

THREE MUSLIM SAGES

Avicenna - Suhrawardī - Ibn 'Arabī

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Suhrawardī and the Illuminationists

THE BACKGROUND BEFORE SUHRAWARDĪ

PERIPATETIC philosophy, which had reached the zenith of its perfection with Avicenna and which was propagated after him by some of his able students and disciples, among them Bahmanyār and Abu'l-'Abbās al-Lūkārī, had been criticized from its inception by some of the jurists, as well as by the Ṣūfis who opposed the tendency of rationalism inherent in Aristotelian philosophy. In the 4th/11th century a new foe joined the rank of the opposition and became in fact the arch enemy of the Peripatetics. The new adversary was Ash'arite theology, or *Kalām*, which was first formulated by Abu'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī and later expounded by such men as Abū Bakr al-Bāqilānī during the 4th/11th and 5th/12th centuries and which gradually began to gain support in Sunni circles.¹

During the 4th/11th century, however, the political power of the Abbasid caliphate was rather limited, and the local princes, many of whom were Shi'ah and had a more favorable view toward what the Muslims call the intellectual sciences (*al-'ulūm al-'aqliyah*), as opposed to the transmitted sciences (*al-'ulūm al-naqliyah*) derived from the sources of the revelation, ruled over much of the Muslim world.² Therefore, the intellectual sciences, which included philosophy, continued to flourish to the extent that the 4th/11th and 5th/12th centuries may be considered as their "golden age." But gradually the political situation altered: in the 5th/12th

century the Seljuqs, who were the champions of Sunnism and the supporters of the Abbasid caliphate, succeeded in reuniting the Muslim lands of Western Asia and in establishing a strong central government, politically under the Seljuq sultans and religiously under the aegis of the caliphate in Baghdād.³

It was at this moment that the school of Ash'arite theology began to be supported by official circles and centers of learning established to teach its tenets and spread its doctrines. And so the ground was prepared for the celebrated attack of al-Ghazzālī against the philosophers. Al-Ghazzālī was a jurist and theologian who understood philosophy well and having at one point fallen into religious doubt had turned to Sufism for the cure of his spiritual illness and therein had found certainty and ultimate salvation.⁴ Consequently, with all the necessary gifts of knowledge, eloquence, and experience he set about breaking the power of rationalism within Islamic society. To this end he first summarized the philosophy of the Peripatetics in his *Maqāsid al-falāsifah* (*The Purposes of the Philosophers*) which is one of the best summaries of Muslim Peripatetic philosophy,⁵ and then went on to attack those tenets of the philosophers which were contrary to the teachings of the Islamic revelation in the well-known *Tahāfut al-falāsifah* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*).⁶

But it must be added that the attack of al-Ghazzālī upon rationalistic philosophy was more in his capacity as a Ṣūfī than as an Ash'arite theologian, because in his writings as, for example, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*Our Deliverance from Error*), although he considers the view of the theologians to be more in conformity with the tenets of Islam than that of the philosophers, it is Sufism which he believes to possess the only means to attain certainty and ultimate beatitude.⁷ In fact the importance of al-Ghazzālī in Islamic history is not only in curtailing the power of the rationalists but also

in making Sufism acceptable and respected in the eyes of the jurists and theologians so that eventually its teachings were taught openly even in the religious schools (*madrasas*). And even if an Ibn Taimiyah and an Ibn Jawzī did appear from time to time to attack Sufism, theirs were more or less lonely voices which did not succeed in diminishing the respect of the religious community for the Sūfis. Al-Ghazzālī's writings, in fact, represent in a sense Islamic esotericism exteriorized in order to be able to protect its inner life in the cadre of exotericism.

With the advent of al-Ghazzālī, Peripatetic philosophy began to wane in the eastern lands of Islam and journeyed westward to Andalusia where a series of famous philosophers — Ibn Bājjah, Ibn Ṭufail and Ibn Rushd — cultivated it for a century; and Ibn Rushd, the great champion of pure Aristotelian philosophy in Islam and the commentator *par excellence* of the writings of the Stagirite in the medieval period, attempted to retaliate against charges of al-Ghazzālī in his *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*. But his defense had little effect in the Muslim world and it was primarily in the West that he was heard. Indeed a school called "Latin Averroism" came into being which purported to follow his teachings and apply them to a new setting in the Christian world. Thus, almost at the same time that Aristotelianism was being rejected as a completely rationalistic system in the Islamic world, it began to be known in the West through translations of the works of the Eastern Peripatetics such as Avicenna and al-Farābī, as well as those of the Andalusians, especially Averroes.

Indeed, the parting of the ways between the two sister civilizations of Christianity and Islam after the 7th/14th century can be explained to a large extent in terms of the role that this rationalistic philosophy was to have in the two civilizations. In the East, through the attacks of al-Ghazzālī and others like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,⁸ the power of rational-

ism was curtailed, preparing the ground for the spread of the Illuminationist doctrines of Suhrawardī and the gnosis of the school of Ibn 'Arabī. In the West, however, the advent of Aristotelian rationalism had no small part to play in the destruction of the earlier Augustinian Platonism based on illumination and ultimately in bringing about, as a reaction, the secularized form of rationalism and naturalism which in the Renaissance destroyed the castle of medieval scholasticism itself.

SUHRAWARDĪ'S LIFE AND WORKS

The sage whose doctrines came to a large extent to replace, especially in Persia, that Peripatetic philosophy which al-Ghazzālī had criticized so severely was Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā ibn Ḥabash ibn Amīrak al-Suhrawardī, sometimes called al-Maqtūl, that is, "he who was killed." Generally, however, he is known as Shaikh al-ishrāq, the master of illumination, especially by those who have kept his school alive to the present day.⁹ He did not have the honor of being translated into Latin in the medieval period and so has remained nearly unknown in the Western world until recent times when a few scholars — among them, Henry Corbin — began to devote a series of important studies to him and undertook to publish and translate his works.¹⁰ Yet even now Suhrawardī remains nearly unknown outside of his homeland, as can be seen by the fact that the great majority of works on the history of Muslim philosophy continue to view Averroes, or at best Ibn Khaldūn, as the terminal point in the intellectual history of Islam, ignoring completely the school of *Ishrāq* and all the later Illuminationists, or *Ishrāqīs*, that followed Suhrawardī. Moreover, this mistake is repeated by most modern Arab, Pakistani, and Indian scholars, many of whom rely primarily on works of modern orientalist for their knowledge of the history of Islamic philosophy and

Revista del Instituto Egypcio de Estudios Islámicos, 1:36-57 (1953), and M. T. D'Alverny, "Notes sur les traductions médiévales d'Avicenne," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, 27:337-358 (1952). In a footnote on p. 340 of this article, M. T. D'Alverny, who is the foremost authority on this subject and has been preparing for some time a complete edition of Avicenna's works in Latin, has given the name of other works of her own dealing with this subject, as well as articles by H. Bedoret, S. Pines, and M. Alonso.

For a general study of the translation of Arabic texts into Latin, the most authoritative work is still that of M. Steinschneider, *Die europäischen Übersetzungen aus der Arabischen bis Mitte der 17. Jahrhunderts* (Graz, 1956); see also R. Walzer: "Arabic Transmission of Greek Thought to Medieval Europe," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 29:160-183 (1945-1946).

It is quite significant to note, however, that the writings of Avicenna in which his "esoteric philosophy" was expounded, such as the *Ishārāt* and *Mantiq al-mashriqīyīn*, were not for the most part translated into Latin, thereby setting the stage for the difference which soon appeared between Eastern and Western interpretations of his philosophy.

96. This treatise was discovered and published by M. T. D'Alverny as "Les Pérégrinations de l'âme dans l'autre monde d'après un anonyme de la fin du XII siècle," *Archives d'Hist. Doct. et Litt. du Moyen Age*, 15-17:239-299 (1940-1942).

97. See R. de Vaux, *Notes et textes sur l'avicennisme latin* (Paris, 1934). The term "Latin Avicennianism" has not been as widely accepted as "Latin Averroism," coined by P. Mandonet in connection with his studies on Siger de Brabant, although even this term has been challenged by such an authority as F. van Steenberghen in his article "Siger of Brabant," *Modern Schoolman*, 29:11-27 (1951). As for Avicenna, many authorities like E. Gilson feel that there was not a school well-enough defined and closely enough associated with his doctrines to deserve being named after him.

For the influence of Avicenna in the Latin world, and schools connected with him, see E. Gilson: "Graeco-Arab Influences" in *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, pt. 6, chap. 1; "Les Sources gréco-arabes de l'augustinisme avicennisant," *Archives d'Hist. Doct. et Litt. du Moyen Age*, 4:5-149 (1929); "Pourquoi saint Thomas a critiqué saint Augustin," *ibid.*, 1:1-127 (1926); *Avicenne et le point de départ de Duns Scotus*. See also K. Foster, O.P., "Avicenna and Western Thought in the 13th Century," in Wickens, ed., *Avicenna* . . . ; and Corbin, *Avicenna* . . . , pp. 102ff.

98. Christian doctors were usually more sympathetic to him than to Averroes, as can be seen by the much milder treatment that he receives in the anonymous *De Erroribus Philosophorum*.

99. For, as Gilson has put it so aptly, "noetics is only a particular

case of cosmology" ("Pourquoi saint Thomas a critiqué saint Augustin," p. 52).

100. P. Duhem, in his monumental study *Le Système du monde* (IV, 317ff), discusses how closely the astronomical revolution already presupposed a change in the spiritual and theological attitude vis-à-vis the cosmos and already implied its "desacralization."

101. With reference to Avicenna's cosmology and angelology, Corbin writes: "But the whole of cosmology was bound up with angelology. To reject the latter was to shake the foundations of the former. Now, this was precisely what perfectly served the interests of the Copernican revolution: so that we witness an alliance between Christian theology and positive science to the end of annihilating the prerogatives of the Angel and of the world of the Angel in the demiurgy of the cosmos. After that, the angelic world will no longer be necessary by metaphysical necessity; it will be a sort of luxury in the Creation; its existence will be more or less probable." *Avicenna* . . . , pp. 101-102.

102. We have dealt fully with this question in our study of Avicenna's cosmology in *Introduction* . . . See also H. A. R. Gibb's preface to that book.

103. Many stories about Avicenna are told in Persia, Central Asia, and the Arab world in a folk language, and he definitely has found a place in the consciousness of even the common people as a folk hero whose science and wisdom dominated over the powers of Nature.

CHAPTER II: SUHRAWARDĪ AND THE ILLUMINATIONISTS

1. Concerning the doctrines and influence of this school see the basic work, L. Gardet and M. M. Anawati, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane* (Paris, 1948), and the monumental study of H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalām*, which is to be published by the Harvard University Press.

2. Regarding the traditional division of the sciences into the intellectual and transmitted, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, trans. F. Rosenthal, vols. II-III (New York, 1958), chap. vi.

3. For the history of this period, see T. W. Arnold, *The Caliphate* (Oxford, 1924), W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion* (London, 1928), M. T. Houtsma, *Recueil de textes relatifs à l'histoire des Seljoucides* (Leiden, 1886-92), vols. I-IV; G. Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1930); and J. Sauvaget, *Introduction à l'histoire de l'Orient musulman* (Paris, 1943). As for the particular significance of Shī'ah-Sunni political domination in the cultivation of the arts and sciences see the prologue to S. H. Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*.

4. Numerous studies have been devoted to al-Ghazzālī in European languages so that he is much better known than most of the other

Muslim sages, and for this reason it was decided not to devote a chapter to him in the present volume. Although in some circles too much use is made of al-Ghazzālī as a criterion for the orthodoxy of other Sūfīs, there is no doubt that he is one of the most significant figures in Islam, having been placed by the hand of destiny at a decisive moment in Islamic history when the influence of rationalism was to be curtailed and the ground prepared for the sapiental doctrines of Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arābī.

Regarding the life, doctrines, and influence of al-Ghazzālī, see M. Asin Palacios, *La Espiritualidad de Algazel y su sentido cristiano* (Madrid-Granada, 1934-1941); Carra de Vaux, *Ghazali* (Paris, 1902); A. J. Wensinck, *La Pensée de Ghazzali* (Paris, 1940); and F. Jabre, *La Notion de certitude selon Ghazali dans ses origines psychologiques et historiques* (Paris, 1959).

5. It was because of the translation of this work into Latin that al-Ghazzālī — the Latin Algazel — was identified by St. Thomas and other scholastics as a Peripatetic philosopher. The *Maqāsīd* is actually an almost word-for-word translation of Avicenna's *Dānishnāmah-i 'alī* from Persian into Arabic. But whereas the original is difficult to understand, this being the first attempt to write Aristotelian philosophy in Persian, the Arabic version of al-Ghazzālī is most lucid, which is perhaps the basic reason for its great popularity.

6. Al-Ghazzālī criticizes the philosophers on many points, of which he considers three as cardinal, these being their denial of creation *ex nihilo*, God's knowledge of particulars, and bodily resurrection, all of which are stated clearly in the Quran. See W. Montgomery-Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazzali* (London, 1953), pp. 37ff.

7. The Ash'arites, however, benefited from the attack of al-Ghazzālī against the philosophers so that to a certain extent his criticism of them can be considered as a victory for the theologians as well, especially since political and social conditions of the time favored the spread of their teachings.

8. This great theologian, who was one of the most learned men of his time, must be considered after al-Ghazzālī as the most severe critic of the philosophers. He compiled the monumental Quranic commentary, *Tafsir al-kabīr*, as well as the *Jāmi' al-'ulūm*, on all the sciences of his day of which he had a vast knowledge. His importance in philosophy lies in his detailed analysis and criticism of the *Ishārāt* of Avicenna, to which Khwājah Nāsir al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī was to reply in his *Sharḥ al-ishārāt* a generation later.

Regarding Imām Fakhr, as he is called in Persia, see M. Horten, *Die spekulative und positive Theologie in Islam nach Razi und Tusi* (Leipzig, 1912); P. Kraus, "The Controversies of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī," *Islamic Culture*, 12:131-153 (1938); and S. H. Nasr, "Fakhr al-Dīn

al-Rāzī," in *History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden, 1963).

9. Shaikh al-ishrāq should not be confused with the series of Sūfī masters bearing the name of Suhrawardī, especially Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, the famous Sūfī master for whom the founder of the school of Illumination, or *Ishrāq*, has been mistaken even by some Muslim historians.

Concerning the four famous Suhrawardīs, see H. Ritter "Philologika, IX: Die vier Suhrawardī, ihre Werke in Stambuler Handschriften," *Der Islam*, 24:270-286 (1937) and 25:35-86 (1938).

10. Of the writings of H. Corbin on Suhrawardī, mention should be made especially of the translation of some of Suhrawardī's shorter works into French; and also *Suhrawardī d'Alep, fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishrāqī)* (Paris, 1939); *Les Motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Suhrawardī* (Tehran, 1946); and Corbin's two prolegomena to Suhrawardī, *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, vol. I (Istanbul, 1945); vol. II (Tehran, 1952). Volume I of these two volumes includes the *Metaphysics* of three of Suhrawardī's large treatises, the *Talwihāt*, *Muqāwamāt*, and *Mutārahāt*, and Volume II the complete text of his masterpiece *Hikmat al-ishrāq* and two short treatises, *Fī 'ittiqād al-hukamā'* and *Qisṣat al-ghurbat al-gharbiyah*. Volume III, which will be published jointly by Corbin and the present author, will include the complete collection of the Persian works the first part of which is planned for publication during 1963.

11. More recently, some attention has been paid by Arab scholars to Suhrawardī, mostly as a result of the spread of the fruits of Corbin's research in the Arab countries. This is exemplified by Sāmī al-Kiyālī's *al-Suhrawardī* (Cairo, 1955), Aḥmad Amīn's *Hayy ibn Yaqzān li ibn Sinā wa ibn Ṭufayl wa'l-Suhrawardī* (Cairo, 1952) and sections devoted to Suhrawardī in *Fīl-falsafat al-islāmīyah* by Ibrāhīm Madkour (Cairo, 1947) and *Shakhṣiyāt qūlqah fīl-islām* of 'Abd al-Rahmān Badawī (Cairo, 1946), which contains an Arabic translation of Corbin's monograph, *Suhrawardī d'Alep*, mentioned above.

In Persia his *Hikmat al-ishrāq* with various commentaries and glosses was lithographed during the last century and has always been a basic text in the *madrasas*, and several of his Persian treatises have been published by Mahdī Bayānī and Muḥsin Ṣabā. There is also the work of 'Alī Akbar Dānāsirisht entitled *Afkār-i Suhrawardī wa Mullā Ṣadrā* (Tehran, 1316), which treats of some of Suhrawardī's basic ideas. See also S. H. Nasr, "Suhrawardī," *History of Muslim Philosophy*, which treats much of the material discussed in this essay.

Before Corbin, the most important works written in European languages on this subject, some of which contain faulty interpretations by otherwise competent scholars, include Carra de Vaux, "La Philosophie illuminative d'après Suhrawardī maqṭoul," *Journal Asiatique*,