
UNIT 5 JEWISH AND ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHERS

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit is an attempt to show that during the fifth and sixth centuries, a new civilisation slowly developed and a new political, social, intellectual and religious order arose after the patristic philosophy which is called the philosophy of the Fathers of the Church reached its climax in the system of Augustine. It aims at exposing that the medieval philosophy is not only of those who were ardent members of the Church like Popes, Bishops, Priests and Canonised Men but also there had been philosophers in the medieval ages from other religions like Judaism and Islam.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Scholasticism is a term which generally designates the dominant doctrinal movement in the Western or Latin middle ages. The origin of the word denotes that a 'Scholastic' was, originally, a master teaching in a school. This is a method of theological and philosophical speculation which aims at better understanding and deeper penetration of revealed truths and Christian doctrine through the intellectual processes of analogy, definition, speculation, coordination and systematization of these materials. A man designated as scholastic might be supposed to be learned in the three fields namely, grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. Gradually, the title was given to any learned person whether in the sciences of philosophy and whether a teacher or not. Throughout most of the medieval period, it was a title of respect.

The Scholastic claim that the doctrines of faith and the deliverances of reason agree is gradually modified in two principal ways: the first view is that while some of the dogmas could be explained or rendered intelligible, others transcend reason, the second is that none could be explained for they are not objects of philosophical knowledge at all, the truths of religion lie beyond the reach of reason, and reason cannot fathom them. The latter view which is more extreme amounts to an abandonment of Scholasticism as such and results in a deliverance of philosophy from servitude to dogmatic theology.

Regarding Scholasticism, which is a rational reflection on faith which takes into account Platonic, neo-Platonic and Aristotlean teaching developed first of all among Muslims and Jews and only later among Christians. After the Islamic conquest of Syria, Persia and Egypt; there began a great work of translation of the texts that had been studied in the late Greek philosophical schools into Arabic. It includes a number of dialogues of Plato and Neoplatonic treatises as well as the works of Aristotle. At any rate, as with the Scholastics, there was a great divergence in views among the Islamic philosophers, but some basic characteristics give them a kind of unity. They were very much influenced by several Neo-Platonic writings. They tried to make their philosophy subservient to, and in harmony with Sacred Scripture, Koran. The first great thinkers in this line were the encyclopaedists Al-Kindī (died in 873), the first outstanding Islamic philosopher known as “the philosopher of the Arabs.” and Al-Fārābī (878-950), one of the pre-eminent thinkers of medieval Islam. He was regarded in the Arab world as the greatest philosophical authority after Aristotle. They set a trend for future Arab thinkers by seeing in philosophy a means to correct and purify their religious faith of errors. Thus in the long run, they gave priority to philosophy and not to Scripture.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Explain the term Scholasticism with its later modifications in your own words.

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2) What are the Basic characteristics of Islamic philosophers? Who are the first outstanding philosophers?

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5.2 INDIVIDUAL ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHERS

Apart from the first outstanding Islamic philosophers, the following thinkers played an emphatic role in the Islamic Scholasticism.

AVICENNA (980-1037)

Iranian physician and the most famous and influential of the philosopher-scientists of Islam. He was particularly noted for his contributions in the fields of Aristotelian philosophy and medicine. He composed the *Book of Healing*, a vast philosophical and scientific encyclopaedia, and the *Canon of Medicine* which is best among the most famous books in the history of medicine.

As a general principle, Avicenna held that truth is One and so there could be no real contradiction in philosophy. As a consequence, he sought to harmonise Plato and Aristotle, being assured that there could be no real differences between their points of view. Besides, the revelations of Koran could hardly be at variance with philosophy either. In working out all these harmonies, he came up with his theory of hierarchy of beings and of causes.

As to the hierarchy of beings, he divided the universe into three orders. The lowest order is that of the terrestrial world. Its summit is the human soul. In explaining the make-up of this world, he is a faithful Aristotelian. Act and Potency, matter and form, the four causes were found in his usage. As to the human intellect, he offers some original thinking, separating it into the active and passive intellect. He held that the active intellect is quite separate from the human intellect.

Next order is the celestial world at whose apex is the 'first cause'. As to the Celestial world, he found inspiration in explaining it as much in Aristotle's metaphysics. The heavens consist of a series of crystal spheres into which the various planets and stars are fixed in transparent forms. The turning of these spheres explains the movement of the heavenly bodies across the sky. The revolution of these spheres is accounted for by the fact that each one is provided with an intelligence that sets them in motion. Then, comes God who presides over all as supreme. God is viewed in Aristotelian fashion as pure actuality, first mover and necessary being. His existence is called for by the fact of contingent beings in the world. The goal of philosophy is to know God and to be like God, so far as this is possible. It could be reached, according to Avicenna, by instruction as well as by divine illumination.

AL-GHAZALI (1058-1111)

Al-Ghazali is one of the greatest Islamic jurists, theologians and mystical thinkers. He learned various branches of the traditional Islamic religious sciences in his home town of Tus, in the northern part of Iran. As the intellectual head of the Islamic community, he was busy lecturing on Islamic jurisprudence at the College, and also refuting heresies and responding to questions from all segments of the community. However, Al-Ghazali fell into a serious spiritual crisis and finally left Baghdad, renouncing his career and the world. After wandering in Syria and Palestine for about two years and finishing the pilgrimage to Mecca, he returned to Tus where he was engaged in writing, Sufi practices and teaching his disciples until his death.

With this background, we should not be surprised to learn that his major work *Revivification of Religious Sciences* is still the peak of orthodox Islam and that his main philosophical work is called *The Destruction of Philosophers* and is directed against Avicenna and his school. He is a kind of mystical sceptic, holding that the only way to harmonise faith and reason is to hold that the latter cannot attain truth by itself and that man can only do so by opening himself to mystic illumination. For Al-Ghazālī, the sole valid proof of truth was the authority of the Koran. Since he saw Avicenna's theses on the eternity and necessity of creation as an undermining of the sovereignty of God, he attacked such views saying that they involve ridiculous contradictions. He also taught a type of occasionalism – i.e. he held that creatures do not really act as agents in the full sense of the word; they are mere occasions for God to act through them. He saw God as acting in almost complete disregard of the merits and wishes of creatures, in a very arbitrary manner and was instrumental in giving to Islam much of its spirit of fatalism.

AVERROES (1126-1198)

The violence of Al-Ghazali's anti-philosophical polemic, coupled with the force of his person and reputation effectively put an end to all philosophical activity in Eastern Arabia for quite sometime. Thus the next great Islamic thinker was a man from Spain, Averroes. He is regarded by many as the most important of the Islamic philosophers. He set out to integrate Aristotelian philosophy with Islamic thought. A common theme throughout his writings is that there is no incompatibility between religion and philosophy when both are properly understood.

His major work was *The Destruction of the Destruction*, purporting to be a refutation of Al-Ghazali. He seems to argue that there are two forms of truth, a religious form and a philosophical form. And it does not matter if they point in different directions. There is much in his work also which suggests that religion is inferior to philosophy as a means of attaining knowledge, and that the understanding of religion which ordinary believers can have is very different and impoverished when compared with that available to the philosopher.

He proposed an unusual manner of reconciling reason with faith by his theory of the three orders. Such a theory was necessary, since many of his ideas were in flagrant contradiction with the Koran. According to him, there are three distinct orders of truth which are quite impervious to each other. Thus the Koran, though it is addressed to all men, can be interpreted according to the three orders as follows. In the Vulgar level, that meant for the common people, there is the obvious or literal sense. This is the area of faith and by way of proof oratory is used. Then there is the Mystical order, this is for the theologian. Mystical interpretations are to be aimed at and proofs are to be based on probabilities. Finally, there is the area of Science. This is for the philosopher and here the true meaning is to be discovered by the help of scientific demonstration. In the event of conflict, science must prevail and faith is to be given an allegorical interpretation.

These three meanings are not always harmonisable. One should not worry about this as Averroes holds. Each one should be happy with that level or order of truth which is proportionate to him. Thus all heresies and difficulties are resolved.

CRITICAL REMARKS

One cannot be disappointed by the two extreme attitudes taken by the Islamic thinkers. If Al-Ghazali was anti-intellectual and fideist, Averroes would be violently rationalist and anti-faith. The attempt to harmonise to apparently conflicting views cannot be achieved by a sheer denial of one of these. That is a too easy way out. Most regrettable is Averroes' theory of the three orders of truth. Such a view encourages all manner of dishonesty and superficial eclecticism. Avicenna has a much more balanced approach and argues for the unity of Truth. But his system is as fragile and ambiguous as it is attractive and leaves much unsaid.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) How does Avicenna divide the universe into three orders As the hierarchy of beings?

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2) Explain how Al-Ghazali differs from Avicenna. What is the meaning of Occasionalism?

3) What was the Proposal of Averroes to reconcile reason with faith?

5.3 JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

The term Jewish philosophy refers to various kinds of reflective thoughts engaged in by persons identified as being Jews, in one sense or another. At times, as in the Middle Ages, this meant any methodical and disciplined thought, whether on general philosophical subjects or on specifically Judaic themes pursued by Jews. The first really great Jewish thinker, whose writings were to play an important part on the formation of Scholasticism was Avicenna (Solomon Ibn Gabirol) who lived about 1021-1070 in Spain. He is one of the foremost Hebrew poets of the middle ages. He elaborated the theory of emanation. He held that all things emanate successively from the will of God, the simple and ineffable Being. From God, the soul of the universe or cosmic spirit composed of universal matter and universal form is emanated. And there are the angels and spiritual souls composed of spiritual matter and spiritual form. Finally emanated corporeal beings composed of prime matter with corruptible form. Jewish rationalism was given an even greater development by Maimonides in the 12th cent and his work was even more influential in the making of the Scholastic mind.

Characteristics of Jewish Philosophy

1. The main concern is to deal with the ultimate questions of the nature of the universe and of the human condition.
2. Judaism represents a constructive synthesis of biblical monotheism and Greek philosophy.
3. The earliest written source for Jewish ideas is the Hebrew Bible which has been considered as a divinely revealed or inspired text.
4. Reason and philosophy were represented by Plato, Aristotle and the neo-Platonists, while faith was represented by the Old Testament and the *Talmud*.
5. It has got certain common strands notably the belief in a single, personal God, creator of the universe and of man, caring for his creation, intervening in history and sanctioning an elaborate code of social regulations.

MOSES MAIMONIDES

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) was a Spanish Jew, jurist and physician, the foremost intellectual figure of medieval Judaism. His first major work was a commentary on the Mishna (Hebrew: “Repeated Study”), the oldest authoritative post biblical collection and codification of Jewish oral laws. His contributions in religion, philosophy and medicine have influenced Jewish and non-Jewish scholars alike.

Maimonides held that there was a necessary harmony between faith and philosophy – i.e. between the revelation transmitted through Moses and wisdom as developed by Aristotle. In case of conflict, reason seems to take primacy since it has the duty to explain, though it cannot contradict revelation. In any case, contradictions are to be resolved by allegorical interpretations of the Bible. For we must hold fast to what is given to us by sense-perception or can be a bit too far in his attempts to rationalise their faith and some French Jews even tried to get the Inquisition to quash his ‘heresies’.

Maimonides assembles proofs for God’s existence, taken from Aristotle and from Avicenna. He invites us to reflect on the attributes or names we ascribe to God. In the first place, he points out that we must not take literally the anthropomorphic description of God given in the Old Testament, as for instance, ‘jealous’ and ‘angry’. He went a step further in this to add that we know rather what God is not, than what he is. He is of the view that we can assert nothing of God’s real Nature. Finally, Maimonides said we could attribute to God only titles that concern his action on the world – such as Creator, Provident and so on – since they designate him as unknowable cause of the world under various aspects. Like Aristotle, he would say that God is Pure Thought, perfectly knowing Himself.

Maimonides also taught a kind of restricted immortality which is reserved only to philosophers and saints. He accepted Avicenna’s theory of degrees and concluded that spirituality is only proper to the two higher levels of intelligence. Since only the philosopher and the saint attain this level of intelligence, only they can know life after death. This immortality is, however, impersonal: it involves the ultimate absorption of the intelligence concerned into the Active Intellect. He added that there would be, eventually, a special resurrection of all other men, but said that this was an article of faith.

LEVI BEN GERSON (GERSONIDES)

Levi Ben Gerson (1288-1344), known in Latin as Magister Leo de Baneolis, was active in the Province of Bagnol, Orange, and for a short time, in Avignon, but little else is known about his life. **Work:** *Milhamot Adonai*.

Levi Ben Gerson agrees with the Aristotelians that the acquisition of the intellectual knowledge is the final goal of human life. He states that it is the purpose of his work ‘to investigate very precious and obscure questions on which depend the great fundamental principles which bring human to intellectual happiness.’ He addresses six topics of importance: immortality of the soul, prediction of the future (in dreams, divination and prophecy), divine knowledge of particulars, divine providence, celestial bodies and their relation to God, and creation.

HASDAI CRESCAS

Born in Barcelona, Hasdai Crescas was active in Spain during the second half of the fourteenth century and the first decade of the fifteenth. His times were marked by the persecution of Jews and by false charges against them. In 1367, Crescas, then a merchant and communal leader in Barcelona was imprisoned with others on the made-up charge of desecrating the Host, but he was soon released. In 1383 he was a member of a delegation that negotiated the removal of Jewish privileges with Pedro IV, king of Aragon. In 1387 he became closely associated with the court and received the title “member of the royal household.” He died Ca. 1412. **Work:** *Adonai* (Light of the Lord).

Hasdai Crescas was among those who accepted the notion that there are basic principles or roots of all scriptural beliefs and they are: existence, unity and incorporeity of God. These are followed by six scriptural principles on which the validity of the Torah depends: God’s knowledge of existent things, providence, omnipotence, prophecy, human freedom and purpose of the Torah. Next come true beliefs which are divided into those that do not depend upon any specific commandment and those that do. The former consists of: creation of the world, immortality of the soul, reward and punishment, resurrection of the dead, eternity of the Torah, Superiority of the prophecy of Moses, the efficacy of the Urim and Thumin worn by the High Priest in predicating the future, and the coming of the Messiah; the latter consists of such beliefs as the efficacy of prayer and of repentance. Of special philosophic interest is Crescas’ critique of certain Aristotelian physical and metaphysical notions which Maimonides had presented in twenty-five propositions. The Aristotelians had defined place as the inner surface of a surrounding body; Crescas identified space with dimensionality. The Aristotelians had denied the existence of a vacuum; Crescas affirmed it. The Aristotelians believed in the existence of one world; Crescas, that of many. The Aristotelian had denied that an actual infinite can exist; Crescas argued for its existence. Crescas also believed that human actions are produced by a decision of the will.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What are the Characteristics of Jewish Philosophy?

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2) How does Moses Maimonides explain the Nature of God and theory of Immortality?

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5.4 LET US SUM UP

After the establishment of the fundamental doctrines and the triumph of religious doctrines, there began a period of philosophical construction devoted to the elaboration of a philosophy in which the subject-matter and guiding principles were determined by religious dogma. This religious philosophy – which constitutes the largest part of the philosophy of the Middle Ages – had for its aim the exposition, systematization, and demonstration of the religious dogmas and the construction of a theory of the world and of life on that basis. The thinkers who performed this service were called schoolmen and their systems, scholastic philosophy. Scholastic philosophy derived its doctrinal commitments from religious dogmas as formulated by religious thinkers of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, but they cast these in a philosophical mould of dialogue which bore the stamp of the methods and concepts of Greek philosophy.

5.5 KEY WORDS

Act	: Act is the state of being or perfection.
Potency	: Potency is the capacity for act.
Possibility	: Possibility is that which is not yet but can be.

5.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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5.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Scholasticism is a term which generally designates the dominant doctrinal movement in the Western or Latin middle ages. The origin of the word denotes that a 'Scholastic' was, originally, a master teaching in a school. This is a method of theological and philosophical speculation which aims at better understanding and deeper penetration of revealed truths and Christian doctrine through the intellectual processes of analogy, definition, speculation, coordination and systematization of these materials. A man designated as scholastic might be supposed to be learned in the three fields namely, grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. Gradually, the title was given to any learned person whether in the sciences of philosophy and whether a teacher or not. Throughout most of the medieval period, it was a title of respect.

2. The Islamic Philosophers were very much influenced by several Neo-Platonic writings. They tried to make their philosophy subservient to, and in harmony with Sacred Scripture, Koran. The first great thinkers in this line were the encyclopaedists Al-Kindī (died in 873), the first outstanding Islamic philosopher known as “the philosopher of the Arabs.” and Al-Fārābī’ (878-950), one of the pre-eminent thinkers of medieval Islam. He was regarded in the Arab world as the greatest philosophical authority after Aristotle. They set a trend for future Arab thinkers by seeing in philosophy a means to correct and purify their religious faith of errors. Thus in the long run, they gave priority to philosophy and not to Scripture.

Check Your Progress 2

1. As to the hierarchy of beings, Avicenna divided the universe into three orders. The lowest order is that of the terrestrial world. Its summit is the human soul. In explaining the make-up of this world, he is a faithful Aristotelian. Act and Potency, matter and form, the four causes were found in his usage. As to the human intellect, he offers some original thinking, separating it into the active and passive intellect. He held that the active intellect is quite separate from the human intellect. Next order is the celestial world at whose apex is the ‘first cause’. As to the Celestial world, he found inspiration in explaining it as much in Aristotle’s metaphysics. The heavens consist of a series of crystal spheres into which the various planets and stars are fixed in transparent forms. The turning of these spheres explains the movement of the heavenly bodies across the sky. The revolution of these spheres is accounted for by the fact that each one is provided with an intelligence that sets them in motion. Then, comes God who presides over all as supreme. God is viewed in Aristotelian fashion as pure actuality, first mover and necessary being. His existence is called for by the fact of contingent beings in the world. The goal of philosophy is to know God and to be like God, so far as this possible. It could be reached, according to Avicenna, by instruction as well as by divine illumination.
2. Al-Ghazālī is different from Avicenna in being the orthodox Islamic philosopher and that his main philosophical work is called *The Destruction of Philosophers* and is directed against Avicenna and his school. He is a kind of mystical sceptic, holding that the only way to harmonise faith and reason is to hold that the latter cannot attain truth by itself and that man can only do so by opening himself to mystic illumination. For Al-Ghazālī, the sole valid proof of truth was the authority of the Koran. Since he saw Avicenna’s theses on the eternity and necessity of creation as an undermining of the sovereignty of God, he attacked such views saying that they involve ridiculous contradictions. He also taught a type of occasionalism – i.e. he held that creatures do not really act as agents in the full sense of the word; they are mere occasions for God to act through them. He saw God as acting in almost complete disregard of the merits and wishes of creatures, in a very arbitrary manner and was instrumental in giving to Islam much of its spirit of fatalism.
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Check Your Progress 3

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