Introduction

Referring to his major philosophical work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) confided to one of his colleagues that if his book had been written during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Al-Ma'mun – from 813 to 832 – it would have had profound repercussions in all of the Islamic intellectual world. Simply, an author's pride or even arrogance? To evaluate this judgement, and in the first place to properly understand it, we must recall the nature of the reign of the caliph Al-Ma'mun and what it meant, in particular, for the emergence and development of philosophical thought in Islamic civilisation.

The name Al-Ma'mun is associated with the House of Wisdom (*bayt al hikma*), an institute he created in the year 832, in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbassids, to accommodate the scholars who had the task of translating into Arabic the different Greek sciences – the mathematics of Euclid and Archimedes, the logic and physics of Aristotle, etc.: in short, philosophy and the disciplines it envelops.

We can consider this foundation of the House of Wisdom to mark a beginning in relation to the tradition of thought that was to emerge from the encounter between Greek and Hellenistic philosophy on the one hand, and on the other the spiritual universe of Islam: that which came to be known under the Arabized Greek name of *falsafa*. And whose consequence was the creation of a new class of scholars: the *falâsifa* (singular: *faylasûf*).

It didn't go without saying, when one was the 'Commander of the faithful', to even admit the idea of a 'wisdom' that could come from those – the Greeks – who were, after all, only pagans! Legend has dramatized this reticence, this resistance even faced with a thought that was foreign to the universe of the Revelation in the form of a dream of the Caliph. He saw in a dream, it is said, the philosopher Aristotle himself who had come especially to reassure him and to assure him that ultimately there was barely any contradiction between religion and philosophy, and that the latter could be useful for understanding the former better. Such a divine sign was certainly needed to justify the foundation of an institution dedicated to 'wisdom' that was positioned outside the traditional religious sciences.

There was a great tension between two possible attitudes. On the one hand the attitude that would have consisted in saying that all wisdom was contained within the religious sciences organically linked to the Revelation: books that said the same thing would be superfluous then, and those that said something different would be potentially dangerous. On the other hand, the attitude of openness and acceptance of the movement, which had for its own part at least two prophetic traditions: the tradition that commanded Muslims to go in search of knowledge/science, be it in China; another – which precisely drew on the concept of 'wisdom' – that declares that this wisdom is a 'lost property' of the Muslim, who then has the right to consider himself more entitled to it than anyone else, wherever he may find it.

It is because the reign of the caliph Al-Ma'mun represented the victory of openness and movement, and because the House of Wisdom marked – symbolically – the birth of a spirit of free research and concern for the truth that Muhammad Iqbal wanted to place his philosophical work, over a millennia later, under its aegis so to speak.

We must also add that this evocation of the time of Al-Ma'mun and its 'philosophical' action is normal for the reformist Islamic thinkers of the nineteenth century, within the so-called modernist thought of the new Islamic philosophers. Not in the sense of a nostalgic evocation of a Golden Age, but as the expression of a possibility, always still to be realised, of a restless and questioning – open – thought. We thus find very often in the writings of Sayyid Amir Ali (1849–1929), who was the first in British India to create an Indo-Islamic political organ, the National Muhammadan Association, the idea that the true spirit of Islam was fully expressed during what was the period of emergence of the ideas of rationalist theology of the Mu'tazilite school, which inspired the actions of the caliph. Considering that Al-Ma'mun was for the Islamic world what Augustus was for Rome or Pericles for Athens, Amir Ali pays homage to this school whose expansion was encouraged by the caliph in these terms:

> Mu'tazilaism, is unquestionably the most rationalistic and liberal phase of Islâm. In its liberalism, in its sympathy with all phases of human thought, its grand hopefulness and expansiveness, it represents the ideas of the philosophers of the House of Mohammed who reflected the thoughts of the Master.[1]

And when it is a question, for example, of reflecting on the status of women and of discovering within the very movement deployed by the principles of Islam, what for current times would represent a clear insight into what religion says on this matter; it is to a reading of Mu'tazilism that he returns to conclude his lesson with, 'The Mu'tazila is, by conviction, a strict monogamist.'[2]

It is by inscribing his thought within modern and contemporary philosophy from Descartes to Bergson, and by making it face the scientific revolutions – relativity, quantum mechanics… – that had overthrown the categories of time, space and causality, that Muhammad Iqbal, this *faylasûf* of today, renewed for our own era the approach that had been at the very foundation of the House of Wisdom. The 'profound repercussions' that he could have expected in response to his thought, in the time and conditions that gave birth to the *falsafa*, are simply the resumption of this movement, the renaissance of the spirit of restlessness, whose necessity so current at the end of the nineteenth century, makes itself felt acutely.

Primarily, what we know about Muhammad Iqbal, is that he was one of the main inspirations behind the idea of an independent Pakistan. As such, he occupies in this country the position of a 'founding father' so to speak. But his thought certainly goes a great deal beyond the framework within which it emerged – that of the struggle against colonialism for the freedom of India as well as the violent clash between Hindu and Islamic nationalisms that led to the rupture we know of today. The philosophical oeuvre written by Muhammad Iqbal is particularly enlightening, and useful today, because we have reason to reflect on the conditions of modernity in Islamic societies confronted with the necessity – that his thought helps to convert into a task – of renewing its acquaintance with the spirit of permanent reform and openness as well as with the values that express this spirit: the affirmation of the individual, the value accorded to judgement unencumbered by the weight of tradition, the scientific spirit, the idea of progress, freedom….