

Part Two

THE FIRST WAVE OF HELLENISM

CHAPTER SIX

POLITICS AND THEOLOGY UNDER THE 'ABBĀSIDS

When the 'Abbāsid dynasty came to power in 750, their claim to the caliphate was based on the assertion that the imamate had passed from 'Alī to Muḥammad ibn-al-Ḥanafiyya, then to his son Abū-Hāshim, and that the latter had designated as his successor the father of the first two 'Abbāsid caliphs. Before long, however, this particular claim to legitimacy seems to have been found unsatisfactory, and the caliph al-Mahdī (775–85) replaced it by the claim that the rightful successor of the Prophet had been his uncle al-'Abbās, and that the succession had then continued in his family, the 'Abbāsids. How long this claim was maintained is not clear.

An important feature of the new dynasty was the growth of Persian influence. Persian clients had rallied in large numbers to the black banners of the 'Abbāsid revolt, and so it is not surprising that many of the subordinate officials in the new administration were Persians or persianized Aramaeans and exercised considerable power. Outstanding was the Persian family of Barmak (the Barmakids or Barmecides), whose head was vizier from 786 to 803. The transfer of the capital of the caliphate eastwards from Damascus to Iraq—to Baghdad after its foundation in 763—affected the internal distribution of power in favour of the eastern provinces. It also meant that the main work of administration was in the hands of the class of 'secretaries' or civil servants, who had continued to exist as a class in Iraq since before the Muslim conquest, and had retained much of the technique of government used in the Persian empire under the Sasanians. These men, too, were the bearers of the Persian or rather persianized culture of Iraq. Some were Christians, most probably nominal Zoroastrians, because Zoroastrianism, officially recognized and almost a department of government, was in decline as a religion. Thus the secretaries had a culture of which they were proud, including important Hellenistic elements, but, apart from the Christians, they had little vital religion. When they saw the best appointments in their profession going to Muslims, many of them accepted Islam outwardly.

Prominent among the Persian secretaries was Ibn-al-Muqaffa' (d.c.759).¹ He is regarded as one of the creators of Arabic prose through his numerous translations into Arabic from Persian. These included works on administrative practice and court ceremonial, as well as a history of the Persian kings. His best-known book is *Kalila and Dimna*, a collection of Indian fables in which much practical wisdom is put into the mouths of animals. He expressed his dislike of the dominant Islamic and Arab tradition by adopting a standpoint which may be labelled Manichaean, and among his works is one attacking the Qur'ān. For a time other Persian secretaries also found Manichaeism a useful way of emphasizing their distinct identity. From about 779 to 786, however, there was an official persecution of Zindīqs or 'dualistic heretics', which was largely directed against Manichaeism of this type. The traditional Manichaeans, of whom there were a few, seem to have been little affected by the persecution. Some secretaries then found a less dangerous way of expressing their position; they produced literary works aimed at the depreciation of all things Arab. This is known as the Shu'ūbite movement, and is mainly a literary phenomenon.

The class of secretaries had rivals for power in the class of religious intellectuals which was emerging within the 'general religious movement' and may by anticipation be called the class of ulema ('*ulamā*'). Many of these men, especially those interested in legal questions, had supported the 'Abbāsids against the Umayyads. The 'Abbāsids respected their views and were prepared to select judges from their ranks, though they also brought pressure to bear on them to overcome their disagreements and adopt common principles. The rivalry between the secretaries and the ulema came to be linked with that between the Persian and Arabic cultural traditions and also with that between Shi'ism and what eventually became Sunnism. The essential difference between Shi'ism and Sunnism with regard to this rivalry is that, where the Shi'ites in difficulties sought a divinely-inspired leader, an imam, their opponents held that salvation came through carefully following the divine law as expressed in the Qur'ān and in the *sunna* or example of the Prophet. Since the ulema were accepted as the accredited interpreters of the divine law, the Sunnite position gave them great power.

By the reign of the caliph al-Ma'mūn (813-33) the unity of the empire was felt to be threatened by the opposition of the rival groups of interests—the secretaries, Shi'ites and Persians on the one hand, and the ulema, the Sunnites and the Arabs on the other.² Al-Ma'mūn in 817 tried to reconcile the opposing groups by designating as his heir the man recognized as imam by many Shi'ites, but unfortunately this man died in the following year. Later al-Ma'mūn tried to find a theological compromise by demanding that many persons in impor-

tant positions (such as judges and court officials) should publicly profess their belief in the doctrine that the Qur'ān was the created word of God, not his uncreated word. This piece of apparent hair-splitting is relevant to the conflict just outlined. If the Qur'ān is created, God could presumably have created it other than it is, whereas, if it is uncreated it presumably expresses something of his own being which is unchangeable. If the Qur'ān could have been created other than it is, the work of the ulema in interpreting it loses much of its authority; and a divinely-inspired imam (caliph) would be entitled to say how the law was to be changed. In practice this would almost certainly mean more power for the caliph's ministers and secretaries. The policy of demanding a profession of belief in the createdness of the Qur'ān continued in force until about 850, and is known as the *Mihna* or 'inquisition'. The reason for its abandonment is probably that it failed to reconcile the opposing groups, despite the fact that nearly all the ulema made the profession, apparently out of fear.

Al-Ma'mūn's views were very like those of the Zaydites.³ These are spoken of as a sect by the heresiographers, but they were a trend of thought rather than a closely-knit sect. One of their doctrines was that the rightful imam must be a member of the family of the Prophet (or more precisely a descendant of 'Alī and Fāṭima) who had publicly claimed the imamate and had made good his claim by the sword. Al-Ma'mūn, though not a descendant of 'Alī, had made good his claim by the sword. Moreover, besides being the first caliph to make use of the term 'imam' with its Shi'ite flavour, he seems to have held that the imam should be the 'most excellent' (*afḍal*) of the community; and another point of Zaydite teaching was that 'Alī was the rightful successor of Muḥammad because he was the 'most excellent' and not simply because he was 'designated'. This formulation enabled the Zaydites to say that Abū-Bakr and 'Umar were truly caliphs, since they had been accepted as such by 'Alī despite their 'inferiority' to him. The Zaydites are classified among the Shi'ites because of their views about 'Alī. Their name is derived from a great-grandson of 'Alī and Fāṭima called Zayd who led an unsuccessful revolt against the Umayyads in 740. Several revolts against the 'Abbāsids led by descendants of 'Alī and Fāṭima are also reckoned as Zaydite, but the elaboration of Zaydite doctrine was chiefly the work of persons not involved in revolts. There is also some obscurity about the dividing line between Zaydism and Mu'tazilism (to be discussed in chapter 8). Some leading Mu'tazilites were closely associated with al-Ma'mūn's administration, and Mu'tazilites were chiefly responsible for the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'ān which was at the centre of the 'inquisition'.

The main body of Shi'ites in the ninth century, though much divided among themselves, are mostly called by the nickname of

Rāfiḍites ('deserters') by their opponents, because they 'deserted' Abū-Bakr and 'Umar, the two shaykhs, that is denied that they were rightful caliphs, or because they 'deserted' Zayd. It is preferable to call them Imāmites, since those who called themselves by this name after about 900 (see chapter 9) accepted these earlier men as their theological predecessors. It is difficult to know what were the political aims of such persons during the first century or so of 'Abbāsīd rule. Later Imāmites held that the imamate was handed on from father to son in the line of al-Ḥusayn until the 'occultation' of the twelfth imam in 874; and this suggests that each of these imams in turn claimed to be the legitimate ruler of the Islamic empire. This cannot be the case, however, since the 'Abbāsīds would have put dangerous rivals to death, whereas they only placed one imam under house-arrest. On the contrary it is recorded that a scholar defended Imāmite views against a Zaydite in the presence of al-Ma'mūn himself. The most likely view is that the early Imāmites were not arguing on behalf of a particular imam but in favour of an absolutist conception of the caliphate, one in which the imam or caliph, because he has been 'designated' by his predecessor, receives his authority from above, as it were, and not from any electors or from the oath of allegiance of the Muslims.⁴

NOTES

1. *EP*², art. Ibn (al-)Muḳaffa' (F. Gabrieli); *Formative Period*, 171f.
2. *Formative Period*, 173-9.
3. *Ibid.*, 162-6.
4. *Ibid.*, 157-62.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ATTRACTION OF GREEK THOUGHT

Within the culture associated with the Islamic religion there has always been a tendency to maintain that Islam is self-sufficient and that in Qur'ān and Ḥadīth it contains in essentials all the religious and moral truth required by all humanity to the end of time. Muslims have accordingly been hesitant about accepting ideas from other intellectual traditions, and especially from the Judaeo-Christian tradition because of the theory they developed that the Jewish and Christian scriptures had been 'corrupted'. Even material derived from Biblical sources—such as the genealogy from Abraham back to Adam in Ibn-Hishām's life of Muḥammad—is not acknowledged as such. It is thus all the more noteworthy to find it openly admitted that much was borrowed from the Hellenistic tradition. Yet even here the actual influence was more extensive than was admitted, while in the end much of what was borrowed was rejected or treated as of minor importance. The admitted borrowings came by way of translations of Greek works and original compositions in Arabic in the Greek philosophical and scientific tradition. The unadmitted borrowings are found in the development of the discipline of 'philosophical theology' or Kalām.

A system of Hellenistic education had been established in Iraq under the Sasanians and was continued under the Muslims. The main subject of instruction was probably medicine; but philosophy and other 'Greek sciences' were always taught as well. The teaching was mainly in the hands of Christians, and the best-known college was at Gundē-Shāpūr (about 150 km north-east of Basra). Later, when a hospital was set up in Baghdad, there were probably philosophical lectures in connection with the medical teaching. This system of Hellenistic education was thus complete in itself, and was spread over a number of institutions.

Even before the inauguration of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate a beginning had been made of translating Greek scientific and philosophical works into Arabic. At first the choice of works depended probably on