thought to have been his own work and which, along with liturgical writings, are part of the *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian holy book of which only a portion is extant.

Although there is little that can be unequivocally established about Zoroastrianism it is evident that it was an important and influential doctrine. It was the national religion of the Persian empire from the third to the seventh century CE, yielding dominion then to the devastating attack of Muslim invaders, but thereafter staunchly surviving a millennium of persecution, its faithful adherents living in small enclaves in remote or desert settlements. In the tenth century CE many Zoroastrians grouped themselves in India, chiefly around Bombay, and became known as the Parsis (Persians). Zoroastrianism's basic tenets concerning good and evil, heaven and hell, judgement, resurrection and free will have informed the teachings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

There is considerable uncertainty about the dating of Zoroaster's lifetime, but evidence increasingly suggests that he was alive some time between 1500 and 1000 BCE and that he experienced massive migrations of Iranians and Indians, and also the attendant conflicts between those who were peaceful herdsmen and those who were members of roving bands of plunderers. The system of religious belief in which he grew up was based on a creation myth that saw the world as having been generated by gods from inchoate matter passing through seven stages of development. This cosmogony maintained that once order had been achieved and human life established in the centre of the created world, physical and spiritual equilibrium could be maintained by making appropriate sacrifices to the gods. Zoroaster inherited a priesthood in this religion and possessed the genius to reform it in a way that allowed it to develop in a vital and consistent manner.

It is a traditional view that Zoroaster spent most of his adult life in north-eastern Persia, having been forced to travel after the failure of his early missionary efforts in search of a powerful ruler who would accept his faith and protect him. The story relates that he eventually settled in the north-east after converting the ruler, Vishtaspa, by healing his favourite horse when it was deemed to be mortally ill. Some doubt is cast on this placing of Zoroaster in the north-east by the fact that the *gathas*, the hymns, or psalms, attributed to his authorship, are written in a language that is thought to have belonged to the north-western region of Iran.

It is, again, tradition that informs us that Zoroaster's birth was signalled by miracles and that a divine protection kept evil forces from harming him. His childhood, it seems, was solitary and in his youth and early manhood he was trained for the priesthood. He received his first vision and prophetic calling at the age of 30 and thereafter began his teaching mission. To prepare himself

he spent time alone on a mountain and it is reported that for two weeks, while his spirit communed with God, his body was completely motionless on the mountainside. His first missionary teachings were rejected outright and he was subjected to ridicule and violence. Then his remarkable healing of Vishtaspa's horse brought about not only the conversion of the ruler but also the official adoption of his beliefs by the whole realm. Legend recounts that he was murdered in old age while praying at the altar and that the event fulfilled forecasts that the prophet would live for exactly seventy-seven years.

As already mentioned, it has been argued that the description of Zoroaster as a prophet of monotheism is not correct and that the error came about largely as the result of the work of Martin Haug, a philologist who translated the *gathas* in the 1850s and established them as Zoroaster's own declaration of his faith and doctrine.³ Haug interpreted the *gathas* as embodying a strict monotheism and also a rejection of ritual sacrifice, a view that ran completely counter to the tradition and practice of the early nineteenth-century Parsis of India who attended Haug's lectures in order to learn about the history of their religion. According to Mary Boyce, Haug based his understanding entirely on one or two philological points concerning the translation of the *gathas* without weighing the evidence of the living tradition and the available secondary writings. When, in the 1880s, a quantity of secondary Zoroastrian literature was translated by E.H. West in consultation with Parsi priests and with reference to current practices, a somewhat different conception of Zoroastrianism emerged, one more consistent with its known tradition of a belief in dualism, and which yielded a different understanding of the *gathas* from that propounded by Haug.⁴

The central issue in the debate which has ensued arose from the tension between Zoroaster's assertion of the fundamental dualism

of the cosmos and later interpretations of his theology as monotheistic. It brought into prominence a number of difficulties that from time to time had exercised the minds of Zoroastrian theologians. For example, if Zoroastrianism is understood to posit that there are two principles, good and evil, questions then arise as to whether they are entirely distinct from one another, and what the status and source of each is. If it is claimed that both principles are gods and that they are separate, then either monotheism does not obtain or it has to be reinstated by invoking and describing an ultimate deity that somehow overarches both good and evil. If it is claimed that good is supreme, then the presence and power of evil and its relationship with the good have to be satisfactorily elucidated and any outstanding uncertainties about monotheism resolved.

Very few absolutely firm conclusions can be drawn about the exact character of Zoroaster's own thought, but this is not surprising in view of the incompleteness of sources and the difficulties of translation. The extant portions of his own writing, the *gathas*, as well as the rest of the *Avesta*, are capable of being translated in a variety of ways. What remnants we have of the *Avesta* consist of writings drawn from several centuries, embodying modifications and developments imposed by the priests and believers of many generations. The result is a body of doctrinal and liturgical matter that is largely unsystematic, that sometimes appears to be ambiguous or inconsistent within itself and that always needs to be seen in relation to the history of actual Zoroastrian practice. Any attempt to give an account of Zoroaster's ideas has to be made in awareness of this complex background.

Zoroaster's God of goodness, the One True God whom he claimed to have seen in visions, is Ahura Mazda. Opposing Mazda is Angra Mainyu, the personification of evil. Mazda epitomizes everything that is life-affirming and

creative, and all activities that foster truth, the benign ordering of life and a pastoral care of the earth and its creatures. In contrast, Angra Mainyu represents destruction, untruth and bloodshed, and the aggressive life-pattern of the pillaging nomad rather than the settled pastoralist. These two beings are derived from the two kinds of gods, the *ahuras* and the *daevas*, who were affirmed by the Indo-Iranian polytheism that was largely rejected by Zoroaster. He repudiated the *daevas* as followers of evil and the Lie, and from among the *ahuras* took Ahura Mazda as the One True God.

It is at this point in the account that the interpreters of Zoroastrianism begin to diverge in their interpretations. There are passages in the *Yasna*, the Zoroastrian liturgy, that describe two Spirits, one of which chooses Good and the other Evil. We read that

at the beginning of existence, the Holier spoke to him who is Evil: 'Neither our thoughts nor our teachings, nor our wills nor our choices, nor our words, nor our deeds, nor our convictions, nor yet our souls agree.'⁵

What is not clear in this is the relationship in which the two Spirits stand to Mazda. The Good Spirit is sometimes referred to as the son of Mazda and the two Spirits are on one occasion described as twins. But this means that the Spirit of Evil is as much the offspring of Mazda as the Spirit of Good, a conclusion that is not entirely acceptable since it seems to attribute the creation of evil to a God who is entirely good. A resolution of the difficulty, and one that is readily derived from parts of the *Yasna*, is that Mazda created two Spirits who freely chose their paths. This permits the understanding that the Spirit that chose evil was not created as an Evil Spirit but as one with the freedom to choose. Commentators have pointed out that Zoroaster nowhere attributes evil to God.⁶

Those who favour a strictly monotheistic understanding of Zoroaster's teaching cite passages from the *Yasna* in which Ahura Mazda is described as, for example, 'the creator of all things by the Holy Spirit'.⁷ Those who regard

the dualism of his thought as central emphasize, without denying the attribution of supremacy to Mazda, the opposition of Good and Evil, of Mazda and Angra Mainyu, that pervades all the Prophet's teaching. They are mindful of an early catechism of Zoroastrianism which says: 'I must have no doubt that there are two first principles, one the Creator and the other the Destroyer', and point out that it was in terms of this opposition that the religious life and practices of Zoroastrianism were conceived. Thus, in an essay published in 1978, Mary Boyce has said that in one sense, that of believing in only one eternal, uncreated Being who is worthy of worship, Zoroaster was indeed a monotheist, with a concept of God as exalted as that of any Hebrew or Arabian prophet. But he was also a dualist, in that he saw coexisting with Ahura Mazda, another uncreated Being, who was maleficent, not to be worshipped.⁸

Boyce also points out that Zoroaster's doctrine does not entirely dethrone the other *ahuras* who, in Indo-Iranian polytheism, had ranked with Ahura Mazda.

In creating the world Mazda also created the 'Bounteous Immortals', six lesser divinities, to assist in the destruction of evil and the perfecting of the world. These beings, although beneath Ahura Mazda, were to be accorded worship and prayer. They personified attributes possessed by Mazda: qualities such as Wisdom, Right, Purpose, Truth, Wholeness and Loyalty. They were also linked with aspects of the physical creation so that the nurture and tending of the world were connected with the virtues and powers they represented. Zoroaster held to the ancient belief in a sevenfold creation in which there was first the enclosing shell of the sky, made of stone, then the world within it, then water in the shell, followed by the earth flat upon it; then a plant, an animal and a man in the centre of the earth. The gods were believed to have crushed and sacrificed these last, thereby causing their multiplication and beginning the cycle of life and death.

In summary, traditional Zoroastrianism teaches that Ahura Mazda is supreme and wholly

good, but not omnipotent. Angra Mainyu is an active force of evil that is pitted against the good and that must be opposed with courage and resolution. It has been remarked that this is 'perhaps the most rational solution of the problem of evil ever devised'.⁹

There is little doubt that until the mid-nineteenth century, when Haug's research appeared and the Parsis of India were experiencing the reforming pressures exerted by monotheistic religions, Zoroastrianism flourished as a sturdily dualistic religion that provided a comprehensive framework for human and humane living. Although many of the details of its original doctrines are now lost, it is clear that the broad philosophical conceptions it embodied are of the kind that spring from and foster some of the noblest aspects of human nature: a love of freedom, the enjoyment of work, a sense of community, valour in the face of evil and an awareness of the mystery of creation and goodness that expresses itself in a sensuous care of the world and its creatures.

In the twentieth century few Parsis remain to uphold Zoroastrianism. There are small groups of two or three thousand in London, Los Angeles and Toronto. The two largest communities, each of around 17,000, are in India (Bombay) and Iran. These communities observe rituals established by Zoroaster: a brief time of prayer five times each day and seven joyous feasts in each year dedicated to Ahura Mazda, the Six Bounteous Immortals and the Seven Creations. The most important of these feasts is No Ruz, or New Year's Day, held at the vernal equinox. It celebrates the new spring life and the idea of resurrection with flowers, new clothes and painted eggs.

Zoroastrianism's powerful influence is especially apparent in the Jewish sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls where there is a dualist doctrine concerning the creation of Two Spirits that is almost exactly the same as the Zoroastrian doctrine. The Zoroastrian practice of praying five times each day was adopted by Muslims and the Zoroastrian ethic has been compared with that of the Christian Bible's Book of Proverbs.

Notes

- 1 Modern practice decrees that the religion derived from Zoroaster's teaching is called 'Mazdaism' since that is how it is referred to by the worshippers of Ahura Mazda, the 'Wise Lord' of Zoroaster's doctrine. Since this essay focuses on theoretical foundations rather than religious practices, 'Zoroastrianism' has been used consistently as a generally descriptive term.
- 2 For a glimpse of the wide-ranging controversy concerning early Zoroastrianism see Julian Baldick, 'Mazdaism ("Zoroastrianism")', in Stewart Sutherland, Leslie Houlden, Peter Clarke and Friedhelm Hardy (eds) *The World's Religions*, London, Routledge, 1988, pp. 552–568.
- 3 See M. Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings and Religion of the Parsis*, 3rd edn, London, Trubner, 1884, repr. Amsterdam, Philo Press, 1971.
- 4 See the essay 'Zoroastrianism' by Mary Boyce in John R. Hinnells (ed.), *A Handbook of Living Religions*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, repr. 1991, pp. 171–190.
- 5 *Yasna* 45.2.
- 6 See, for example, R.F. Zaehner (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths*, 4th edn, London, Hutchinson, 1988, p. 204.
- 7 *Yasna* 44.7.
- 8 See Mary Boyce, 'Spanning east and west: Zoroastrianism', in Whitfield Foy (ed.), *Man's Religious Quest*, London, Croom Helm and the Open University Press, 1978, p. 608.
- 9 op. cit., p. 607.

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ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

INTRODUCTION

Islamic philosophy was given impetus and direction in the eighth century CE by the surge of translations of Greek writings into Arabic that began to be made at that time. Numerous Greek works, many of them on medical subjects, had been translated by Christian Syrians into Syriac in the fourth and fifth centuries and it was a group of Syrian scholars who were invited to the Baghdad court in 750 CE to undertake the translations into Arabic. In the ninth century a school of translators and scholars, known as the House of Wisdom, was founded at Baghdad. It was largely through the work of these men that the writings of Plato, Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists became familiar to Arab thinkers and, subsequently, to the western world.

Two important factors, each of which has its own internal complexity, contributed influentially to the character of early Islamic philosophy. The first of these was the theology of the Islamic scriptures, the Koran, which informed every aspect of Muslim culture, including its political, legal and social institutions. This theology was first delivered by Muhammad the Prophet (c. 570 CE–632 CE) who saw himself as the messenger of God and the transmitter of God's exact words, the words of the Koran. The Koran declares that its message is universal and that Muhammad is the ultimate Prophet. It sets out the Five Pillars, a practical doctrine that requires the Muslim to undertake the following: to testify publicly, on at least one occasion in a lifetime, that 'There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet'; to pray five times each day; to pay *zakat*, a poll tax for the benefit of the needy; to fast during Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar year; and to perform pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. Further rules and customs for daily living, known as the *sunnah* (literally, 'the well-trodden path'), were based on the Prophet's example and enshrined in *hadith*, reports of advice and injunctions held to be traceable back to the Prophet's actual words and deeds. The *sunnah* and *hadith* were closely interactive with Islamic jurisprudence.

By the eighth century CE two main schools of Islamic theology had been established: a rationalist school, the Mutazila, whose adherents held that reason can discover truths which are confirmed by revelation and that God does not act unreasonably, and the Sunni, who opposed the rationalism of the Mutazila, claiming that God obeys no norms, that actions

become good or bad by God's declaration, and that rational reflection cannot discover God's will. It was, broadly, upon this complex cultural structure, grounded on faith and dogma but capable of internal debate, that the translations of Greek philosophical thought impacted.

The second element that gave Islamic philosophy its distinctive character was formed largely by an accident of intellectual history. Through an error of attribution, part of a work, the *Enneads*, by the Neo-Platonist Plotinus, was attributed to Aristotle and became known as *The Theology of Aristotle*. In consequence, certain Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas became assimilated to those of Aristotle so that Greek philosophy came to be seen and treated by its translators as more unified than it actually was. This meant that the early Arab philosophers tended to assume that in studying the Greek writings they were dealing with a coherent body of thought containing a strong element of mysticism that derived from all the Greek philosophers. In fact, the mysticism that attracted them was a characteristic peculiar to Neo-Platonism rather than ubiquitous among the Greek authors. But it was with Neo-Platonic mysticism that Islamic theology found its closest affinity and, in consequence, a vision for its own secure development in relation to Greek philosophy.

The task undertaken by the early philosophers of Islam was that of demonstrating how the unchallengeable revelations of the Koran, adhered to by faith, might be shown to be consonant with and reinforced by the conclusions of Hellenic reasoning. The carrying out of the task between the ninth and twelfth centuries not only established an Islamic philosophical tradition of the highest excellence but also, in due course, brought about the burgeoning of fresh philosophical thought in the West. Translations of the Greek writings began to reach the West in the first part of the twelfth century; but it was not just an Aristotelian or generally Greek influence that made itself felt, for the writings and thought that were transmitted were presented in the context of the Islamic philosophers' intellectual struggle to reconcile reason and faith, a struggle that western theologians and philosophers, fired by the example of Muslims such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd, were to make their own in succeeding centuries.

In the latter part of the eleventh century the philosopher and theologian al-Ghazali challenged the reasoning of the philosophers who preceded him, not by reasserting the primacy of faith but with arguments that undermined those claims of his predecessors that had put strain on Koranic dogma. He espoused the teachings of Sufism, that Islamic sect which practised an austere asceticism in its search for a mystical communion with God. But even as his scholarly advocacy of Sufism worked to effect a reconciliation of its stance with the mainstream of Islamic doctrine, an extremely rigid and highly organized system of Islamic education was being established throughout western Asia in the *madrasa*, or colleges, that were rapidly springing up. Standard textbooks on theology, ethics, law and the Koran guaranteed a uniformity of education, an uncritical acceptance of authority and, as time passed, a stultification of intellectual enquiry and enterprise. Sufism survived and developed in various ways but underwent, in some of its manifestations, corruption by charlatans who exploited the natural piety of simple people with tricks and pseudo-miracles.

It was not until the eighteenth century that a revival of the fundamental doctrines of early Islam began to take place and a fresh concern to maintain a balance between reason and revelation became apparent in the work of theologians and philosophers.

In the twentieth century, Islamic philosophy and Islamic culture as a whole have had to confront the challenge presented to them by ideas and forms of life from which they had previously been more or less insulated. In particular, Islam has had to work out an attitude to rapid technological change and a political strategy for survival. Its philosophers have sought to cultivate a dynamism in Islamic thought, a movement clearly exemplified in the philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal (1876–1938), who saw both the rationalism of the Greeks and the mysticism of the Sufi as having exerted an adverse influence on Islam. Iqbal drew on the ideas of Henri Bergson, the French philosopher of process, and on Hegelian dialectic to help him generate a more dynamic sensibility for Islamic philosophy.

In the late twentieth century Islamic philosophers have worked on a broad front that encompasses politics, ethics, metaphysics, methodology and theology as well as the scholarly and critical study of their magnificent medieval tradition. Their fundamental task remains unchanged: to show that Islam, as a comprehensive form of life, is compatible with other forms of life in the contemporary world.

MUHAMMAD THE PROPHET c. 570–632 CE

Muhammad founded the Islamic movement that has spread from his native Arabia to almost every part of the world. His central aim was to establish monotheism in place of the prevailing polytheism of his time and to teach a total allegiance to the commands of the one God. The Muslim profession of faith announces that ‘There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God’. The word ‘**Islam**’ means ‘submission’ and **Muslims** are ‘those who submit’. The Islamic scriptures, the **Koran**, are held by Muslims to be the infallible word of God.

What is known of Muhammad’s circumstances is largely derived from a life of the Prophet written by Ibn Ishaq in the eighth century CE.¹ He was born into the Quraysh tribe around 570 CE near Mecca, a town long established as a sanctuary and place of pilgrimage. Mecca had been founded by monotheists but by the time of Muhammad’s birth it had become predominantly pagan and polytheist. The Prophet’s early life was not a settled one. As an infant he was cared for by foster parents who were poorly off. He was then returned to his mother who died when he was 6. After two years in his grandfather’s charge he was sent to an uncle, Abu Talib, with whom he stayed for the rest of his formative years. While still a young man he became the commercial agent for a rich widow, Khadija, who in due course married him. He did not emerge as the Prophet until his middle years but accounts of his life relate that all the signs were there from his birth: a heavenly light seen by his mother around her infant son’s head, the blessing of a Christian monk, his own tendency towards solitude and long hours of reflection.

Muhammad’s calling came to him at around the age of 40 while he was engaged in an annual religious practice. It was the custom to spend one month of each year on Mount Hira, often with one’s family, in order to bestow goods and food

on the visiting poor. One night while on the mountain Muhammad dreamed that he was visited by the angel Gabriel who taught him the words that are now part of the ninety-sixth chapter of the Koran: ‘Recite, in the name of your Lord, the Creator, who created man from clots of blood . . .’. Over the next decade or so, further revelations of the scriptures were transmitted from God to Muhammad by means of the dream figure of Gabriel. Muhammad also dreamed of a visit to Jerusalem to meet Abraham, Moses and Jesus. These incidents determined him to begin his mission to preach monotheism, first within his family and tribal group and then to the people and pilgrims at Mecca. It seems he was at first deeply puzzled by his dreams but his confidence in his mission gradually increased; in particular when it was confirmed that the description of Jerusalem he derived from his dream – for it seems he had never actually been to that city – was an accurate one. Emboldened by this and by the steady sequence of revelatory dreams, he began to teach to a wider circle. Thus from tentative beginnings there developed Islam, a movement and form of life of immense influence and power.

The remarkable success that eventually attended Muhammad’s mission is appreciated only through an understanding of conditions prevailing in Arabia and its environs at the time. That vast country is largely desert and in the sixth century its peoples were mostly nomadic, tribal and in frequent conflict with each other. The absence of a central controlling power that might have mobilized and united a formidable fighting force meant that Arabia presented little threat, other than that of an occasional marauding frontier raid, to adjacent territories. Even its traditional polytheism was beginning to feel the effects of the monotheistic influences of Jews and Christians. It has been pointed out that this picture of a large but disorganized country is one that might well have led a shrewd observer at the time to predict that Arabia would probably soon fall prey to external or invading powers and that if monotheism came to dominate there then it

would do so in a Christian or Jewish form. The events which actually ensued were utterly different from any such well-reasoned conjecture.²

The ground for Muhammad's work was probably prepared by his great-grandfather, Hashim, who, using Mecca as a base, established the Quraysh community as influential merchants by organizing two caravan journeys a year and by gaining protection for his merchants in the territories of the Roman empire and, in due course, in Persia, the Yemen and Ethiopia. Hashim maintained the family tradition of caring for the pilgrims who visited Mecca and did not attempt to interfere with its pagan rites. Muhammad was therefore heir to an extensive and secure trading system and a tradition of liberal toleration within his own community. When his mission developed and he began to speak out against polytheism, tensions began to manifest themselves. Schisms and regroupings occurred in the tribes as some members aligned themselves with the new monotheism and others clung to polytheism. Those who dissented from their tribal leadership were vulnerable to attack from their own group and were also insecure in their relationships with other groups. Muhammad himself was protected by the Quraysh but he arranged to send a group of his supporters, for their safety, to Ethiopia, where he was already held in considerable esteem. He then sought to strengthen his following by means of itinerant preaching, but with little success until he met six members of the Khazraj tribe in the oasis city of Yathrib. The agreement he reached with these men was a momentous one: they would protect him completely, even in the face of aggression from his own Quraysh people. Muhammad's Meccan disciples then emigrated to Yathrib while he remained to await God's command to follow them. His own emigration, known as the *hijrah*, took place in 622 CE, about twelve or fifteen years after his first dream encounter with the angel Gabriel. The *hijrah*

marks the first year of the Muslim era and the starting point of the Muslim calendar.

The Prophet lived at Yathrib for the remaining ten years of his life. During that time he completed his compilation of the Koran. The angel Gabriel continued to appear in dreams revealing details of rituals of prayer and fasting, cleansing, alms-giving, worship and pilgrimage. One year after the *hijrah* had taken place it was ordained that Muslims, when praying, should turn towards Mecca instead of towards Jerusalem. Seven years later Mecca was regained. It was then purged of its polytheism and made wholly Islamic.

After the *hijrah*, Yathrib became known as Medina. Muhammad's followers there were called the *ansar*, the helpers, and those who went with him from Mecca were called the *muhajirun*, the emigrants. Muhammad's mission now took an overtly militant and political turn. A document was drawn up to establish his followers as a community. It commanded them to refer any disputes between them to Muhammad and thereby to God. Rules of conduct and especially those for the conduct of warfare were laid down and so began the conquest of southern Arabia. By the time of Muhammad's death, in 632 CE, the eleventh year of the *hijrah*, Muslim domination was reaching out towards the Roman empire in the north. Its spread was resisted by Arabian Jews and to some extent by Christians, but with little effect on what had become an engulfing tide.

In the eighth century Islam spread into Central Asia, Sind and Spain. In the eleventh century it began to be transmitted by Turks into southern Russia, India and Asia Minor. It was taken to the Niger basin and in the fourteenth century became dominant in the Balkans and spread into China. It largely disappeared from Spain in the fifteenth century and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries its influence in the Balkans has dwindled. It now flourishes in many parts of Africa and in certain regions of North and South America and, in the 1990s, has begun to reaffirm itself in Albania.

Muhammad saw himself simply as the recipient and channel for the transmission of the Islamic scriptures, but he occupies a special place in the series of monotheistic prophets recognized by Islam for he was taken to be the last in a succession of 'warners' among whom were Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. It is in the context of the belief that the world had a life of only six or seven thousand years that this position was accorded him. By his lifetime the world was thought to have already endured for five or six thousand of its allotted years. The revelation of the Koran to Muhammad was therefore seen as the culmination of a sequence of such revelations, following on from the imparting of the Pentateuch to Moses and the Gospel to Jesus. The Muslim belief is that Muhammad was the last messenger of God before the end of the world.

The writings that constitute the Koran were put together in an authoritative version, shortly after Muhammad's death, during the reign of the third caliph, Uthman (644–656 CE). A few very minor changes were subsequently made in the tenth century. The Koran has 114 chapters, or *suras*, that were arranged so that the *suras* with many verses precede those with fewer verses.³ All the *suras* were assigned in their headings either to Mecca or Medina. Quotations and recitings of the Koran are always introduced by the phrase 'God has said', thus emphasizing Muhammad's role as the transmitter rather than author of the scriptures. The structure of the content of the Koran reflects the genesis and development of Islam. Broadly speaking, its earlier sections are concerned with God's majesty and power, its later ones with juridical matters and directives for conduct within the community. Its dominant theme is the uniting of believers in a total obedience to a God whose word is unchallengeable. The absolute acceptance of its doctrine is reinforced by the Islamic practice of committing the Koran to memory. Learning and reciting it means that its precepts inhabit the believer's mind and heart, shaping and predisposing every thought and action.

Some time after Muhammad began to preach publicly, but before the *hijrah*, there occurred the incident of the 'satanic verses'. This refers to *sura* 53, known as 'The Star', which is reported to have originally stated that three pagan goddesses, al-Lat, al'Uzza and Manat, with shrines not too far from Mecca, were empowered to make intercessions to Allah. Commentators have pointed out that Muhammad delivered this revelation at a time when he was seeking to convert influential merchants to Islam and that the message did bring about their conversion. But a later revelation from the angel Gabriel to Muhammad made it clear that the message had been 'put upon his tongue' by Satan. The correct *sura* was then imparted to him. It stated that the three goddesses 'are but names which you and your fathers have invented: Allah has vested no authority in them'.⁴

The cosmogony of the Koran describes creation as consisting of seven earths stacked on one another beneath seven heavens, similarly stacked. The undermost earth houses the devil. Humankind inhabits the highest earth and the lowest heaven is the sky above the highest earth. The seventh and topmost heaven is Paradise. God is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient and indivisible. Any suggestion that his divinity might embrace a trinity or multiplicity of any kind is always rejected. In the second *sura* of the Koran we read: 'They say: "Allah has begotten a son." Allah forbid! His is what the heavens and earth contain; things are obedient to Him. Creator of the heavens and the earth! When He decrees a thing, He need only say "Be" and it is.' The Koranic Allah is remote, mysterious and entirely other, having 'no need of the worlds' yet knowing and influencing every detail of creation.⁵

Muhammad was a prophet rather than a philosopher. But any influential declaration of the kind that he made concerning God, the universe and the relationship of both with humankind is always the object of critical scrutiny by sceptics and of justification by its upholders. From such activity there emerges a

refining of concepts and ideas along with methods of analysis and discussion. And so philosophy develops. Early Islamic thought was largely theological in character and was dominated by the debate between progressive Muslim thinkers who were prepared to subject revelation to rational scrutiny, and a conservative or orthodox element that regarded any such scrutiny as impious. Both positions were rooted in theology and both had to confront difficulties about the interpretation of scriptural commands and legislation for issues and conduct not covered by the scriptures. Discussion tended to focus on the concepts of God's supreme majesty and power and on the relationship of total obedience in which human beings stood to God. In such a context questions about free will soon surfaced, since the notion of the absolute authority of God suggests the absence of freedom of choice on the part of his obedient subject. Within Islam, the presupposition of all such debates was the view that saw politics, philosophy, law and every aspect of societal life as emanating from and dependent on the one God.

Internal debate was not the only critical stimulus to the development of Islamic philosophy. The Arab conquest of Alexandria in 641 CE meant that Muslim thought became open to investigation from many quarters. In the seventh century, Alexandria was the pre-eminent centre for the study of Greek philosophy and was in touch with smaller centres of learning such as Syria and Iraq. Thus the dogmatic theology of Islam was required to respond to comment from Greeks, Christians, Jews and others and to construct a rational justification for the Koranic scriptures as delivered by Muhammad.⁶ The free exchange of all kinds of ideas and doctrines was greatly facilitated by the enthusiastic translation, in the two centuries after Muhammad's death, of Greek works on medicine, science and, in due course, philosophy, into Arabic. This did much to enrich the vocabulary of Arabic as well as to inform Muslim thought with the ideas of Greek philosophy, especially those of Plato, Aristotle

and the Neo-Platonists. By the beginning of the ninth century CE the scene was set for the emergence of Islam's first important philosopher, the Arab prince Ya'qub ibn-Ishaq al-Kindi.

Notes

- 1 This work is called the *Sira* or *Sirat*. It has been translated into English as *The Life of Muhammad* (see sources and further reading).
- 2 See, for example, remarks in Michael Cook, *Muhammad*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 11.
- 3 Numerous attempts have been made to reorder the *suras* but there seems to be no standard critical edition of the Koran.
- 4 See pp. 112, 113 (*sura* 53) in the Penguin edition of the Koran, trans. N.J. Dawood, Harmondsworth, 1959.
- 5 *Sura* 3.
- 6 See the introduction to Islamic philosophy in this book, pp. 9–11.

Muhammad's major writing

Muhammad's claim was that he was the transmitter, not the author, of the words of the Koran. There are numerous translations. The edition named below gives the traditional numbering of the *suras*.

The Koran, trans. N.J. Dawood, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1959

See also in this book

Al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, Muhammad Iqbal

Sources and further reading

Cook, Michael, *Muhammad*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, Past Masters series, 1983