

What is Islamic Philosophy?

ROY JACKSON



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What is Islamic Philosophy?

“This excellent book provides a user-friendly introduction to the emergence and subsequent developments of Islamic philosophy. Jackson’s problem oriented approach also shows, in a skilful manner, the relevance of this philosophy to some of the most pressing issues of our time in important fields such as politics, ethics and religion.”

Ali Paya, *University of Westminster (UK), Islamic College (UK), and National Research Institute for Science Policy (Iran)*

What is Islamic Philosophy? offers a broad introduction to Islamic thought, from its origins to the many challenging issues facing Muslims in the contemporary world. The chapters explore early Islamic philosophy and trace its development through key themes and figures up to the twenty-first century.

Topics covered include:

- ethical issues such as just war, abortion, women’s rights, homosexuality and cloning
- questions in political philosophy regarding what kind of Islamic state could exist and how democratic can (or should) Islam really be
- the contribution of Islam to ‘big questions’ such as the existence of God, the concept of the soul, and what constitutes truth.

This fresh and original book includes a helpful glossary and suggestions for further reading. It is ideal for students coming to the subject for the first time as well as anyone wanting to learn about the philosophical tradition and dilemmas that are part of the Islamic worldview.

Roy Jackson is Reader in Philosophy of Religion at the University of Gloucestershire, UK. He has many years’ experience of lecturing in Philosophy and Religion at a number of universities. His books include *Fifty Key Figures in Islam* (2006), *Nietzsche and Islam* (2007), *Mawlana Mawdudi and Political Islam* (2010), and *The God of Philosophy* (2011).

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To Annette ... my 'LC'

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Preface

The aim of this book is to present Islamic philosophy in an accessible way, making no assumptions in terms of the reader's background knowledge of either philosophy or Islam (or, for that matter, Muslim languages). There are now many excellent introductions to Islam, and also to philosophy, but there is still very little out there to satisfy what is a growing demand for some understanding of Islamic philosophy. I hope this little book goes some way to alleviating this demand.

The book is a result of my many years of studying and teaching, first within the field of Western philosophy, and then into Islamic Studies. My background caused me to make links between philosophy and Islam, and my studies have been helped tremendously over the years by my students, who have patiently been prepared to devote their own time and energies to my enthusiasms in this respect.

What isn't in this book

With the hope of anticipating criticisms that this little book leaves out so much, my response is to simply say that, yes, it does leave out plenty. The publisher provides a specified word limit and the author has a limited lifespan, which may or may not be specified. My intention has always been to introduce Islamic philosophy to those who know nothing or little about it and may not even be aware that Islam has a philosophical tradition at all. In this respect, this book is a taster, and I sincerely hope that readers will be sufficiently interested in some of the topics or philosophers covered here to then move on to read some more. Thankfully, more and more works are being translated into English every year, and at the end of each chapter I recommend just a few good books for further reading. I did not wish this book to end up as merely a series of bullet points in an attempt to cover such a massive subject, and so I have focused on certain specific philosophers and themes, while also being aware that I do not do them justice by any means.

Arabic names, terms and dates

My students, when confronted with variation in the spellings of Arabic or Persian or Urdu words and terms, have asked me which is the 'correct' one.

Ultimately, there is not always one ‘correct’ way of writing these down and, for this book, I have followed the Occam’s (slight pun there, as ‘Occam’ can also be written as ‘Ockham’) Razor principle of parsimony. Simplicity is best. Inevitably, sometimes I will use Arabic words and names, though sometimes they will be in the more recognized Anglicized form. In this respect, I may be bowing to familiarity rather than accuracy. It is not my intention to overwhelm the reader with unfamiliar names and words, and I have also left out all diacritical marks in transliteration. In addition, when introducing a Muslim name for the first time, I will provide the name in bold that the reader may use to find his or her full (or fuller, some are quite long) name in Appendix I; but from then on, I will keep to a shortened name. For example, choosing randomly one name that will appear in this book on occasion:

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī

(Full name with diacritics)

Without diacritics, and shortened, you will often come across his name in introductory texts as ‘al-Ghazali’ (or al-Gazzali, etc). However, the ‘al’ in Arabic is the definite article, which is the equivalent of ‘the’ in English and is often used to refer to the birthplace of that person or his ancestors (again, Occam’s name derives from William *of* Occam). Many Muslim names also have ‘ibn’ (Ibn Arabi, for example), which indicates a person’s heritage and means ‘son’ (‘bint’ means daughter), so Ibn Arabi means ‘son of Arabi’, though this need not be the father, but a more distant ancestor. These are just a couple of examples, which I am leaving out of the names once used on first introduction: al-Ghazzali becomes Ghazzali, Ibn Arabi becomes Arabi, and so on.

However, again, on occasion familiarity must take precedence. For example, with some names the absence of ‘al’ may make a name seem rather alien if entirely omitted, and in these circumstances it will be added to produce a surname. For example, al-Kindi becomes Alkindi, and al-Farabi becomes Alfarabi. All the names appear in Appendix I where the reader can check the spellings used in the book with the Islamic name.

Latinized names

Another complication is that a number of Arabic names have become ‘Latinized’. As Muslim thinkers were introduced to the Western world, their names were converted into a Latinized form to make them easier to pronounce. Now, here, I shall bow to familiarity: for example, Ghazzali’s Latinized name is Algazel, but this name is so uncommon as to cause confusion if I were to use it, and so **Ghazzali** it is. The same cannot be said for Ibn Rushd, who is much better known by his Latinized name Averroes, and so I stick to the latter.

To italicize or not to italicize

When to italicize an Arabic word? These days, generally speaking, you will not find the word ‘Quran’ in italics, yet you may find ‘sharia’ in italics some of the time, and not others. Again, unless a word has become so Anglicized (‘Quran’ being an example here, although, again, I am going for simplicity and not writing it out as ‘Qur’an’) I will put Arabic words and phrases in italics and bold upon first usage only, and a list of words is contained in Appendix II.

Dates

The Muslim calendar is lunar and consists of twelve months in a year, but is shorter than the ‘solar’ calendar, being 354 or 355 days. Sometimes you will see ‘AH’ after the date, the Latin ‘anno Hegirae’ (‘in the year of the Hijra’) because the first year of the Islamic calendar begins when the nascent Muslim community migrated from Mecca to Medina, which was in 622 of the Gregorian calendar. Again, I will go for what is more familiar for most readers here, and will restrict myself to the Gregorian calendar.

Acknowledgements

I have mentioned already the trials my students have had to undergo over the years as a result of my particular hobbyhorses. There are, of course, far too many names to mention (or remember!) but, as a cohort, they have frequently brought me entertainment, enthusiasm, enlightenment, and a constant renewal in a faith that human beings are not all that bad really.

Always at the back of my mind when writing this book is the memory of my teacher and friend Dr John Bousfield, who is sorely missed, and is an example of someone who saw no distinction between religion and philosophy, for it was all about truth. I would also like to thank my colleague Dr David Webster for never ceasing to be enthusiastic about whatever crazy idea I have, but that is probably because he has so many crazy ideas himself.

A debt of gratitude is also owed to Annette, for being Annette, and to my children Raef and Nadiya, for being children (long may that last!).

Finally, much appreciation goes to all the staff at Routledge. This is not the first project I have worked on with them, and I have found them to be professional, dedicated, and eager for new ideas. A special mention to Katherine Ong, who has been at the ‘front desk’ in terms of dealings with this book, but also a big thanks to all those others who contributed by correcting my failings and bringing the book to fruition.

1 What is Islamic philosophy?

Bismillah

One of the greatest philosophers is the German **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804) and, as this is a book on philosophy, his name and thought will inevitably crop up on occasions throughout this work. Kant is, of course, a ‘Western’ philosopher and not an Islamic philosopher, although I might add that it is quite possible to be ‘Western’ and ‘Islamic’ at the same time (more about that below), but I begin here with Kant and a curious fact, for there exists a copy of Kant’s doctoral thesis, dated 1755, which has inscribed at the top of the title page the Arabic words *bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* (most common translation: ‘in the name of God, most Gracious, most Compassionate’). This short and poetic phrase is regarded as containing the true essence of the **Quran** (the Islamic holy scripture) and it is frequently cited at daily prayers and other contexts by Muslims. Why this Arabic phrase should appear at the top of Kant’s doctoral thesis is puzzling, and we will likely never know the answer. It is unlikely Kant placed it there himself, for he makes little mention of Islam in his writings, but I remark upon the existence of this thesis here because, in many ways, it symbolizes the key theme of this book, and that is the relationship between the firmly established Western philosophical tradition – with such giants as Kant – and the perhaps more fragile existence of Islamic philosophy. Is it really possible to propose that there is congruence between such philosophical system-builders as Kant and what Islamic philosophers have to say in their great volumes or, for that matter, what can be found in the Quran? Or does this bismillah merely poke fun at the very idea that Islam could offer anything of value to philosophical discourse when compared with the earth-shattering contributors to modern thought that Kant, amongst others, represents? This is why I declare that Islamic philosophy seems more ‘fragile’ in this respect, for the ground upon which it rests *seems* more slippery. But why is this the case, and does it really make any sense at all to even speak of an ‘Islamic philosophy’?

What is Islam?

This writer does his very best to write an accessible introduction to Islamic philosophy, and no assumptions are made that the reader has any background

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knowledge or previous understanding of philosophy as such. However, when it comes to Islam, we are dealing with a very large subject here, and this work cannot provide an introduction to such a complex and diverse belief system. The reader is advised to familiarize him- or herself with some of the basic beliefs and practices in Islam, and some good introductions are recommended at the end of this chapter. Having said that, I like to think you can get by perfectly well without any supplementary reading: all Islamic terms are explained, however briefly, and there is a glossary at the end of the book. Something the reader will quickly become aware of is the diversity that exists within Islam, a feature it shares with all world religions. Therefore, one of the first problems we have when talking of Islamic philosophy is what constitutes 'Islamic'.

From a historical perspective, Islam begins with the **Prophet Muhammad** (c. 570–632) who, it is traditionally regarded, was born in Mecca in Arabia. In the year 610, Muhammad received revelations from God that were then written down in what is called the Quran ('recitation'). For all Muslims, belief in the one God and that Muhammad is the prophet (indeed, the final prophet) of God are essential articles of faith. As the Quran is seen as literally the word of God, Muslims look to this scripture for guidance on how to be a good Muslim, which is synonymous with how to be a good human being. God created Man with a purpose, and Man must, in turn, determine what this purpose is.

Today there are over one and a half billion people who call themselves Muslim, and they are spread across the world. Anyone who reads a newspaper will quickly appreciate just how many countries are 'Islamic' in one sense or another as a result of, for example, the events of the Arab Spring, civil war in Syria or unrest in Turkey. Alas, it is the nature of newspapers that bad news tends to sell better than good, and so an image of Islamic states tends to be associated with such things as 'unrest', 'war', 'terrorism', 'protest' and so on, but the fact is that the majority of Muslims live peaceful lives and, should you visit a Muslim country, you are likely to discover how welcoming, courteous and generous these pious people can be.

Islam, at its most essential level, is a belief in God. This, of course, is a very personal and inward matter, although it inevitably has consequences in terms of how the believer lives his or her life. Nonetheless, in terms of outward expression of this belief, this can vary quite a lot from one person to the next. Some may well be considered more 'devout' than others by praying five times a day (or more), fasting during the holy month of **Ramadan**, making one or more pilgrimages to Mecca and so on, but this raises the question of what constitutes a good Muslim, and this need not necessarily be because someone is diligent in engaging in the practices and rituals. For some, it is enough, and even more important, to simply believe with one's heart in God.

Islam, as we shall see, also refers to a culture and a civilization although, again, due to the diversity that is Islam, it is difficult to pinpoint what constitutes an Islamic culture or civilization: there are Arabic Muslims, Persian Muslims, Chinese Muslims, African Muslims, Southeast Asian Muslims and

‘Western’ (European and American) Muslims, amongst others. There are also ‘nominal’ or ‘cultural’ Muslims whereby identity is determined by being born to a Muslim father, much like a Jew born to a Jewish mother. Other than that, it is not required to subscribe to beliefs and practices of the faith; rather it is a matter of ethnicity or group allegiance. A modern example of this is Bosnia, where a person is described (or describes him/herself) as a Bosnian Muslim to be distinguished from Bosnian Serbs (Orthodox) and Bosnian Croats (Catholic). Other than that, the Bosnian Muslims are

[d]rinkers of slivovitz, strong plum brandy, eaters of pork, for many Bosnian Muslims their only connections with Islam until the [Bosnian] war were that they had names like Amra and Emir and left their shoes outside their houses. Bosnian Muslims were largely secular and those that were religious emphasized that they were ‘European Muslims’, something quite different to the Ayatollahs of Iran and the Islamic clergy of Saudi Arabia.

(LeBor 1997: 20)

It is, perhaps, not surprising that the Muslims from Saudi Arabia and Algeria that went to Bosnia to fight during the conflicts there were shocked by the Bosnians’ lifestyle, and equally the Bosnians themselves were not enamoured of the orthodoxy of these **Mujahidin**.

However, the concern in this work is primarily with those who do wish to assert a belief in God and resist any accusations of atheism, but as we shall see there is considerable tension in being both ‘Islamic’ and a ‘philosopher’.

What is philosophy?

The word ‘philosophy’ derives from the ancient Greek ‘*philosophia*’ which means ‘love of wisdom’, and it makes great sense to state that philosophy as we understand it begins with the ancient Greeks. When the so-called pre-Socratics such as Thales, Anaxagoras, Parmenides and so on were investigating the nature of the world and, by doing so, were not relying upon mythic explanations, they were effectively ‘doing philosophy’, although what they were doing may remind us more of scientific enquiry today than what we regard as philosophy. The term ‘philosophy’ for most of them covered a broad and varied school of thought. What they generally all have in common is a concern with matters of ‘cosmology’ (from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning something like ‘good order’). The ancient Greek philosophers were intent on finding a unifying principle of the cosmos, an order for the apparent chaos of the world they occupied.

It was really **Plato** (427–347 BC) and **Aristotle** (384–322 BC) who laid the foundations for what we understand by philosophy to this day. Although also concerned with matters relating to cosmology, Plato and his teacher Socrates (c. 470–399 BC) are very different from the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers before them because of their more rigorous and rational method of enquiry.

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What they did was to invent the method and terminology of philosophizing that is still used today. By introducing analysis, cogent argument and a rational approach to thought, Plato especially laid the foundations for all philosophers who came after him. This is why the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) famously said that the history of philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato. Plato's main concern, initially, was with moral philosophy, with how we ought to live our lives. However, although this was his main inspiration, as he matured his writings covered many of the branches of philosophy, including political philosophy, education, aesthetics (philosophy of art), metaphysics (the study of the features of reality) and epistemology (the study of knowledge and what can we know).

In a nutshell, philosophy concerns itself with all those kinds of knotty problems such as: What can we know for sure? What is the best form of political government? What does it mean to be good? Is there a mind and is it separate from the body? As a *method*, it attempts to address these 'big questions' systematically (usually!), critically and through rational argument. Now, it should be stressed that – like religion – philosophy is itself incredibly diverse; it is by no means always rational and systematic and, indeed, some philosophers would argue that reason gets in the way of 'proper philosophy'. Nonetheless, however rational or otherwise philosophy may be, the issue here is how philosophical methodology and enquiry relates to Islam. It is argued by many Muslims throughout history that God provides us with all the knowledge that we need. The Quran begins by retelling the story of an angel (who became Satan) who fell from grace by using his intellect to defy God. Such emphasis on using the mind to question what God decrees, then, is treated with suspicion, as well as being regarded as irrelevant so far as Islam is concerned.

The Islamic 'sciences'

Within Islam there are a number of disciplines or schools, what are referred to as the Islamic 'sciences'. The term 'science' in this respect needs to be understood in its broader context as the Latin derivation *scientia*, which simply means 'knowledge'. The pursuit of knowledge can take many different paths and two in particular, the 'science of theology' and the 'science of philosophy', have often been uncomfortable travelling companions along the Islamic paths.

Theology, or *kalam* (literally meaning 'spoken word') as it is known in Arabic, has on the whole confined itself to questions that are raised by revelation. For example, regarding such issues as the nature of God and His relationship with His creations: Does God's power mean that Man has no free will? Can God be described in human terms? (I.e. actually possess hands, eyes and so on.) In Arabic the word for philosophy is merely an Arabization of the Greek, hence *falsafa*. It is what in the Western world would be regarded as 'natural philosophy', and so encompasses the non-religious sciences such as logic, mathematics, physics, astronomy, psychology, ethics and politics to name just some.

Falsafa, then, is less restricted than kalam, the former being prepared to tackle any branch of philosophy. The distinction between kalam and falsafa is best summed up by the famous Islamic philosopher of history Ibn **Khaldun** (1332–1406) who, in his *Introduction to History*, noted that whereas philosophy explored both the realms of the physical and the metaphysical in all their aspects, theology's exploration of these realms was confined to how they could support arguments for the existence and nature of God. This confinement of the discipline of theology, for Khaldun, was not seen as a weakness. On the contrary, its strict boundaries were its strength and could be used as a powerful weapon, so that 'innovations may be repulsed and doubts and misgivings concerning the articles of faith removed'. What is particularly revealing about this quote is the concern for 'innovations', that is ideas that are not considered to be part of the Islamic worldview, and hence Khaldun's determination to have intellectual tools to defend the faith against such ideas. This gives some indication of the suspicious eye that many theologians cast over philosophy or any other 'imported' science.

On the one hand, then, we have what are regarded as the Islamic, or religious, sciences: kalam, **fiqh** (jurisprudence) and **sharia** (law). Whilst on the other hand, we have the foreign sciences such as philosophy, mathematics, medicine, physics, astrology and astronomy, although, as already intimated, these foreign sciences were often placed under the broad umbrella term of 'falsafa'. For most Muslims, the former curriculum is considered superior to the latter for the very reason that it is specifically considered 'Islamic', it is a direct offspring of the prophetic-revelatory event that occurred during the life of the Prophet Muhammad and resulted in the creation of the Quran. The foreign sciences, however, are products of non-Muslims, and this immediately creates a tension in terms of fitting non-Islamic schools of thought into the Islamic worldview. Philosophy, by originating with ancient Greeks such as Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BC, was by definition written by non-Muslims and hence 'infidels'. Still, this tension between the Islamic and the non-Islamic was alleviated somewhat by the well-known, oft-quoted **hadith** (saying) of the Prophet, 'Pursue knowledge even to China, for its pursuance is the sacred duty of every Muslim.'

Having said that, whilst it is true that there is considerable suspicion levelled against philosophy, the discipline of theology is also not immune from such misgivings either. The term 'kalam' is the Muslim equivalent of systematic theology in Christianity, but it is not so highly regarded. The term '*ilm al-kalam*' is 'the science of discourse' on divine themes, and Muslims sometimes prefer to use the phrase '*ilm al-tawhid*', 'the science of (divine) unity', thus avoiding the term 'kalam' which, as this translates as 'talk' or 'discourse', can be used in a pejorative sense of 'idle chatter'. The suggestion here is that when considering the unity of God, to engage in discussion is to lower God's divinity to human discourse. Hence the suspicions levelled against philosophy – that it is humans talking about what cannot be talked about – can also be levelled against theology. In fact, the term for a theologian is **mutakallim**, and such individuals are often considered in the same way Plato regarded the sophists: clever talkers

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but lacking in real wisdom. Ultimately, the most important of the Islamic sciences is *fiqh* ('understanding'), which is the science of jurisprudence. It is the attempt, the struggle, to truly understand God's guidance, or *sharia*. As the primary science, it is the experts of *fiqh*, the *ulama*, who are considered by the majority as the wisest Muslims.

What, then, is Islamic philosophy?

I have said above that the concern of philosophy is with the 'big questions', and what you will see in this book is chapters devoted to such questions as where does our knowledge come from?, or what is the best state?, etc. And so, this is certainly a work of 'philosophy'. However, it is a work of Islamic philosophy because those 'big questions' have been raised by people who *relate it to the concerns of Islamic belief and practice*. There is that ultimate, really big question here: *What does it mean to be human?* Whether we look to Plato or the Quran, it is the same question being asked, and attempts are made to answer that question. The Quran is a guide for Muslims, but it admits its own ambiguity and encourages its followers to seek knowledge, and so we should 'do philosophy' and make use of the tools and the knowledge it possesses in helping us to try and understand that ultimate question. This book is also an acknowledgement that, despite resistance at times, Muslims have been philosophical in their enquiries and would not hesitate to still consider themselves pious believers. We should study and learn from these great people.

Further reading

Some introductions to Islam:

Esposito, J.L. (1998), *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rippin, A. (2012), *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 4th edition, Abingdon: Routledge.

Ruthven, M. (2000), *Islam in the World*, 2nd edition, London: Penguin.

Shepard, William (2013), *Introducing Islam*, 2nd edition, Abingdon: Routledge.

The Quran

Many Muslims would say that the Quran could only be truly understood in its original Arabic. Therefore, any 'translations' are considered 'interpretations', and to some extent this is certainly correct, considering the ambiguity of many Arabic words. The reader is advised to consult more than one 'interpretation' to see just how they can differ but, for consistency, I have relied on just the one for this book:

The Qur'an (2008), Oxford World Classics, trans. by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The hadith

The hadith record the sayings and acts of the Prophet Muhammad and they consist of a vast body of material from a number of hadith ‘collectors’. In most cases I have named the collector in brackets, although many hadith sayings can be found in more than one collection (the idea of hadith collection as a ‘science’ is that one collector should corroborate another). Ultimately, only one excellent source is used here: www.hadithcollection.com. Here you will find hadiths from those collectors considered the most reliable (Bukhari, Dawud etc.) and an efficient search engine. Not all hadiths come from these sources, and some have been passed down with weak veracity; for example, the hadith quote I give in this chapter (‘Pursue knowledge even to China, for its pursuit is the sacred duty of every Muslim’) will not be found amongst the stronger hadiths. However, it is so well used, and, if nothing else, the spirit of the hadith is recognized amongst many Muslims so as to make it more powerful in determining Islamic discourse than many of the more reliable hadiths. For this reason, they are worth quoting.

Websites

Some good sources for the study of Islam:

Academic Islamic Studies and Middle East, Central Asian, and other Area Studies Sites: www.uga.edu/islam/MESCenters.html.

Islamic Studies Digital Library: www.academicinfo.net/Islammeta.html.

Academic Islamic Studies Resources: www.theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/tam/linkcategory/C122.

Andrew Rippin’s own website with many useful links: www.rippin.org.

The BBC provides basic knowledge, but you can also listen to radio programmes from the BBC World Service: www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world_religions/islam.shtml.

Also, there is lots of material here on Islam and the West: news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/special/islam/3182669.stm

A website for Islamic sources etc. on Islamic philosophy: Islamic Philosophy Online: www.muslimphilosophy.com.

2 The Greek and Persian legacy

Hellenism: The encounter with Greek philosophy

In Chapter 1, mention was made of the well-known hadith ‘Pursue knowledge even to China, for its pursuance is the sacred duty of every Muslim.’ Muslims did not need to go to China in this case, but they did have to go as far as the city of Alexandria in Egypt.

The experience of Islam’s encounter with a literary and cultural tradition referred to as ‘Hellenism’ is a fascinating one in its own right. People in our modern age often comment that every city looks the same these days, with the chain stores, similar planning designs and so on, but the fact is that, during the heyday of Greek culture, one Greek city looked very similar to another: this is ‘Hellenism’. It is a particular way of doing things that provided the model that was copied from Elea in Italy to Alexandria in Egypt. As the Athenian orator Isocrates (436–338 BC) said in his discourse *Panegyricus*: ‘The name Hellene no longer suggests a race, but an intelligence, and the title “Hellenes” is applied rather to those who share our culture, than to those who share a common blood.’ Hellenic culture meant being part of a city-state, a *polis*, with its own city walls, marketplace, bath houses and town halls, as well as many other characteristic features and activities. Hellenic culture was not just its architecture, but its arts, its theatre, its religions, its festivals, its legends and, of course, its philosophies. Such a magnificent culture is bound to influence other cultures, but it was usually encountered by scholars who already knew Greek and had some kind of context when studying Hellenism. It is much more difficult – as any reader of this book who has absolutely no knowledge of Islam or philosophy will testify – to approach a text when you have little or no knowledge of Greek or the culture. And yet this, to a large extent, was actually the position Muslim scholars found themselves in. Although in many cases the Muslim intelligentsia were not coming entirely from a blank slate, knowledge of Greek philosophy and culture was extremely limited. Today, scholars of Greek philosophy argue and disagree over what the Greeks meant, although they have the luxury of hundreds, if not thousands, of years of previous scholarship to tap into, as well as a bank of resource materials that is unmatched in terms of quantity and quality by any previous generation. There is no reason to

believe that differences of views were not also prevalent amongst the Muslims in the early centuries of translation, given, especially, such factors as the linguistic difficulties of translating Greek or Syriac into Arabic (not only in terms of vocabulary, but whole complex concepts that would have been unfamiliar to an audience untrained in philosophical discourse) and the absence of existing translated works that can be used to compare, contrast, verify and so on.

The great city of Alexandria was named after the one-time student of Aristotle, Alexander 'the Great' (356–323 BC), who was king of Macedon in northern Greece. His title of 'Great' is due to the fact that by the age of 30 he had created an empire that spread from the Ionian Sea to the Himalayas without a single defeat in battle. This, then, was one of the largest empires of the ancient world, and if Alexander had ever fulfilled his plans to conquer Arabia as well, Islam may never have existed. As it turns out, Alexander died young and his empire splintered. As this empire spread, so did Hellenic culture and, more significantly for our purposes, Greek philosophy. When we are talking about the influence of Greek philosophy on Islam we do not begin this journey in Greece as such, but in Egypt and the city of Alexandria.

Alexander, in fact, founded a number of cities named in his honour, but it was Alexandria in Egypt, established in 331 BC, that is significant for the spread and, indeed, the very survival of philosophy. Although Alexander himself spent only a few months in this city, Alexandria grew to be the largest city in the world within a century of its foundation. Despite being situated in Egypt, it was home to a sizeable Greek community and became the centre of Hellenistic learning, with the largest library in the ancient world. It is difficult to determine what 'large' really meant, but estimates of the number of scrolls the library contained are usually within the hundreds of thousands at its peak.

Although Alexander the Great united Greece and caused the spread of Hellenic culture to distant parts of the world, by the second century BC it was the Romans who were the dominant power in the Mediterranean and something of a fusion of Roman and Greek culture prevailed. Under Roman rule, philosophy continued to flourish and was read, debated and written about amongst scholars. For example, the work in medicine and anatomy by Galen of Pergamon (c. AD 129–99) and in astronomy by Ptolemy of Alexandria (c. AD 90–168). At first the great philosophical schools in Athens such as Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum and the Stoa and Epicurean Garden continued and, indeed, were supported financially by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–80). But, certainly after the death of Marcus Aurelius and some time before that, the religious beliefs of Christianity and Gnosticism, especially, grew in influence upon the philosophical world. The discipline of the theology developed as a separate school from philosophy, concerned as it was with understanding religious concepts but with a philosophical quality. For example, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which defines God as three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), led to a number of models and heresies, as well as puzzled comments from Islamic scholars. The philosophical influence of, most notably, Aristotle here is important: the Nicene Creed, used to this

day during the Eucharist, describes God as 'being one substance with the Father', yet this notion of 'substance' has its origins with Aristotle. Another example is John Philoponus (AD 490–570, also known as John the Grammarian or John of Alexandria), who was an Aristotelian commentator and was condemned as a heretic by the Orthodox Christian Church because he saw in the Trinity three separate natures, substances and deities, which he equated with the three Aristotelian categories of 'genus', 'species' and 'individuum'. Here, then, we have two examples of philosophy lending a hand to theology, although in the latter case not welcome by some.

Alexandria came under Roman rule from 80 BC, then it fell to the Sassanian Persians in AD 619. However, in 641, after also experiencing a brief spell under Byzantine control, the city was captured by the Muslims and was to remain under their rule until Napoleon's expedition in 1798. Egypt was a logical progression in the expansion of the nascent Islamic empire: by 639 the Arabian peninsula, as well as Syria and Iraq, had been entirely subjugated by the armies of Islam. The next destination was westward, to Egypt, but this was to be a very different enterprise from military expeditions so far as it was relatively unfamiliar territory. Arabia was, of course, the Muslim heartland, and Syria and Iraq were lands the Arabs had long been familiar with through trade and settlement. It was the military governor of Palestine, Amr ibn al-'As (c. 573–664), who persuaded the then ruler of all Muslims, Caliph Umar (579–644), that Byzantine Egypt should be invaded in order to secure the southern borders of the Muslim empire from a Byzantine threat. There were other reasons; though decimated to an extent by Persian rule, plague and Byzantine rule, Egypt was nonetheless a great prize, not only as a vital source of grain, but also as the legendary land of the pharaohs, which represented wisdom. Amr was perhaps more military-minded than concerned with the philosophical discoveries that might await the conquering of such a land, however.

It is one of those twists of fate that the conquering of Egypt may never have happened, and the consequences for the nascent Islamic empire could well have been very different, for the Caliph Umar had second thoughts, concerned, quite understandably, that Amr's army was too small and ill-equipped to face a Byzantine force. From his capital of Medina, Caliph Umar wrote to Amr ordering him not to enter Egypt. According to the Egyptian chronicler Ibn al-Hakam (d. c. 870), this letter contained a postscript that read: 'If you receive this letter when you have already crossed into Egypt, then you may proceed. Allah will help you and I will send you any reinforcements you may need.' Apparently Amr had seen the messenger of the letter riding towards him while the general was in Rafah, just short of the Egyptian border. Guessing the contents, he said he would not open the letter until the end of that day's march, by which time he was just over the Egyptian frontier.

By that time, also, Amr's forces had been strengthened by Bedouin tribesmen from the Sinai, no doubt keen to acquire the spoils of war. Consequently, his army met little resistance at the fortified town of Pelusium, east of Port Said. The famed Babylon, near the site of what is now Cairo, would be a greater