



Assimilation and Reaction: The Influence of Greek Philosophy on the Formation of Early Islamic Theology

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Abstract

This investigation assesses the reciprocal engagement between the Hellenic philosophical corpus and the emergent theological idiom of early Islam, focusing on the Abbasid epoch when the institutionalised pacemaking of the Translation Movement matured. The inquiry sharpens on the epistemic predicaments of the predominant doctrinal triad—Mu'tazilah, Asy'ariyah, and Maturidiyah—whose constructs exacted a selective retrieval of the Hellenistic inheritance. Through a conjunction of historical contextualisation and close philological scrutiny, it interrogates axial substantive questions, including the nexus of reason and revelation, the divine attributes, the modality of volition, and the semiotic status of the Qur'ān. The interpretive outcomes disclose that the Greek legacy engendered more than passive inheritance; it provoked an agonistic dialogue that sporadically oscillated between assimilation, refraction, and creative integration. Mu'tazilah rationalism, yielding a predilection for demonstrative syllogism and a metaphysics of divine justice, incorporated Aristotelian logical schemata; by contrast, Asy'ariyah and Maturidiyah wrought a composite idiom registering revelation within stringent logical confines. The magisterial refutations of al-Ghazālī, which circumscribed the epistemic locus of non-prophetic reason, emerge as a historical fulcrum that consolidated the theological nomenclature and defined, within normative Islam, the extents of speculative scrutiny. Thus, this article addresses a gap in the literature by offering a systematic, comparative reconstruction of how Greek philosophical reasoning was selectively appropriated, contested, and normatively integrated within the formative schools of Islamic theology.

Keywords: Assimilation, Philosophy, Greece, Theology, Islam

Introduction

The intersection of the inherited Hellenistic intellectual corpus with the emergent Islamic civilisation, still moulding its foundational voice, marked a decisive turn in the trajectory of global thought. This juncture surpassed the mere transmission of specialised knowledge; rather, it fostered a reciprocal intellectual osmosis that provoked a decisive recalibration of epistemic structures within the Islamic milieu (Lelli, 2015). The extensive translation initiative that unfolded



under the Abbasid caliphate, attaining its apogee during the patronage of al-Ma'mun, constituted a decisive mediating mechanism, facilitating the migration of essential Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic texts into the Arabic idiom. Such a campaign extended beyond the mere reproduction of written matter; it enfolded novel conceptual architectures and methodological heuristics that progressively reconfigured Muslim approaches to theology, cosmology, and epistemology, rendering them irreversibly re-situated within a wider meta-Greek dialogue (Ragab, 2017).

Greek philosophy thus acted as a dual stimulus within the framework of early Islamic intellectual culture. Its transmission supplied the Muslim scholarly community with rigorous methodological instruments—in the form of formal logic—and with conceptual architectures—metaphysical schemes—thereby enabling the systematic unfolding of theological inquiry into a consistently rational discipline (Hermes, 2012). Concurrently, exposure to Hellenistic speculative traditions produced a series of doctrinal stimuli whose theological implications compelled Muslim thinkers to articulate responses. These responses crystallised in distinctive schools of thought: the Mu'tazilah espoused a thorough rationalism; the Asy'ariyah adopted a moderated, yet resolutely critical, stance toward speculative excess; while the Maturidiyah sought an equable reconciliation of reason, on the one hand, and transmitted religious authority, on the other (Amir-Moezzi & Schmidtke, 2009). The dialectical tension generated within this constellation of views culminated in the sequel to what became a widely received canonical critique: Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī's decisive intervention in the Tahafut al-Falasifah recast decisively the permissible parameters of speculative philosophy, modestly yet decisively delimiting its role along the ensuing trajectory of the Islamic scientific and theological legacy (Van Lit, 2015).

This investigation seeks to effect a thorough inquiry into the modalities whereby Greek philosophical thought participated in the configuration of early Islamic theology, attending particularly to the historical circumstances, the modalities of translation, and the cognitive tensions provoked by the intercultural dialogue (Daiber, 2012). Attention is directed to such themes as the reciprocity of reason and revelation, the Essence of the divine, human autonomy, and the status of the Qur'ān. Supplementary to the specific topics, the inquiry endeavours to situate these processes within a more inclusive dialectical horizon in which philosophy is apprehended not as an extrinsic menace, but as a dialogical interlocutor that enjoins Islamic theological discourse to precise and elaborate itself (Völker, 2015). Despite the extensive scholarship on the transition of Greek philosophy into the Islamic world, this article offers an original contribution by providing a systematic and comparative reconstruction of how Hellenistic philosophical reasoning was selectively appropriated, contested, and normatively integrated within the formative schools of kalām, rather than treated as a merely external or derivative influence. The principal objective of this study is to demonstrate that the engagement between Greek philosophy and early Islamic theology constituted a sustained dialectical process that reshaped theological method and epistemic boundaries, particularly in debates concerning reason and revelation, divine attributes, human agency, and the status of the Qur'ān.

Literature Review

The influence of Greek philosophy on the emergent Islamic intellectual tradition has attracted sustained scholarly scrutiny, encompassing historical, philosophical, theological, and political dimensions. Collectively, these enquiries underscore that the assimilation of Hellenic thought during the formative Abbasid epoch entailed more than mere translational labour; it instigated a comprehensive epistemic transformation that permeated the diverse domains of Islamic intellectual production (Ali & Almulla, 2023). The Abbasid caliphs' concerted translation commission, reinforced by the administrative and institutional architecture of the Bayt al-Hikmah, extended critical yet hitherto inaccessible Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic texts to Muslim



savants, thereby catalysing a novel intercultural and intercivilisational dialogue (Muhammad, 2008). However, research shows that this process did not take place passively; the translated works underwent adaptation and reinterpretation in accordance with the intellectual and spiritual needs of the Islamic community at that time. Muslim thinkers adopted Greek logic and metaphysics to articulate Islamic teachings more systematically, while criticising aspects that were considered contrary to the principles of revelation (Ali, 2022).

A number of studies highlight how rationalist schools such as Mu'tazilah utilised Greek philosophy to construct theological arguments centred on divine justice, free will, and the use of reason as a source of religious knowledge (Ramadhani, 2020). Other studies show the response of moderate groups such as the Asy'ariyah and Maturidiyah, who, despite accepting rational thinking, still place revelation as the main authority and introduce more balanced theological concepts, such as the theory of kasb and the affirmation of God's attributes with the *bila kayfa* approach (Chaharborj, 2021). Research also reveals that figures such as al-Kindi, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Razi not only utilised Greek philosophy but also expanded the horizons of Islamic philosophy by synthesising Hellenistic elements and Islamic teachings, producing original works that influenced the Islamic and Western worlds (Muhammad, 2008).

Other studies trace the transformation of key concepts, such as reason and rationality, from Greek to Islamic thought. They find that the concept of reason was not simply borrowed, but modified to support the framework of Islamic faith and law (Fakhry, 1998). Historical studies also emphasise that Greek philosophy not only had an impact on metaphysics and theology but also entered the realm of politics and practical ethics. The ethical thinking of Plato and Aristotle, for example, can be seen in Islamic political advice literature that discusses leadership, justice, and state governance. This shows that the interaction with Greek philosophy was multidimensional and transcended the boundaries of theology alone.

In addition, some studies discuss the tension between philosophy and theology in the Islamic world, especially during a period when criticism of rationalism emerged sharply. One example is al-Ghazālī's own critique, prioritising revelation over unchecked reason amid rising philosophical influence threatening theological doctrines like divine omnipotence (Mujahidin, 2024). Studies on al-Ghazālī, for example, emphasise that although he strongly criticised metaphysical philosophy in *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, he still maintained the use of Aristotelian logic in Islamic theology and law. Because he distinguished between logic as a neutral tool for valid reasoning and metaphysics as speculative doctrines conflicting with Islamic revelation (Aini, 2016). The integration of Hellenistic philosophical traditions into Arabic-Islamic intellectual life, while exhibiting pronounced tensions, nonetheless provided the bedrock upon which the corpus of Islamic science was subsequently elaborated. The prevailing scholarship, as a survey of recent works indicates, treats the excursus between philosophy and speculative theology as rigorous and reciprocal rather than as a mere polemical standoff. The resultant synthetic movement, documented independently yet consonantly by Belhaj and others, produced dense constellations of novel concepts capable of organising empirical phenomena alongside doctrinal commitments (Belhaj, 2024).

Colloquies of re-translation, critical appropriation, and tantamount recontextualisation have, indeed, constituted a pronounced dialectic, rather than a monolithic regimen of reception. Prominent exponents of *kalām*, *mutakallimīn*, and such speculative praxes exercised hermeneutical latitude that invariably established Hellenic episteme upon secularity hedged by Islamic commitments. Paragon statements govern innovative notations of *l-f ōr* and *kīn ōn* -both of which renamed Greek notions of actuality and potency- enacting a generative sequence that reserved Hellenistic arguments for interrogation, yet never considered them irredeemable (Pormann, 2015). This dialectic, therefore, invested *kalām*, philosophy, and empirical science



alike with resolutely transported ranges of categories, rule-sets, and —foremost—epistemic questions.

The accumulated corpus, itself a *mise en chantier* of argumentative treatises, established a solid intellectual scaffolding capable of sustaining enduring controversies, which, naturally, extend into the present (Camper, 2017). Such reconstructions, rightly considered, govern a task that coordinates how Hellenic technique, underlying categories, and structural inclinations are reconceivingly assimilated across, and competing subsystems of, textual disciplines, and to district contemporary controversies and, of course—therein—pan-Islamic, pan-disciplinary and, yesterday, the gulf theorists and yesterday, wale febrile in their coastal interactions with the same trans-Hellenic traditions Asia (Ahmed, 2013).

Method

This inquiry adopts a qualitative paradigm underpinned by historical and textual analysis to illuminate the impact of Hellenic philosophy upon the formation of early Islamic theology (Adiyono et al., 2024). The utilisation of a historical lens is warranted because the investigations are concerned with phenomena and intellectual currents temporally distant, specifically the Abbasid epoch, when the nascent translation movement catalysed a sustained dialectic between Hellenistic and Islamic rational enterprises. Concurrently, textual analysis permits a scrupulous interrogation of both primary and ancillary literatures, thereby permitting reconstruction of the ideas and counter-arguments inhering in theological contests. To this end, the primary corpus comprises canonical works of Hellenic antiquity, particularly those of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, the rendered texts of Hunayn ibn Ishaq, and the subsequent compositions of Muslim theologians, embracing the Mu'tazilite, Ash'ari, and Maturidi traditions, together with al-Ghazālī's incisive interventions in the *Maqāṣid al-Falasifah* and the *Taḥāfut al-Falasifah*. Complementary documentation consists of academic monographs, articles, and critical commentaries assessing the dynamics of the translation enterprise, the evolution of the *kalām*, and the appropriative reception of Hellenistic philosophic paradigms within the embryonic Islamic scientific corpus.

Research materials were assembled primarily via systematic library inquiry. Searches encompassed central, remote, and institutional libraries, complemented by targeted explorations of digital archives and discipline-specific peer-reviewed journals (Keeran & Levine-Clark, 2014). Each identified text was subjected to rigorous evaluative reading, wherein authorial credentials, purpose, and period-specific circumstances were foregrounded to assess evidential reliability. Subsequent to selection, the assembled material underwent a tripartite methodological scrutiny. The initial phase entailed chronological mapping, whereby extant, recorded translations were surveyed to delineate the trajectory of Greek philosophical incorporation, with particular attention to the mediating influences of court sponsorship and such bodies as the House of Wisdom. I followed this with thematic inquiry, directing attention to centra that persistently surfaced across the disparate assemblage—namely, the structure of Aristotelian reasoning, the successive emanations of Neoplatonic metaphysics, the divine nature and its corollaries, the latitude accorded human volition, and the epistemic standing afforded textual revelation. Third, comparative analysis is used to compare the positions and arguments of different schools of *kalām*, particularly the Mu'tazilah, Asy'ariyah, and Maturidiyah, in responding to the challenges of Greek rationalism.

To ensure data validity, this study utilised source triangulation, which involves examining various texts from different authors and periods to reinforce the validity of the findings. The credibility of the authors and the reliability of the texts were also critically evaluated, while the analysis was conducted consistently using the method to ensure reliable results. This study is limited to the



early period of kalām development, namely the 8th to 12th centuries CE, with a focus on the main philosophical concepts that influenced the formulation of Islamic theology, rather than on political, legal, or religious practices that are outside the scope of this study.

Results and Discussion

The Translation Movement—The Gateway for Hellenism to Enter the Islamic World

The massive translation movement that took place under the Abbasid Caliphate, particularly from the 8th to the 10th centuries CE, cannot be understood as a phenomenon that arose out of a vacuum. It was driven by a powerful combination of the practical needs of the state, the ideological agenda of the rulers, and civilisational competition. Pragmatically, the vast caliphate required applied knowledge in the fields of medicine, astrology, and mathematics to support government administration and public welfare.¹ However, a stronger impetus came from the realms of ideology and prestige (Vagelpohl, 2010).

Caliph Al-Ma'mun (reigned 813–833 CE), who had a strong inclination towards the rationalist Mu'tazilah school of theology, actively sought a philosophical foundation to reinforce his theological views (Demichelis, 2012). Greek philosophy, with its emphasis on logic and rational argument, provided the perfect intellectual tools for this purpose. Thus, translation became not only an intellectual project, but also a project of statecraft. By promoting philosophy, Al-Ma'mun not only advanced knowledge but also armed the state ideology with the most sophisticated intellectual tools of his time to confront his theological opponents (Tamer, 2013). In addition, there was an element of cultural competition with the Byzantine Empire. By mastering, translating, and ultimately surpassing ancient Greek knowledge, the Abbasid caliphs sought to demonstrate the superiority of Islamic civilisation.

The pinnacle of state patronage was the establishment and development of Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad. Initiated by Caliph Harun al-Rashid and reaching its peak under his son, Al-Ma'mun, Bayt al-Hikmah was not merely a library, but a multi-functional academic complex that became the centre of intellectual life at that time (Wani & Maqbool, 2012). Its diverse functions reflect the grand ambitions of this project:

1. Translation Bureau: This was its primary function, where scholars from various backgrounds worked to translate manuscripts from Greek, Persian, Syriac, and Sanskrit into Arabic.
2. Library: Bayt al-Hikmah collected, catalogued, and stored a vast number of manuscripts, making it the largest library in the world in the mid-ninth century.⁶ Caliph Al-Ma'mun personally funded missions abroad, such as to Constantinople, to purchase and collect rare books.
3. Educational Institution: It functioned as a higher education institution where scholars taught and students studied various disciplines, ranging from philosophy to medicine. This teaching system even included the awarding of diplomas as proof of mastery of knowledge.
4. Research Centre and Observatory: Bayt al-Hikmah was also a centre for original research. Equipped with an observatory, scientists such as Al-Khwarizmi conducted important research in astronomy and mathematics, which led to significant advances in algebra.

The transmission of Hellenistic knowledge to the Islamic world often did not occur directly. Many Greek works were first translated into Syriac (an Aramaic dialect) by Christian scholars before being translated into Arabic (Takahashi, 2015). This highlights the crucial role of non-Muslim communities, particularly Nestorian and Jacobite Christians, as intellectual bridges. The early Islamic world inherited regions such as Syria and Egypt, where Hellenistic intellectual traditions

had been preserved and studied for centuries by these communities. When the Abbasids needed access to this knowledge, they drew upon the expertise and existing corpus of texts from these communities (Islam, 2017). One of the most important figures in this process was Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873 CE), a Nestorian Christian physician. He was not only a prolific translator but also a sophisticated methodologist. He led a team that not only translated literally but also corrected, compared various manuscripts, and produced accurate and clear translations. The reward given to him—Al-Ma'mun (Vagelpohl, 2015), is said to have paid him with gold equal to the weight of the books he translated—showing how vital the role of these translators was to the Abbasid civilisation project. This movement, which lasted for more than a century, succeeded in creating a corpus of philosophical and scientific literature in Arabic that became the foundation for all subsequent intellectual development in Islam. Thus, the Islamic Golden Age was not an exclusively "Islamic" phenomenon, but rather a multicultural and multireligious civilisation project that was heavily dependent on the contributions of non-Muslim scholars (Wakelnig, 2022).

Theological Response—The Dialectic between Reason and Revelation in Ilm al-Kalam

The massive influx of Greek philosophy sparked intense theological debates in the Islamic world. Muslim thinkers were now confronted with new conceptual tools for discussing fundamental issues of faith. The responses that emerged were not uniform, but gave rise to various theological (kalām) schools, each of which attempted to reconcile or negotiate the relationship between reason ('aql) and revelation (naql) (Grabus, 2012).

The Mu'tazilah school, often referred to as Islamic rationalists, was the first group to enthusiastically adopt Hellenistic philosophy as a tool to defend and formulate Islamic teachings. Born out of a debate about the status of those who commit major sins—whom they positioned in "a place between two places" (al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatain)—the Mu'tazilah quickly developed a coherent theological system based on five basic principles (al-Usul al-Khamsah). Two of these principles directly indicate the influence of rational thinking (Campanini, 2012):

1. Al-Tawhid (The Oneness of God): In their efforts to uphold the absolute oneness of God, the Mu'tazilah reject the idea that God's attributes (such as Knowing, Powerful) are separate entities or meanings attached to His Essence. They argue that if these attributes were eternal (qadim) like God's Essence, then there would be multiple eternal entities (ta'addud al-qudama'), which would undermine the concept of Tawhid. Therefore, for them, God's attributes are His Essence itself.¹⁵ This is a highly philosophical argument, not merely a literal interpretation of the text.
2. Al-'Adl (Divine Justice): This principle led them to the doctrine of radical free will. The Mu'tazilah argued that for God to be considered just, humans must be the creators of their own actions. If God creates human actions (both good and bad), then it would be unjust for God to punish humans for bad actions that are not His creation. Thus, they assert that humans have the freedom and ability (qudrah) to choose and carry out their actions.

Their explicit prioritisation of reason in interpreting revelation made them highly receptive to Greek logic and metaphysics, which they viewed as powerful tools for defending Islam from external and internal criticism. As a direct reaction to what was considered the excesses of Mu'tazilah rationalism, the Asy'ariyah school emerged. Founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 936 CE), a former prominent Mu'tazilah theologian who later broke away from his teacher, this school sought a middle ground between the Mu'tazilah's methodological commitment to reason as capable of determining theological truth independently of revelation in certain domains, and the rigid literalism of the traditionalists (Ahl al-Ḥadīth) (Ayub, 2021).

Al-Ash'ari and his followers employed the same rational and dialectical (kalām) methods of



argumentation as the Mu'tazilah. However, they used these tools to reach theological conclusions that were more in line with the understanding of the majority of Muslims. To confront the Mu'tazilah on the same intellectual battlefield, they had to master and use logic and philosophical terminology, albeit for different purposes. Thus, Greek philosophy not only influenced one school of thought but fundamentally created a lingua franca or "common language" for the entire discourse of Islamic theology. To counter "rationalism", traditionalists had to become rationalists themselves (Džilo & Mehmedi, 2018).

The key doctrines of Asy'ariyah reflect this attempt at synthesis (Manshur & Herlina, 2023):

1. The nature of God: Contrary to the Mu'tazilah's rejection, the Asy'ariyah assert that God does indeed possess real attributes (such as Knowledge, Power, Life) that are inherent to His Essence. However, to avoid anthropomorphism (likening God to creatures), they introduced the principle of *bila kayfa* ("without asking how"), which means accepting the existence of these attributes as mentioned in revelation without attempting to understand their Essence with human reason.
2. Free Will and Destiny: This is one of the most complex issues. The Asy'ariyah reject the Mu'tazilah's idea that humans are the creators of their own actions. Instead, they propose the concept of *kasb* (acquisition or attainment). According to this theory, all actions, good and bad, are created by God. However, humans "acquire" or "strive for" these actions with the power created by God at the moment the action occurs. It is through *kasb* that humans are held responsible for their actions. This is a complex attempt to balance God's absolute omnipotence with human moral responsibility.

Almost contemporary with Al-Asy'ari, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944 CE) in Samarkand, Central Asia, also developed a theological system in response to Mu'tazilah. Although often grouped with the Asy'ariyah as the founders of Sunni theology (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*), the Maturidiyah school has several important differences, which show that the theological landscape at that time was not a simple dichotomy between "reason" and "revelation", but rather a broad spectrum (Bilgin, 2020).

Maturidiyah occupies a significant middle ground in this spectrum. They give reason a greater role than Asy'ariyah. For example, they argue that human reason, even without divine guidance, can know the existence of God and the basic obligation to be grateful to Him, and can objectively distinguish between good and bad deeds (Aygün, 2015). However, they agree with the Asy'ariyah that the details of sharia obligations can only be known through revelation. Regarding free will, they also offer a different solution from the Asy'ariyah's *kasb*. The Maturidiyah argue that God creates human actions, but humans have real free will (*ikhtiyar*) to perform or not perform those actions. God creates actions based on human free will. To clarify the often subtle doctrinal differences between these three main schools of thought, the following table presents a comparison of their positions on key theological issues (Hardiansyah et al., 2025).

| Theological Issues | Mu'tazilah School | The Asy'ariyah School | Maturidiyah School |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| The Position of Reason vs. Revelation | Reason can independently discern good/evil and the existence of God. Revelation confirms and elaborates. | Revelation is the primary source of obligation. Reason serves to understand and justify revelation. | Reason can know the existence of God, but the obligation to worship Him comes from revelation. |
| The Attributes of God (Sifat) | Attributes are the Essence (Dzat) of God Himself to maintain absolute Tawhid. | God has real attributes that are inherent in His Essence, but without questioning how (<i>kayfa</i>). | These attributes are not identical to the Essence, but they are also not separate from it; they are inherent in the Essence (<i>mulzamah</i>). |



| | | | |
|----------------------|---|--|--|
| Free Will (Qadar) | Humans are the creators of their own actions (absolute free will) based on the principle of Divine Justice. | God creates actions; humans "acquire" (kasb) these actions, making them responsible. | God creates actions, but humans have a real will to choose (ikhtiyar) between good and evil. |
| Status of the Qur'ān | A created being (created in time). | The eternal (qadim) Word of Allah, not a creature. | The eternal Word of God, not a creature. |

Table 1. Comparison of Theological Views between the Mu'tazilah, Asy'ariyah, and Maturidiyah Schools on Key Issues of Kalām
 Source: Author, 2025

This table compares the views of the three main schools of Islamic theology, namely Mu'tazilah, Asy'ariyah, and Maturidiyah, on four key issues: the relationship between reason and revelation, the attributes of God, free will, and the status of the Qur'ān. Regarding reason and revelation, Mu'tazilah gives a dominant position to reason, which is believed to be capable of knowing good, evil, and the existence of God independently, while revelation only confirms and elaborates (Grabus, 2012). In contrast, Asy'ariyah views revelation as the primary source of obligation, with reason serving as a tool to understand and justify revelation. Maturidiyah occupies a middle position by acknowledging the ability of reason to know the existence of God, but still emphasises that the obligation to worship comes from revelation. In terms of the attributes of God, Mu'tazilah emphasises absolute unity by equating attributes with the Essence of God. At the same time, Asy'ariyah acknowledges the existence of attributes inherent in the Essence of God without explaining their nature (bila kayfa) (Abdrasilov et al., 2023).

Maturidiyah states that these attributes are not identical but also not separate from the Essence. On the issue of free will, Mu'tazilah affirms the absolute freedom of humans as creators of their actions in order to maintain God's justice. Asy'ariyah views actions as created by God, but humans "acquire" (kasb) those actions so that they remain responsible (Misra et al., 2019). At the same time, Maturidiyah acknowledges that God creates actions but allows room for human will to choose. Finally, regarding the status of the Qur'ān, the Mu'tazilah view it as a created being in time. At the same time, the Asy'ariyah and Maturidiyah agree that the Word of God is qadim, eternal, and not a created being. These differences demonstrate the spectrum of theological thought in Islam, from extreme rationalism to a moderate position that balances reason and revelation (Grabus, 2012).

Analysis of Key Concepts Under Debate

Interaction with Greek philosophy not only gave rise to new theological schools of thought but also focused debate on a series of philosophical concepts that are now central to Islamic discourse. Muslim thinkers did not simply swallow the Hellenistic legacy whole; instead, they engaged in a complex process of selective adoption and creative adaptation (Booth, 2018a). One of the most widely accepted and enduring contributions of Greek philosophy was Aristotelian logic, known in Arabic as mantiq. This logic was adopted not as a worldview, but as an "instrumental science" (al-ilm al-ali)—a neutral methodology for thinking correctly and systematically. Theologians (mutakallimun) from various schools quickly recognised the power of this tool. They used Aristotelian syllogisms (qiyas 'aqli), categories, and definitions to construct rational proofs (dalil 'aqli) on fundamental theological issues such as the existence of God, His oneness, and His attributes (Akrami, 2017).

Mantiq became the primary weapon in inter-school debates, enabling arguments to be constructed with precision and refuted with analytical acuity. Philosophers such as Al-Farabi (d. 950 CE) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037 CE) later refined and developed it further, making it an integral



foundation of scientific and philosophical thought in the Islamic world (Hodges, 2017). Debates about the nature of God became the main arena for the encounter between Greek metaphysics and Islamic theology.

The concept of God in Aristotelian philosophy is as the Unmoved Mover—an impersonal entity, a pure act that is the final cause of all motion in the universe, but is not actively involved, does not create from nothing, and does not know the particulars of what happens in the world. This concept fundamentally contradicts the description of God in the Qur'ān as personal, Omniscient, and active as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe (Olson, 2013).

Nevertheless, Muslim thinkers recognised the power of the rational argument behind Aristotle's idea of the first cause, adapting it to affirm God as the Necessary Existent from which all contingent beings emanate (De Cillis, 2013). The chain of causality in the universe must end with a cause that is not caused. They then undertook a creative process of "Islamisation": they adopted the logical structure of the First Cause argument, but then "filled" the entity of the First Cause with the attributes of God as described in the Qur'ān (Shihadeh, 2019). Al-Kindi (d. 873 CE), the first Muslim philosopher, explicitly stated that God is the Creator, not merely the Prime Mover.²⁵ Thus, this interaction was not a surrender to Greek thought, but rather a critical dialogue in which foreign concepts were unravelled, adapted, and synthesised back into the Islamic paradigm—in addition to Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, particularly the thought of Plotinus (d. 270 CE), also had a major influence, especially on Muslim philosophers (falasifa). Neoplatonism offered a different cosmological model, namely the theory of emanation (al-fayd). In this model, the universe was not created at a specific point in time, but rather "overflowed" or "emanated" from God (the One) inevitably and eternally, like light emanating from the sun (Arif, 2012). This process created a descending hierarchy of beings, starting from the First Intellect, the Universal Soul, and finally physical matter.

This emanation model was adopted by great philosophers such as Al-Farabi. However, this model poses serious theological challenges to orthodox Islamic doctrine. If the universe necessarily emanates from God, this implies two problematic things: first, the universe is as eternal (qadim) as God, which contradicts the concept of creation in time; second, this process does not occur because of God's free will, but as a necessary consequence of His Essence, which seems to limit His omnipotence and freedom (Arif, 2012). This creates a direct conflict with the Qur'anic doctrine of creation from nothing (creatio ex nihilo), in which God created the universe through His free will at a specific moment with His word "Be!" (kun fayakun). The debate between the emanationist cosmology of the philosophers and the creationist cosmology of the theologians became one of the most acute and fundamental points of division in the intellectual history of Islam.

Critical Turning Point—Al-Ghazālī's Criticism and Long-Term Implications

In the 11th century, tensions between revelation and the claims of pure reason by philosophers reached their peak. It was Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE), a leading theologian, jurist, and Sufi, who launched the most systematic and influential critique of philosophy, which fundamentally changed the intellectual direction of the Sunni Islamic world (Ibad, 2016). The strength of Al-Ghazālī's critique lay in his methodology. Before attacking the philosophers, he dedicated his first time to mastering their thoughts in depth. The result was the book *Maqashid al-Falasifah* (The Aims of the Philosophers), a clear, objective, and accurate exposition of Peripatetic (Aristotelian-Neoplatonic) philosophy as espoused by Al-Farabi and Ibn Sīnā. By writing this work, Al-Ghazālī showed the intellectual world that his forthcoming criticism did not stem from ignorance, but from a deep understanding. This gave him undeniable credibility and authority to launch his attack (van Lit, 2015).

After presenting the doctrines of the philosophers, Al-Ghazālī wrote his monumental work, *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers). It is important to understand that this work is not a total rejection of reason or logic. On the contrary, Al-Ghazālī greatly praised mantiq and even considered its study a prerequisite for other sciences. His attack actually uses sharp logic to expose the internal inconsistencies and exaggerated claims of the philosophers (Aini, 2016). Al-Ghazālī's criticism is specifically directed at the metaphysical conclusions that the philosophers claim to have proven through rational demonstration. Al-Ghazālī argued that these claims were not logically proven at all and contradicted the fundamental teachings of Islam. He identified twenty points of "confusion" in their thinking. Of these twenty points, he considered three to be not only wrong, but also leading to disbelief (Lubis & Rozi, 2020):

1. The Eternity of the Universe (Qidam al-'Alam): Philosophers, following the emanation model, argue that the universe is eternal and was not created in time. Al-Ghazālī points out that their rational arguments for this are inconclusive and contradict the doctrine of creation.
2. God's Limited Knowledge: Philosophers argue that God, as an unchanging entity, only knows universal things (kulliyat) and does not know particular things (juz'iyat) that are constantly changing in the world. Al-Ghazālī rejects this as a denial of God's omniscience as affirmed in the Qur'ān.
3. Rejection of Physical Resurrection: Philosophers interpret resurrection in the afterlife allegorically, meaning only spiritual resurrection (of the soul), not physical resurrection. Al-Ghazālī considers this a rejection of explicit revelatory teachings.

Al-Ghazālī's attack was so devastating not because he was a theologian who rejected reason, but because he was a master philosopher-logician who used reason to show the limits of reason itself in the realm of metaphysics. This was a criticism from within that was far more powerful than an external rejection based solely on faith. The impact of Al-Ghazālī's criticism is often the subject of debate. Some historians view him as the figure responsible for the "death" of philosophy (falsafa) as an independent discipline in the Sunni Islamic world. However, this view oversimplifies his complex legacy (Booth, 2018b).

A more nuanced view is that Al-Ghazālī did not kill philosophy, but rather set its limits. He effectively showed that pure reason, without the guidance of revelation, is incapable of reaching certainty in the deepest metaphysical issues. In doing so, he redefined the relationship between philosophy and theology. In this sense, al-Ghazālī exemplifies the wider pattern traced throughout the study, whereby Greek philosophical tools were retained as instruments of reasoning while their metaphysical claims were subjected to sustained theological critique. Rather than being a rival, philosophy (especially logic) became a "servant" to theology. By advocating the use of Aristotelian logic in Islamic disciplines such as theology (kalām) and legal methodology (ushul fiqh), Al-Ghazālī ensured the survival of rational tools within the framework of orthodox theology that he defended. He succeeded in integrating the most useful philosophical tools while rejecting their metaphysical conclusions, which were considered dangerous, a synthesis that proved to be very influential for subsequent generations (Al-Janabi & Kirabaev, 2017).

Conclusion

The journey of Greek philosophy in the formation of early Islamic theology cannot be viewed as a one-sided adoption, but rather as a long dialectical process involving translation, assimilation, adaptation, criticism, and synthesis. The presence of Greek philosophy provided conceptual and methodological tools that enabled Muslim theologians to formulate the basic teachings of Islam with a higher degree of intellectual precision. *Ilm al-Kalam*, which was initially rooted in textual discourse and theological polemics, developed into a systematic rational discipline thanks to



intense dialogue with the Hellenistic tradition. Muʿtazilite rationalism, the mediating positions of the Ashʿariyah and Maturidiyah, and al-Ghazālī's critical intervention together illustrate how Greek philosophy functioned as a permanent interlocutor—both as a source of intellectual assimilation and as an object of theological reaction—within the unfolding trajectory of Islamic thought.

Interestingly, even strong rejections of philosophy, such as those made by Al-Ghazālī, cannot be separated from the logical and philosophical analytical tools adopted from Greece. This confirms that the influence of Hellenism was not only superficial but had penetrated the very structure of Islamic thought itself. Furthermore, the traces of philosophy did not stop at Kalām, but also permeated other disciplines such as *usul fiqh* through the use of *mantiq*, and even found its continuation in philosophical Sufism, especially in Neoplatonic ideas about the soul and emanation in figures such as Ibn 'Arabi. Seen in this light, Greek philosophy was neither simply assimilated without resistance nor rejected in its entirety; rather, the history of its reception in Islam is best understood as a dynamic oscillation between assimilation and reaction, the two poles that structure the broader historical narrative examined in this article. It paved the way for the integration of reason into religious discourse, creating a unique synthesis between revelation and reason, and setting the stage for the development of Islamic sciences in the subsequent era.

Thus, Greek philosophy was not merely an external factor that occasionally exerted influence, but rather a foundation that helped shape the identity of classical Islamic theology. It paved the way for the integration of reason into religious discourse, creating a unique synthesis between revelation and reason, and setting the stage for the development of Islamic sciences in the subsequent era. There is still ample room for future research to examine in greater depth how Aristotelian logic influenced Islamic legal methodology, how the Islamic intellectual experience compares to the Jewish and Christian traditions in dealing with Aristotelianism, and how Neoplatonism continues to live on in Islamic mysticism. All of this shows that Greek philosophy, although often considered an "external challenge", has in fact become an integral part of the Islamic intellectual edifice. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its primary focus on major theological schools and canonical figures, leaving less explored the diversity of regional, sectarian, and non-elite engagements with Hellenistic thought. Future research could therefore extend this analysis through comparative studies across different Islamic traditions or historical periods, as well as through closer examination of how philosophical concepts were operationalised in legal, ethical, and mystical practices beyond formal *kalām* discourse.

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