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Philosophy versus theology in medieval Islamic thought

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The encounter of the medieval Muslims with Greek philosophy undeniably shaped the course of their philosophical and theological thought. This encounter led to the complex and contentious issue of 'philosophy versus theology'. Medieval Muslim thinkers needed to develop a response to the issue of philosophy versus theology. The present article will first highlight the response of the Islamic theologians to their encounter with Greek philosophy in the form of three major trends in medieval Islamic theology: (1) strong opposition to the application of reason and rationalist approach to Islamic doctrines, and strict adherence to the actual text of the Qur'an and the Hadith, (2) the adoption of Greek philosophy, and the application of reason and rationalist approach to explain and defend Islamic religion and (3) acknowledging the significance of reason in exploring the matters related to the natural world but, at the same time, stressing the subordination of reason to revelation. This article will discuss Atharism, Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism as the representatives of the first, second and third trends, respectively. The response of the medieval Islamic theologians to the issue of philosophy versus theology serves as a context in which medieval Muslim philosophers carried out their philosophy–theology debate. The article will proceed to show that some medieval Muslim philosophers, such as Abu Bakr Al-Razi, subordinated religion or revelation to philosophy or reason. Other medieval Muslim philosophers, such as Al-Ghazali, subordinated philosophy to theology. The third group of medieval Islamic philosophers represented by Alfarabi argued for the reconciliation and harmonious co-existence of philosophy and religion.

Contribution: This article highlights the response of medieval Islamic theologians and philosophers to the issue of philosophy versus theology that was caused by their encounter with Greek philosophy.

Keywords: medieval Muslim philosophy; medieval Muslim theology; philosophy versus theology; Atharism; Muʿtazilism; Ashʿarism; Abu Bakr Al-Razi; Al-Ghazali; Alfarabi.

Introduction

The encounter of the medieval Arab Muslims with Greek philosophy is one of the most significant events in the history of philosophy. As Ali (2022) has discussed, this encounter mainly owes to the Arabic translation movement, which took place between the eighth and the tenth centuries largely in Baghdad. The Arabic translation movement introduced Arabs to Greek philosophy as it ensured the availability of Greek philosophical writings in Arabic language to medieval Arab thinkers. Medieval Arab Muslims' encounter with Greek philosophy gave birth to the inevitable and vexed issue of 'philosophy versus theology'. As medieval Arab Muslims were the followers of monotheistic religion, on the one hand, they had a theology that was based on divine revelations. On the other hand, there was Greek philosophy that was based on reason and rational thinking. Philosophy and theology provided answers to the same social, political, ethical, metaphysical and cosmological questions. However, not only the answers but also the methodology through which the answers were obtained by the two (philosophy and theology) were largely different.

Owing to its immense significance, philosophy–theology debate in the medieval Arab Islamic thought has attracted a great deal of academic research. In his book titled *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, Erwin Rosenthal (1958:1–12) posits that medieval Arab Muslim philosophers drew a distinction between philosophy and theology. They regarded the former as rooted in revelation, while perceiving the latter as based on mythological constructs.

Note: Hangzhou City University Section: Cross-cultural Religious Studies, sub-edited by Chen Yuehua and Ishraq Ali (Hangzhou City University, China).

As a result of the constraints imposed by theological considerations, they encountered difficulties in grasping the true essence of philosophy. Similarly, Leo Strauss (1945:357–393, 1989:207–226) and his adherents argue that medieval Arab Islamic thinkers endeavoured to align their perspectives with Islamic theological tenets owing to the adversarial environment in which they lived and worked. Similarly, Nasr (1996:27–38) regards the Qur'an and Hadith as the primary sources of inspiration for medieval Islamic thought. However, on the other hand, Leaman (1980:525–538) maintains that medieval Arab Islamic philosophers regarded philosophy as the bedrock of their intellectual pursuits, distinct from the domain of theology. According to his perspective, they engaged with philosophy rather than religion. Dimitri Gutas (2002:5–25) also rejects the various approaches that interpret medieval Islamic thought solely through the lens of Islamic religion and theology. He concludes that the concerns of medieval Arab thinkers were solely directed towards philosophy, foregoing any other motivations. Likewise, Walzer (2007:108–133) perceives medieval Islamic philosophy as a continuation of Greek philosophy. He posits that, etymologically speaking, the majority of medieval Islamic philosophical concepts trace their origins back to Greek philosophical traditions. Correspondingly, Walker (2005:85–101) suggests that Greek thought exerted a profound influence on medieval Islamic philosophy. It is obvious from the current research that there is a difference of opinion among scholars regarding the influence of philosophy and theology on medieval Islamic thought. Some scholars view theology as the decisive factor that shaped medieval Islamic thought, whereas others attempt to tone down the influence of Islamic theology and argue that Greek philosophy is the decisive factor that shaped medieval Islamic thought. Notwithstanding the difference of opinion among scholars, it is certain that philosophy–theology debate lies at the core of medieval Islamic thought.

In order to properly understand the impact of the philosophy–theology debate on medieval Arab Islamic thought, we must distinguish between medieval Islamic theology (*kalām*) and medieval Islamic philosophy (*Falsafa*). To develop an appropriate understanding of the philosophy–theology debate in medieval Arab Islamic philosophy, one must, first, fully understand the encounter of Greek philosophy with kalām and the response of the practitioners of kalām to this encounter. In the Arabic language, *kalām* literally means 'speech'. Initially, the term denoted the expression of theological doctrines, and over time, it evolved to encompass the declaration of an intellectual theological standpoint or the argument supporting such a position. Kalām ultimately evolved into a comprehensive movement in Arabic thought, which can be described as Arabic scholasticism. Those who practiced kalām were known as *mutakallimūn* (singular *mutakallim*). Richard Walzer (1967:648) referred to them as 'dialectical or speculative theologians' and pointed out that their methodology is distinct from that of the philosophers as the starting point of their investigations is the truth of Islam. In due course, Islamic theologians encountered Greek philosophical ideas and the challenge they presented to their faith. The response of the Islamic theologians to their encounter with Greek philosophy can be identified in the form of three major trends: (1) strong opposition to the application of reason and rationalist approach to Islamic doctrines, and strict adherence to the actual text of the Qur'an and the Hadith, (2) the adoption of Greek philosophy, and the application of reason and rationalist approach to explain and defend Islamic religion and (3) acknowledging the significance of reason in exploring the matters related to the natural world but, at the same time, stressing the subordination of reason to revelation. In a single article, it is not possible to cover all the schools of Islamic theology that subscribed to these trends. Therefore, the present article will discuss Atharism, Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism as the representatives of the first, second and third trends, respectively. The views of these three schools of Islamic theology regarding reason and revelation laid the foundation of the medieval Arab Islamic debate of philosophy versus theology. Thus, the views of these three schools of Islamic theology would be seen as a context for the philosophy–theology debate in medieval Arab Islamic philosophical thought. It is, however, crucial to understand that there is not a direct and rigid one-to-one correspondence between the three schools of Islamic theology and the three major trends in medieval Arab Islamic philosophy in response to the issue of philosophy versus theology. Medieval Arab Muslim philosophers did not reject reason or rationalism outright. Instead, the debate regarding philosophy versus theology in medieval Arab Islamic philosophy primarily revolves around the question of which one takes precedence or is considered superior over the other. In the third section of the article, the views of Abu Bakr Al-Razi will be discussed as the representative of the group of medieval Arab Islamic philosophy who argued for the superiority of reason or philosophy over religion or theology. The views of Al-Ghazali will be analysed as the representative of the group of medieval Arab Islamic philosophy who argued for the superiority of theology over philosophy. Finally, the views of Alfarabi will be discussed as the representative of those medieval Islamic philosophers who suggest a reconciliation and harmonious co-existence of theology and philosophy.

Atharism, Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism: Foundation of the medieval Arab Islamic debate of philosophy versus theology

The foundation of the medieval Arab Islamic debate of philosophy versus theology can be traced to the three important schools of Islamic theology: Atharism, Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism.

Atharism

Atharism, also known as Atharī theology, is a school of Islamic theology within Sunni Islam that originated in the

late 8th century. It emerged from the scholarly circles of Ahl al-Hadith, an early Islamic religious movement that opposed the rationalistic approach to Islamic doctrines. This movement advocated strict adherence to the actual text of the Qur'an and the Hadith. The followers of Atharism, often known as Atharis or Ahl al-Athar, firmly hold the belief that the apparent or literal meaning of the Qur'an and the Hadith serves as the exclusive authority in matters of belief and Islamic religious law. According to them, engaging in rational arguments in the matters of religion, even for the purpose of ascertaining truth, is prohibited (Halverson 2010:36). They expressed strong disapproval and refused to accept the rationalist approaches utilised by other schools of Islamic theology.

According to Muslim jurists and historians, Zubayr ibn al-Awwam, a close companion of the prophet Muhammad, was the earliest textualist and traditionalist whose influence shaped Atharī scholasticism (Al-Alwani, Delorenzo & Al-Shaikh-Ali 2003:11). Zubayr was of the opinion that the interpretation of the Qur'an must be closely tied to its text and the traditional understanding of Sunnah and Hadith. This traditionalist, anti-rationalist and Hadith-centred approach was also embraced by other notable scholars of Islam such as, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Kathir and Ibn Hazm (Lucas 2006:290–292; Spevack 2014:129–130; Stewart 2002: 99–158; Stowasser 1996:9).

In the view of Atharis, divine revelation takes precedence as the primary and most authoritative source of knowledge. They argue that human rationality has limitations and is prone to error, while divine revelation is infallible: being direct communication from God. As a result, they firmly believe that the Qur'an and Hadith must be the highest authorities in the matters of faith and practice. They strictly forbid using reason to reinterpret or override these sacred texts. (Halverson 2010:36, 39). They contend that reliance on rationalism can result in philosophical debates and speculative interpretations that have the potential of causing deviation from the authentic teachings of Islam. According to their belief, dependence on rational deductions can potentially give rise to theological innovations (bid'ah) that result in division and confusion within the community of Muslims. They advise exercising caution when using reason to explore the nature of God's attributes, as they are concerned about the potential risk of anthropomorphism or speculative metaphysical interpretations that could conflict with the established orthodox principles of Islamic theology (Hoover 2020:195–230).

Muʿtazilism

The term Muʿtazilah, which literally means 'those who withdraw or stand apart', originated during the first Muslim civil war between AD 656 and AD 661. As Ali and Qin (2019) have discussed, this civil war was a result of the dispute over Ali's leadership of the Muslim community following the death of the third caliph, Uthman. The word Muʿtazilah was initially used to describe those individuals who, during the 'battle of the camel' (AD 656) and the 'battle of Siffin' (AD 657), chose to take a middle position, neither condemning nor supporting Ali or his opponents (Britannica 2020). However, Muʿtazilism thrived as an Islamic school of speculative theology in Basra and Baghdad from the 8th to the 10th centuries AD. Credited as its founder, Wasil ibn Ata's journey into Muʿtazilism began when he withdrew from Hasan al-Basri's study circle because of a theological disagreement regarding the legal status of a Muslim who commits grave sins. In response to Wasil's withdrawal, Hasan al-Basri remarked, 'Wasil has withdrawn from us'. Henceforth, Wasil and his followers became known as Muʿtazilah or Muʿtazilites, signifying 'those who withdraw' (Dhanani 1994:7).

Although the Muʿtazilites' ultimate reference and starting point were the fundamentals of Islam, they heavily relied on logic and elements of ancient Greek philosophy (Craig 2000; Walzer 1967:641–669). The Muʿtazilite understanding of God was influenced by the ancient Greek doctrine of atomism, which proposes that all things and processes can be reduced to fundamental physical particles and their arrangements. However, it's important to observe that Muʿtazilite atomism did not imply determinism. Instead, they believed that God was ultimately responsible for manipulating these particles, allowing him to transcend the material laws of the universe. As a result, this view of a profoundly sovereign God gave rise to an occasionalist theology, suggesting that God could directly intervene in the world to produce contingent events as he wished. This radical freedom was made possible because the world was believed to be comprised solely of inert matter rather than an immaterial spirit with its own independent vital force (Craig 2001:49–50; Elkaisy-Friemuth 2006:47, 52–54).

Another significant impact of Greek philosophy on Muʿtazilites lies in their rejection of a purely literal interpretation of religious texts and their strong belief in the autonomy of human reason. They hold reason and human intellect in high regard, contending that while God commands what is right and forbids what is wrong, Muslims can, in most cases, discern right and wrong using reason alone, even without relying on divine revelation. According to them, the human intellect plays a crucial role in understanding God, his attributes, and the fundamentals of morality. They believe that the foremost obligation of human beings, particularly mentally capable adults, is to utilise their intellectual power to recognise the existence of God and to gain knowledge of his attributes. One must contemplate the entire existence, pondering why something exists instead of nothing. Recognising that there is a being who caused the universe to exist, independent of any other entity and completely free from any need, leads to the realisation that this being is morally perfect and all-wise. If this being is all-wise, then his act of creation cannot be purposeless or random. Consequently, one is compelled to inquire about what this being expects from humans, as neglecting the mystery of existence and the Creator's plan can be detrimental to oneself.

This perspective, known as *wujub al-nazar* in Islamic theology, emphasises the obligation to use speculative reasoning to attain ontological truths. Martin, Woodward and Atmaja (1997:90) report that prominent Muʿtazilite theologian Abd al-Jabbar asserts that it is speculative reasoning (*al-nazar*) that leads to the knowledge of God because He is not known out of necessity (*daruratan*) or through senses (*bi l-mushahada*). Thus, God must be known through reflection and speculation. Once this foundational knowledge is acquired and one confirms the divine origin of Qur'an and the truth of Islam, reason and revelation converge to become the primary sources of guidance and knowledge for Muslims, thus complementing each other in shaping their beliefs and actions.

Muʿtazilites constructed their rationalist theology on the basis of three core principles: the created nature of the Qur'an, the oneness and justice of God and human freedom of action (Campanini 2012:41–50; Fakhry 1983:46). Their most prominent stance is the rejection of the notion that the Qur'an is uncreated and eternal like God. They argue that if the Qur'an is the word of God, then logically, he must have preceded his own speech. Moreover, the Muʿtazilites sought to address the theological dilemma of evil by positing that reason and justice serve as the foundations of God's interactions with humanity. According to their belief, since God is wise and just, he cannot command actions that contradict reason or disregard the well-being of his creatures. Consequently, they regarded evil as a result of errors in human actions stemming from the free will bestowed upon humans by God. The Muʿtazilites were against secular rationalism, yet they upheld the significance of reason and human intelligence for understanding religious principles. They were convinced that good and evil are rational concepts that could be discerned and comprehended through unaided human reason (Fakhry 1983:47).

Ashʿarism

Ashʿarism or Asharite theology is another significant school of Islamic theology that came to prominence during the 9th and 10th centuries. It derives its name from its founder, Abu al-Hasan al-Ashʿari. Al-Ashʿari was initially a student of Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'i, a renowned teacher of Muʿtazilite theology. However, a few years before his teacher passed, al-Ashʿari dramatically announced his repentance for being a Muʿtazilite and committed himself to opposing the Muʿtazilah. This move by al-Ashʿari was influenced by the growing dissatisfaction among the public with the excessive rationalism of the Muʿtazilites, which had been gaining momentum since they lost official support 50 years earlier. After his conversion, al-Ashʿari continued to employ the dialectic method in theology, but he stressed that reason should be subordinate to revelation (Anvari 2015).

Al-Ashʿari positioned himself between two polarised schools of thought prevailing during his time, engaging in a battle against both opposing parties. On one extreme were the Muʿtazilites, who elevated reason over revelation as the sole criterion for determining truth and reality. On the other extreme were orthodox groups such as the Atharis, who staunchly opposed the use of reason in defending or explaining religious doctrines, deeming any discussion about them as innovation. In this challenging milieu, Al-Ashʿari navigated a middle path, avoiding the extremes of Muʿtazilite rationalism and Athari literalism. He skillfully employed the rationalistic methods advocated by the Muʿtazilites to defend most tenets of the Atharī doctrine, finding a synthesis between reason and revelation (Blankinship 2008:53; Lapidus 2014:123–124).

Ashʿarism acknowledges the significance of reason in exploring the matters related to the natural world. However, it also underscores the limitations of reason in grasping metaphysical and divine matters. According to Ashʿarism, the human intellect has finite capabilities and cannot fully comprehend God and his attributes through reason alone. Therefore, revelation in the form of the Qur'an and Hadith becomes indispensable, supplementing human reason and providing guidance in matters that transcend human understanding. Ashʿarism seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of both the world and the divine by combining reason and revelation. Moreover, Ashʿarism advocates for a moderate approach to scriptural interpretation, referred to as *tafwid* [delegation]. This approach suggests leaving some ambiguous verses in the Qur'an to their apparent meanings without delving into precise interpretations or resorting to literal interpretations. This flexibility in understanding religious texts helps to avoid excessive anthropomorphism in attributing human-like characteristics to God. By adopting a moderate stance, Ashʿarism promotes a balanced interpretation of scriptural texts, focusing on their broader themes, moral lessons and spiritual messages rather than getting entangled in detailed literal interpretations (Frank 2020:136–154).

In Ashʿarism, a clear distinction is made between the essence of God and his attributes. According to this theological perspective, God's essence is separate from his attributes and remains beyond full comprehension by human beings. The attributes of God, such as seeing, speech, hearing, will, knowledge and power, are considered essential for understanding his actions and qualities. However, Ashʿarism strongly emphasises the transcendence of God, asserting that his attributes are in no way comparable to those of human beings. For instance, when the Qur'an employs anthropomorphic language, such as referring to 'the hand of God', Ashʿarism avoids taking these descriptions literally. Instead, it emphasises their metaphorical and spiritual meanings to prevent any anthropomorphic understanding of God's nature. By adopting this approach, Ashʿarism seeks to preserve the transcendence and uniqueness of God beyond human comprehension.

Philosophy versus theology in medieval Arab Islamic philosophy

The views of the three important schools of Islamic theology discussed in the previous section can be seen as a context for

the philosophy–theology debate in medieval Arab Islamic philosophical thought. However, it is important to notice that there is not a strict one-to-one correspondence between the views of the three schools of Islamic theology and the three dominant trends in medieval Arab Islamic philosophy in response to the issue of philosophy versus theology. In medieval Arab Islamic philosophy, we do not find the views that correspond to the literalist and anti-rationalist view of Atharism. Medieval Arab Muslim philosophers did not deny reason or rationalism. Rather, the philosophy versus theology debate in medieval Arab Islamic philosophy mainly revolves around the question of the superiority or primacy of one over the other.

The superiority of philosophy over theology: Abu Bakr Al-Razi

One group of medieval Arab Islamic philosophers argue for the superiority of reason or philosophy over religion or theology. There is a noticeable similarity between the views of these philosophers and the views of the Muʿtazilite school of Islamic theology. Like Muʿtazilites, these philosophers were greatly influenced by Greek philosophy. Under the influence of Greek philosophy, like Muʿtazilites, these philosophers supported rationalism and advocated the autonomy of human reason. Abu Bakr Al-Razi can be viewed as the representative of this group of medieval Arab Islamic philosophers. Abu Bakr Al-Razi, a renowned scholar of the 9th and 10th centuries, was known for his wide-ranging expertise in various fields. He excelled in medicine, alchemy and philosophy, which earned him a reputation as a significant polymath of his time (Adamson 2021). While there is substantial surviving evidence of his work in medicine, his philosophical ideas, particularly his reflections on religion and reason, largely rely on reports found in the writings of other scholars.

In his work 'Proofs of Prophecy', Abū Ḥātim Al-Razi carefully selects and paraphrases passages from a writing of Abu Bakr Al-Razi, portraying him as outright rejecting the validity of prophetic revelation. According to Abū Ḥātim Al-Razi (2011:1), in a face-to-face debate, Al-Razi argued against prophecy by claiming that it would be unfair to grant knowledge beneficial to everyone only to a select few. Moreover, he suggested that appointing only a specific group as religious leaders (imāms) would lead to disagreements among their followers. Al-Razi criticised *taqlid* as the practice of blindly accepting religious beliefs merely on the basis of authority. He viewed it as the primary intellectual sin in the Islamic world (Al-Razi 2011:24). Instead, Al-Razi posited that God bestows reason (*ʿaql*) upon everyone equally, allowing all individuals to independently determine their own goals. In many ways, this perspective on prophecy aligns seamlessly with Abu Bakr Al-Razi's broader philosophical beliefs. It emphasises the notion that reason is bestowed upon the soul as a divine gift from God, a concept supported by other sources and hinted at in the opening of Al-Razi's *Spiritual Medicine*. Moreover, Abū Ḥātim Al-Razi (2011:131–132) portrays Abu Bakr Al-Razi as arguing against the idea of God sending prophets, deeming it irrational and needlessly complicated to achieve his objectives. Why not grant everyone the ability to independently discern the truth? This same premise, where God acts in the most rational manner, is also significant in Al-Razi's theodicy, as evident from other sources. Furthermore, the criticism of blind adherence (*taqlīd*), though a common notion, bears resemblance to Al-Razi's independent mindset, as seen in his approach to Galen, albeit in a different context. Some modern scholars, like Urvoy (1996) and Stroumsa (1999), view the evidence with cautious acceptance and celebrate Al-Razi as a 'freethinker', placing him in the company of boldly unorthodox thinkers like Ibn al-Rāwandī. Other modern scholars, including Vallat (2015), celebrate him for potentially showing sympathies with pagan beliefs. Recently uncovered material by Philippe Vallat (2015) supports the claims made by Abū Ḥātim, indicating that Al-Razi staunchly asserted the futility or even harmfulness of revelation. This material reveals Al-Razi's debate with the theologian Abū Qāsim al-Balkhī, also known as al-Kaʿbī, where he argued that prophets are unnecessary since reason alone should be sufficient, provided that prophecy aligns with reason.[1]

Rashed (2000), however, disputes the idea that Abu Bakr Al-Razi viewed revelation as useless or counterproductive. He does so by presenting and analysing evidence from Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Razi, who quotes Abu Bakr Al-Razi as providing interpretations of the Qurʾan. These interpretations were crafted to demonstrate the alignment between the revelatory text and Al-Razi's own philosophical beliefs. The evidence from Fakhr al-Dīn significantly challenges the idea that Al-Razi held an openly hostile attitude towards Islamic revelation. This is further corroborated by evidence found within Al-Razi's own surviving works, such as his recognition of the paramount importance of books sent by God, as seen in *Doubts about Galen*. Likewise, Adamson (2021) highlights Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa's observation that a presumed work attacking religion might have been authored by malevolent adversaries of Al-Razi and falsely attributed to him. Regarding the recent evidence provided by Vallat, Adamson (2021) contends that there are insufficient grounds to convincingly link it to the debate between al-Kaʿbī and Al-Razi, as Al-Razi is never explicitly mentioned in these texts. Another perspective to consider is that Abū Ḥātim might have deliberately misrepresented Al-Razi's view, which might have been in reality a targeted criticism against schismatic and controversial groups, notably the Ismāʿīlī branch of Islam, to which Abū Ḥātim was affiliated. Ismāʿīlism is known for its strong emphasis on the necessity of a religious leader or imām to guide the adherents towards an authentic comprehension of Islam. Adamson (2021) suggests that Al-Razi's critique may have specifically targeted this doctrine, rather than prophecy in general, as a prime illustration of the perils associated with blind adherence (*taqlīd*).

1.For the debate between Al-Razi and Abū Qāsim al-Balkhī, see Rashed (2000) and Shihadeh (2006).

At the very least, it appears evident that while Al-Razi may not have been hostile to religion, he was undeniably a staunch rationalist who strongly advocated for the supremacy of reason. He firmly believed that the truth within a revelatory text must align with the truths that can be discovered through human reason. Al-Razi was completely devoted to rational inquiry and empirical evidence. He wholeheartedly embraced the teachings of ancient Greek philosophers, with a particular fondness for the works of Aristotle and the Peripatetics. In addition, he demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the works of other eminent thinkers including Plato, the Neoplatonists and early Islamic scholars. Al-Razi recognised the significance of philosophical contemplation in comprehending the natural world, the human condition and the enigmas of existence. He had a strong conviction that through the use of reason and logic, one could discover truths about the universe and the essence of human nature. His devotion to rationalism prompted him to adopt a more critical perspective when approaching theology. He maintained a sceptical stance towards religious dogmas and recognised the necessity for a deeper comprehension of religious texts and traditions. While Al-Razi was not against religion, he promoted the idea of interpreting religious teachings through a more rational lens. He highlighted the significance of employing reason to scrutinise religious doctrines, dismissing literal interpretations that conflicted with reason and scientific knowledge. He perceived philosophy as a valuable instrument to examine and interpret theological concepts in a manner that conforms to reason and evidence. For him, philosophical inquiry had the potential to unveil allegorical or metaphorical elements in religious texts, rendering them consistent with scientific knowledge and human reason.

The superiority of theology over philosophy: Al-Ghazali

Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali was a prominent 11th-century medieval Islamic philosopher, theologian, mystic and jurist.[2] He is considered as an important adherent of the Asharite school of Islamic theology. His views on philosophy, theology and their relationship largely correspond to the views of the Asharite school of Islamic theology. He is the most suitable representative of the group of medieval Arab Islamic philosophers who argue for the superiority of theology or religion over philosophy or reason.

Al-Ghazali lived and worked in a time when the study of philosophy held great importance, and the Islamic intellectual circles were profoundly impacted by the writings of ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Under the influence of Greek philosophy, certain medieval Arab Islamic philosophers had formulated their comprehensive philosophical systems that questioned fundamental beliefs upheld by Muslim theologians, such as the creation of the world in time and the originality of revelation. In the opening of his well-known book, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Al-Ghazali (2000a:1–2) expresses dissatisfaction with the philosophers' belief that their method of acquiring knowledge through demonstrative proof is superior to the knowledge obtained through revelation. He claims that this conviction caused a faction of Muslim philosophers to ignore Islam, and forsake its rituals and laws. In his *Incoherence*, Al-Ghazali examines 20 fundamental teachings of the philosophers and refutes the assertion that these teachings are proved through demonstration. In a meticulous and intricate philosophical discourse, Al-Ghazali endeavours to demonstrate that none of the arguments supporting these 20 teachings meet the rigorous epistemological standard set by the philosophers themselves. Instead, the arguments backing these teachings rest on the unproven premises, which find acceptance solely among the philosophers but lack genuine rational foundations. By revealing that these positions are only sustained by dialectical arguments, Al-Ghazali's seeks to dismantle the epistemological arrogance he believed existed in the philosophers. According to Griffel (2005:273–296), Al-Ghazali endeavours to illustrate in his *Incoherence* that the philosophers engage in *taqlîd*, where they unquestioningly repeat these teachings from the founders of their movement without subjecting them to critical examination.

Al-Ghazali makes the case at the end of the *Incoherence* that while most of the 20 philosophical teachings covered in the book are incorrect, they don't pose any major issues in terms of religion. However, the three teachings that come from the philosophy of Avicenna are not only wrong but also problematic from the perspective of religion: (1) the eternity of the world, (2) the teaching that the knowledge of God is restricted to universals and does not include the particulars and (3) denial of the return of the human souls into bodies after death. Al-Ghazali states that these three teachings are contrary to the teachings of Islam, which are grounded in divine revelation. The teachings of Islam, therefore, invalidate the baseless assertions of the philosophers. Furthermore, the three teachings have the potential to mislead the people into neglecting religious laws, making them hazardous for society. At the end of the *Incoherence*, in his role as a Muslim jurist, Al-Ghazali (2000a:226) includes a concise legal opinion (fatwâ) wherein he pronounces that anyone publicly teaching these three positions is considered an unbeliever (kâfir) and an apostate who can be killed. He strongly emphasises the importance of tolerating all other teachings, even those that are incorrect or seen as religious innovations. Notwithstanding their philosophical origin, Al-Ghazali adds, the Muslim community should accept other teachings. He (Al-Ghazali 2000b:67–70) asserts that each teaching should be individually evaluated, and if it proves to be sound and aligns with divine revelation, it should be accepted and adopted. Al-Ghazali recognised the significance of philosophy and formulated a multifaceted response that involved rejecting and condemning certain philosophical teachings, while at the same time, accepting and implementing others. However, for him, in cases of conflict, theology overrules philosophy.

2.For details about Al-Ghazali's life and works, see Griffel 2020.

The reconciliation between philosophy and theology: Alfarabi

Abu Nasr Alfarabi was a renowned 10th-century medieval Arab Islamic philosopher. He is the representative of those medieval Arab Islamic philosophers who try to reconcile philosophy or reason and theology or religion, and give both equally significant roles in their philosophical systems. As we discussed earlier, the views of the three schools of Islamic theology differ on the role and status of reason and religion. For them, the central question is related to the primacy of one over the other. As Alfarabi gives equally significant roles to philosophy and religion, his philosophical thought does not correspond to any of the three schools of Islamic theology. Ali (2023) has thoroughly analysed Alfarabi's views about philosophy, religion, and their harmonious co-existence. Therefore, we will keep this sub-section brief. It is true that Alfarabi (1985:279) claims that the philosophical knowledge is 'more excellent' than the religious knowledge. However, it must be emphasised that, for Alfarabi, the excellence of the philosophical knowledge is not because of the superiority of the information conveyed through philosophy. Rather, for Alfarabi, philosophy and religion are merely two different ways of knowing the same things. According to Alfarabi (1985:279–285), philosophy is the knowledge of things as they are, whereas religion is the knowledge of the symbolic imitation of the things as they are. The people who possess the intellectual capacity to know the things as they are acquire philosophical knowledge, whereas those who lack this intellectual capacity know the same things through the symbols that represent the things as they are.

The harmonious co-existence of philosophy and religion is most evident in Alfarabi's political philosophy. In his political treatise, *Mabādi' ārā' ahl al-madīna al-fādila*, Alfarabi proposes his theory of the virtuous city. The ruler of Alfarabi's is not only a philosopher but also a prophet who receives divine revelations. This philosopher-prophet uses philosophy to rule the philosophers, whereas he uses religion to rule the non-philosophers. Both, philosophy and religion, are equally important for the existence of Alfarabi's virtuous city (Ali 2023).

In his work 'Ihsa al-Ulum' (Enumeration of the Sciences), Alfarabi shares his perspectives on the conflict between philosophy and religion. According to Alfarabi (2004:81–84), followers of a religion perceive a conflict between their religion and philosophy because of their lack of awareness that the principles of their religion are symbolic representations of philosophical principles. This unawareness often leads to enmity between religion and philosophy. Consequently, philosophers find themselves obliged to clarify the relationship between philosophy and religion to those who follow the religious teachings. They must address the concerns of the religionists and assure them that they are not challenging the religion itself, but only refuting the notion of any contradiction between philosophy and religion.

Conclusion

The encounter of medieval Arab Muslims with Greek philosophy has undeniably shaped the course of their philosophical and theological thought. This encounter led to the complex and contentious issue of 'philosophy versus theology', wherein medieval Muslim thinkers grappled with the juxtaposition of reason-based Greek philosophy and the divine revelations at the core of their monotheistic religion and theology. Medieval Muslim thinkers needed to develop a response to the issue of philosophy versus theology. Medieval Islamic theologians responded in three major ways. Some of them staunchly opposed reason's application to Islamic doctrines. The second group embraced Greek philosophy and employed reason to defend Islam. The third group of Islamic theologians includes those who recognised reason's importance but subordinated it to revelation. This response of the Islamic theologians serves as a context in which medieval Muslim philosophers carried out their philosophy-theology debate. Some medieval Muslim philosophers such as Abu Bakr Al-Razi, subordinated religion or revelation to philosophy or reason. Other medieval Muslim philosophers, such as Al-Ghazali, subordinated philosophy to theology. The third group of medieval Islamic philosophers represented by Alfarabi argued for the reconciliation and harmonious co-existence of philosophy and religion.

The intricate and multifaceted nature of the philosophy–theology debate in medieval Arab Islamic thought underscores its enduring significance. The exploration of these historical perspectives not only enriches our understanding of the past but also provides valuable insights into contemporary discussions on the relationship between reason, religion and philosophy. As scholars continue to delve into the intellectual heritage of medieval Arab Muslims, the interplay between reason and revelation remains a topic of profound interest, contributing to a more comprehensive comprehension of the development of philosophical thought within Islamic civilisation. By comprehending the nuances and complexities of this medieval debate, we can foster greater understanding and appreciation for the intellectual heritage that has shaped the course of human thought and philosophy.

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Authors' contributions

I.A. conceptualisation, methodology, funding acquisition, visualisation and writing original draft, K.A. resources, investigation and funding acquisition.

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Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in the article are our own and not an official position of the institution in which the research was carried out.

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