

Lecture 9

Knowledge and the House of Wisdom

Review

- **Aim of last four lectures**
- To examine some of the mechanisms by which the regions of the Islamic empire came to be constituted as a culture region
- Looking at the popular and elitist forces that worked to establish the region as *Dar-al-Islam*

Structure of today's lecture

1. History & significance of knowledge in Islam
2. The establishment of the House of Wisdom
3. Key thinkers and debates
4. Relationship between knowledge power
5. How the cultivation of knowledge worked to establish an Imperial Islamic imagination

1. Islamic learning in history

- Rosenthal: Islamic learning has long history
- Tradition began during Muhammad's life and prospered after his death
- Concentrated period of intellectual ferment during and following the High Caliphate Period
- During: House of Wisdom in Baghdad
- After: Cairo, Basra, Cordoba and Timbuktu

Impossible task

- Islamic philosophy and learning cannot be covered within a single lecture
- Tradition is as varied and as complicated as we find in Greek philosophy
- Greek and Islamic philosophy characterised by wide array of schools and movements operating in high imperial context

Knowledge in the Quran

- Do not rush to recite before the revelation is fully complete but say 'lord increase my knowledge' (20: 114)
- People we have created you all from a single man and a single women, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another (49: 13)
- What about someone who worships devoutly during the night, bowing down, standing in prayer, ever mindful of the life to come, hoping for his lord's mercy? Say, 'How can those who know be equal to those how do not know?' Only those who have understanding will take heed (39: 9).

Islamicisation of Greek thought

- Influenced by absorption of long-standing centres of Hellenistic thought
- Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt
- Baghdad influenced by Persian culture
- Influenced by Byzantines in terms of theology, philosophy and logic
- Needed to catch-up with Christian and Jewish traditions

2. Key thinkers

- Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809-870)
- al-Kindi (801-873)
- al-Farabi (872-951)

Hunayn Ibn Ishaq

- Founded school of translation 9th century
- Assyrian Christian born in Iraq
- Developed original approach
- Worked from multiple manuscripts
- Created immense collection
- Focused on Greek and Sanskrit texts
- Made Greek philosophic and scientific heritage more freely and accurately available in Arabic
- Wrote numerous treatise on the practice of translation



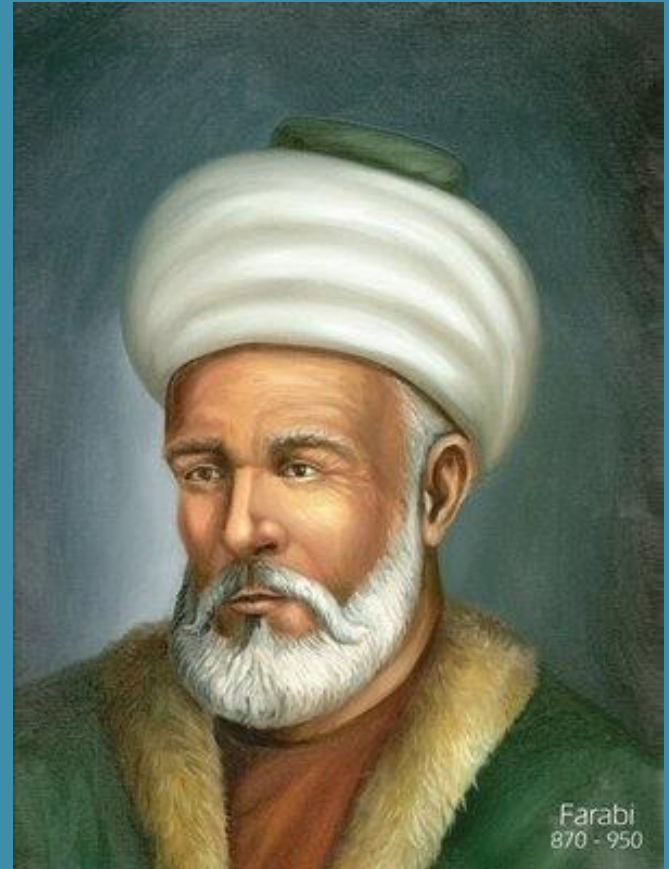
Al-Kindi

- Treatise on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*
- Explaining Aristotle's ideas and terminology
- Logic can only elaborate truth
- Cannot discover truth
- Truth must be revealed
- Philosopher's role to extend religious ideas
- Similar to Mu'tazilites
- Influences Plato: idea of God similar 'Form of Equal'
- Working at intersection of philosophy and theology



al-Farabi

- human reason divine gift
- Should be used to seek divine truth
- Philosophy not subordinate to revelation
- Prophecy and philosophy two ways to truth
- Reason underlies cosmos
- Truth of world can be understood through essential postulates
- Reflects Arab philosophical tradition
- Not just ideas but a world view
- All phenomenon expressions of same cosmological order
- Medicine, astronomy, biology, mathematics, alchemy



3. House of wisdom

- Movement begun by al-Mansur (754)
- Formalised by Ma'mun
- Centre for humanities and science
- Brought scholars and texts from around the empire to study, translate and write
- Largest library in the world



Rationale

- Religious: learning is a form of piety
- Personal: interest of enlightened Caliphs
- Practical: astronomy, medicine, geography, law, economics
- Status: learning an established imperial tradition
- Political: promoting Islamic unity

Ma'mun (813-33)

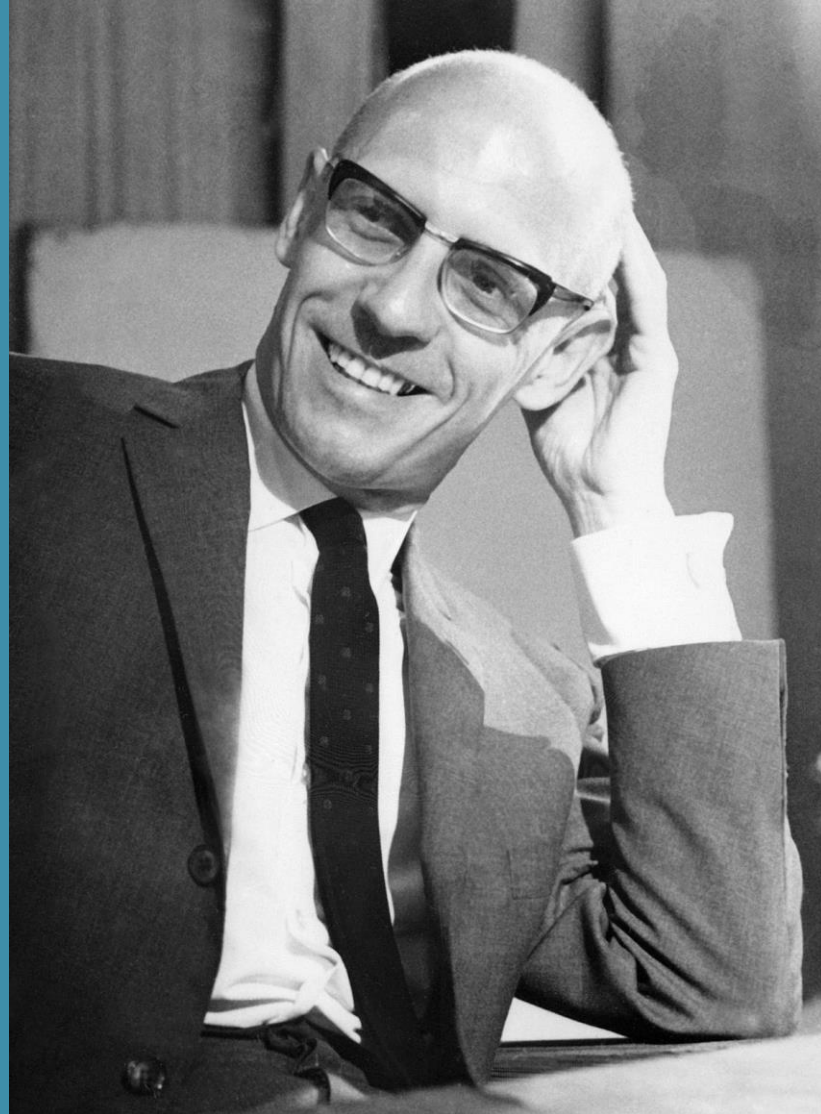
- Period of intense fragmentation
- Civil war with brother
- Shia revolt in Kufah
- Unity through religious authority
- Hellenistic reasoning and Mu'tazilites
- Provide a universalist conception of world
- Underlying logic transcends sectarianism
- Creates strong differentiation between domain of God and domain of humans
- Distinction paves the way for caliphal authority

Philosophy and the Caliphate

- Ma'mun invested in infrastructure and personnel of House of Wisdom and forcefully propagated its ideas
- Philosophy and theology provided a particular vision of Caliphate and caliphal power
- If universe is rational and all elements expressions of overall logic
- Then logic is an appropriate means to rule on all matters
- Logical argument very persuasive
- A means to justify political decisions and contest counter-claims to authority

4. Power/knowledge

Michel Foucault:
How does
knowledge
make that which
is contingent
seem
necessary?



Example: the University Exam

Exam has a dual purpose:

1. It creates knowledge about the student
2. Reinforces the legitimacy of the knowledge on which they are being tested

The act of testing establishes the knowledge they are being tested on as legitimate knowledge *and* tests the students capacity to achieve it

Discipline

- Knowledge not only establishes and reinforces social norms
- Also convinces individuals to adhere to those norms
- No need to monitor or manage student
- Students will self-discipline in order to pass
- The exam operates as a social mechanism by which 'what counts' as legitimate knowledge is reinforced and internalised not by the institution (the university and/or the state) but by the students themselves

Relevance

- House of Wisdom had symbolic and political function
- Symbolic: represented imperial status
- Foucault: knowledge also political



Power, knowledge and the Caliphate

Falsafa used to support particular political vision

1. Authority absolute
2. Rule unifying
3. Logic a guiding principle

Ma'mun

1. Propagated Mu'tazilite theology
2. Persecuted doctrinal divergence
3. Attempted to establish official knowledge
4. Unsuccessful: knowledge highly contested

5. Knowledge and the Imperial imagination

- Unsuccessful in establishing official state knowledge
- Knowledge created still had significant impact on Arab identity beyond the small intellectual circles in which they circulated
- Three areas: schools, popularity of logic

Schools

- Abbasid period provided public education to rich and poor
- During this period that 'madrassa' established
- Over 300 schools in Baghdad
- Schools an effective institution for disciplining society (popular and elite) in official knowledge

Philosophy and education

- Familiarity with Greek thought a sign of being 'well-mannered' and educated
- Merchants, military officers, administrators and notables sent children to House of Wisdom to learn with renowned thinkers
- Similar to Grand tour in Europe
- Learning with scholars a means to improve one's status and improve opportunity

Popularisation of logic

- Many Islamic thinkers, jurists and intellectuals disagreed with Falsafa
- But Falsafa use of logic became widespread
- Logical argument held in high esteem
- Logic the 'proper' manner to debate and discuss issues at court