Introduction:
Al-Shahrastānī, Isma‘ilism and Philosophy

Tāj al-Din Abu’l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) has long been known in modern scholarship as the author of the Kitāb al-Milal wa’l-nihāl, a comprehensive survey of the religions, sects and philosophical schools, first edited by W. Cureton in 1842–1846.¹ Although written from a distinctly Islamic point of view, the book has continued to attract attention and admiration for its non-polemical objectivity and the wide range of its investigation of the currents of human belief and religious thought. Its chapters on the non-Muslim faiths have been described as ‘the high point of Muslim histories of religion’.² A modern French translation of the book with full annotation has been sponsored by UNESCO with a preface paying tribute to the author’s spirit of tolerance.³

Al-Shahrastānī’s major work on scholastic Muslim theology, the Kitāb Niḥayat al-ṣiʿām fīʾl-ilm al-kalām, was first published by A. Guillaume in 1934. It revealed his searching interest in the basic questions of Islamic theology and reflected his expert learning in the Ash’ari school tradition in which he had been brought up. As an outstanding Shāfiʿi Ash’ari scholar, he had indeed taught for three years (924/1517 – 927/1520) at the Shāfiʿi Niẓāmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad made famous by the earlier teaching activity of al-Ghazzālī there.

A different aspect of al-Shahrastānī’s religious thought was first highlighted by M.R. Jalālī Nāʿīni and M.T. Dānishpazhūh in the 1960s. Both scholars noted definite Shiʿi and, more specifically, Ismaʿili views in some of his works. These confirmed charges by several Sunni contemporaries of al-Shahrastānī that he, with all his erudition in the religious sciences, adhered to ‘heretical doctrine’. Ābū Saʿīd al-Shāfiʿī (d. 562/1166), who had heard him teach, reported that he was accused of inclining to the ‘people of the mountain fortresses’, i.e. the Niẓāmī Ismaʿili in Iran, and of spreading their ‘heretical’ teaching.

Al-Shahrastānī’s Ismaʿili views have since been examined in detail by a number of scholars. They are most significant in three of his extant works. The first is a Maḥfīz, a sermon in Persian on the two worlds of Creation and Order, delivered by him in Khuwārizm. It was first edited by Nāʿīni and has been translated into French and analysed by Diane Steigerwald. The second is the Qurʾan commentary Maḥfīz al-āsrār wa-maṣābīḥ al-’abrār composed late in his life. Here he mentions

having met a ‘pious servant of God’ who taught him the true methods and principles of Qurʾanic exegesis, affirms the divine authority of the ahl al-bayt, the Family of the Prophet, to interpret the Qurʾan, and in some passages uses Ismaʿili terms and concepts in his exegesis. The extant part of the commentary has been published in facsimile and has been analysed in detail in a series of articles by G. Monnot. A critical edition is under preparation by M. ‘Ali Ādharshab, of which the first volume has already appeared. The third work is al-Shahrastānī’s refutation of Ibn Sīnā’s theology entitled Kitāb al-Muṣāraḥa, first edited by Suhayr Muhammad Mukhtar, and which is here re-edited with an English translation. The key thesis espoused by al-Shahrastānī in this work is the absolute transcendence of God above all being and comprehension as taught by the Ismaʿili tradition. Its formulation tallies closely with doctrines he ascribed to the older Ismaʿiliya or Bāṭinīyya in his Kitāb al-Milāt wa-l-nihāl.

None of al-Shahrastānī’s contemporary Sunni critics suggested that he, while holding what they regarded as heretical views, actually joined the Ismaʿili community. Born and educated as a Shāfiʿi Sunni, he continued to identify with the Sunni community and followed the Shāfiʿi ritual and legal practice to the end of his life. Yet his concept of Sunnism evidently moved far away from the contemporaneous orthodox understanding of it and expanded to allow Shiʿi veneration of the Family of the Prophet and recognition of the religious authority

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7 Diane Steigerwald, Majlis: Discours sur l’ordre et la création (Saint-Nicolas, Québec, 1998).

of the Shi'i Imams. In his Qur'an commentary the breadth of his concept expressed itself in an eclectic use of Sunni and Shi'i sources and a range of varying avenues of exegesis. In his *Majlis* and the *Musara'a* his Isma'ili thought prevails more consistently. Al-Shahrastānī can thus be described as Sunni socially and communally, but as Shi'i and Isma'ili in some of his core beliefs and religious thought.

In his *Kitāb al-Milāl wa l-nihāyat* al-Shahrastānī describes the teaching of the 'old Bāṭinīyya' in some detail and an objective, detached manner. He then goes on to state that the followers of the 'new preaching' (*dā'wa jadīda*), i.e. the Nizārī Isma'īlis in Iran, had abandoned this teaching when al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṣabbāh began to recruit men and fortified himself in castles. Al-Ḥasan then concentrated entirely on arguing the need of mankind for a truthful Imam at all times and on explaining the way of identifying him. Al-Shahrastānī quotes the gist of al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṣabbāh's argument in his programmatic *Four Chapters* (*al-Fuṣūl al-arba'a*) and some other treatises. He charges, however, in a distinctly critical tone, that al-Ḥasan prohibited the common people from discussing religious sciences and prevented the elite from consulting older books (of the Isma'īli literary heritage) except for those who knew the value of each work and the rank of the author in each discipline. Al-Ḥasan's theological teaching to his followers did not go beyond the statement: 'Our God is the God of Muḥammad'.

He told al-Shahrastānī: 'But you say: God is the God of the minds', implying that everyone was merely following the guidance of his own mind.

Al-Shahrastānī then complains that the followers of al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṣabbāh, whenever he sought to engage in theological discussion with any of them, would confine themselves to al-Ḥasan's statement 'Our God is the God of Muḥammad', and tell him that they had no need of him and could learn nothing from him. Al-Shahrastānī responded, conceding the need for an authoritative teacher and asking them where that teacher was, what he would impress on him in theology and what he would prescribe for him in rational matters. A teacher, he suggested, is to be sought not for himself, but for his teaching. In his view, they had thus closed the door of knowledge and opened that of submission and blind imitation (*taqlīd*). No person of sound mind would agree to adopt a doctrine without clear understanding or follow a path without evidence.12

From these critical remarks it is evident that al-Shahrastānī disapproved of al-Ḥasan b. al-Ṣabbāh's policies both in respect to his armed uprising against the Saljuqs and his restriction of the traditional Isma'ili teaching activity. The Isma'īlis were in his view part of the Muslim community, in some respects its core, and should not segregate themselves into a separate community. In spite of his basic espousal of traditional Isma'ili teaching, he was not prepared to join them in their seclusion. The temporary absence of the Imam, moreover, in his view could not justify the suspension of the religious teaching and reasoning based on the guidance of the past Imams. The teacher, as he saw it, was needed not for his physical presence, but for his teaching which awakened and guided the mind to true knowledge. Restriction of teaching, reasoning and debate rather closed the door to it.

The restriction on theological teaching did not last. Al-Shahrastānī's religious views, dismissed by the 'people of the mountain fortresses' as irrelevant during his time, would later attract their interest. The impact of his thought in the Nizārī community, however, seems to have been limited. His works did not become part of the communal literature and were not quoted. Only Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, in his autobiographical account about his own path to Isma'ilism, mentions him prominently. He refers to him as *dā'ī al-du'ā'ī* and records that his own father's maternal uncle and teacher was a pupil of his. Al-Ṭūsī's father in turn encouraged him to study all disciplines of knowledge and to listen to the discourse of the followers of various schools and doctrines.13 The title *dā'ī al-du'ā'ī* here is,
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12 Al-Shahrastānī, Kitāb al-Milāl wa-l-nihāyāt, pp. 147-52.
no doubt, to be understood as merely honorary. While al-Shahristānī was not a member of the Isma‘ili da‘wa, the passage indicates that his teaching and his works spread Isma‘ili thought and encouraged al-Tusi to join the Nizārī community.

His contemporary Sunni critics also faulted al-Shahristānī for his pursuit of philosophy. The Khwārizmīan Muḥammad b. ‘Abbās b. Arslān, author of a history of Khwārizm, suggested that his inclination to Isma‘ili ‘heresy’ (ihlāq) was the result of his turning away from the light of the sharī‘a and his preoccupation with the darknesses of philosophy. He describes him as going to great lengths in backing and defending the doctrines of the philosophers and adds that he attended several of al-Shahristānī’s preaching sessions where ‘there was no word of “God has said”, nor “the Messenger of God has said”, nor any answer to questions of the sharī‘a.’

This description, it should be noted, fits the extant Majlis of al-Shahristānī only partly, for this sermon, while dealing with esoteric cosmology rather than religious law, abounds with quotations from the Qur’an and the hadith of the Prophet.

Zahir al-Din al-Bayhaqi, in his supplement to Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistani’s biographies of the philosophers, Tatimmat Siyāsah al-hikma, recounts that he criticized al-Shahristānī for mingling religious exegesis with philosophy (hikma) and other disciplines in his Qur’an commentary, and told him that the Qur’an should be interpreted on the basis of the interpretation of the Companions of the Prophet and the generation following them (taibūn). Philosophy, al-Bayhaqi added, must be kept separate from Qur’an exegesis and, in any case, al-Shahristānī could not hope to combine religion (sharī‘a) and philosophy in a better way than al-Ghazālī. Al-Shahristānī was filled with anger at this suggestion. With his ironic reference to al-Ghazālī’s ‘combining’ of religion and philosophy, al-Bayhaqi evidently meant that the latter had studied both disciplines but had kept

them strictly apart and in fact distanced himself from philosophy in his religious works. Al-Shahristānī’s angry reaction at the mention of al-Ghazālī as a model for him is significant for his attitude to his celebrated predecessor at the Nizāmīyya in Baghdad.

The Kitāb al-Muṣāra‘a

Al-Shahristānī dedicated his Kitāb al-Muṣāra‘a to Sayyid Majd al-Dīn Abūl-Qasim ‘Ali b. Ja‘far al-Musawi, amīr and naqīb (syndic of the ‘Alid nobility) of Tirmidh, a high official in the government of the Saljuq Sultan Sanjar. He mentions that he had earlier presented to the Sayyid his Kitāb al-Milad wa‘l-nīhal, which had attracted his patron’s interest and earned his praise. The Kitāb al-Milad wa‘l-nīhal had in fact, it is known, been dedicated to al-Shahristānī’s previous patron, Sanjar’s vizier Naṣīr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī Tawḥīd al-Mawzū‘. When the vizier fell out of favour and was imprisoned in 526/1132, al-Shahristānī attached himself to Majd al-Dīn al-Musawi. He removed the dedication to Naṣīr al-Dīn from the book and presented a copy to his new patron.

Al-Shahristānī goes on to announce that he now intends to engage in an intellectual wrestling match (muṣāra‘a) with Ibn Sinā (Avicenna), whom he describes as the universally recognized grand master of philosophy of all time, and calls upon Majd al-Dīn to act as a judge between the two contestants in this dispute. This invitation indicates that his patron was no stranger to the philosophical issues involved in the discussion and that al-Shahristānī was aware of his expert knowledge and views. Al-Shahristānī had, probably in the time of his employment by Majd al-Dīn, consulted some of the contemporary philosophers, presenting to them his own views and objections to Ibn Sinā’s discourse and asking for their opinions. Thus he exchanged letters with the physician and philosopher Sharaf al-Zamān Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Ila‘iqī (d. 536/1141) on the question of existence and how it is necessitated in the existents, on the relationship between the cognizer and the objects of


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knowledge and on the absolute knowledge of the Necessary Being, God. He submitted objections to Ibn Sīnā's views by letter to the Qāḍī Zayn al-Dīn 'Umar b. Sahān al-Sāwī, a pupil of Ikhān and expert on logic noted for his Kitāb al-Baṣṣa'ir al-Naṣīriyya which he had dedicated to the vizier Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Marwānī. According to al-Sāwī's extant reply to one of al-Shahrastānī's letters, the objections, though formulated by the latter, had come to him from someone to whom al-Shahrastānī felt deeply obliged. Most likely his patron, the Naqīb Majd al-Dīn al-Maṣūm, is meant. The same objections, in different form, are discussed in the Muṣāra'ā. To what extent al-Shahrastānī was influenced by the views of these correspondents must remain the subject of future research.

Al-Shahrastānī remarks that he has chosen some of the most solidly argued statements of Ibn Sīnā in the theological part (ilahiyat) of his Shifā', in the Naqṣāt, Iṣārāt and Taʾlīqat for his discussion. He imposes on himself the condition of dealing with his opponent only in his discipline and not to oppose him on mere expressions on whose meaning and reality they both agreed, wishing to be neither a disputatious kalām theologian (mutakallim jadali) nor an obstinate sophist. His distancing himself from being a 'disputatious kalām theologian' deserves special note. Throughout his book, he does not quote or mention al-Ghazālī's famous refutation of the philosophers, the Taḥafut al-falāsifa, even though several of the questions discussed by him had also been treated by al-Ghazālī. Did he disapprove of al-Ghazālī's work because he considered it merely the product of a disputatious kalām theologian? This must seem likely in view of the substantial differences in approach and aim between the two books.

Al-Ghazālī's Taḥafut falls squarely within the tradition of

Ash'ārī theological apologetics and polemics. Its avowed aim was to destroy the basis of philosophy itself, not to correct some views of the philosophers. Although al-Ghazālī insisted that the book was intended only to refute and not to defend any specific religious doctrine and that he would set forth the true doctrines in a separate work, his yardstick of the truth was in fact the Ash'ārī creed. On its basis he chose to refute the philosophers in twenty issues, charging them with infidelity (kufr) punishable with death in three of them, and with heretical innovation in the others. In the common style of kalām polemics, he pictured the philosophers as maliciously motivated to dupe the public by trickery and obfuscation and their followers as frivolous fools.

Al-Shahrastānī, in contrast, does not question the legitimacy of philosophy as a supreme discipline of wisdom. He proposes to challenge Ibn Sīnā, whom he recognizes as the foremost expert in it, on his own ground in specific questions, relying on chosen quotations from his major works. While he sharply criticizes some of his views and the contradictions which he perceived in them, he never raises the issue of infidelity or heresy. In all questions he counters Ibn Sīnā's theses, repudiated by him with his own, which, he asserts, were based on the guideline (miṣyār) of the prophets.

On the need for such a guideline, there was obviously agreement between al-Ghazālī and al-Shahrastānī. Given this guideline, however, al-Ghazālī saw the use of human reason in religious thought as confined by traditional Ash'ārī interpretation of Qur'an and hadith, leading him to denounce philosophical inquiry into metaphysics and theology. For al-Shahrastānī, the guideline was rather the solid foundation for sound rational inquiry into the truth. He justified his daring challenge of Ibn Sīnā by assuring his patron Majd al-Dīn that he himself had risen from the depth of blind acceptance (taqdīd) in religion to the pinnacle of rational investigation of the truth and submission to it (taslim), as he had drunk a cup from the paradiesical wellspring of prophethood.

The basic idea espoused by al-Shahrastānī against Ibn Sīnā
knowledge and on the absolute knowledge of the Necessary Being, God. He submitted objections to Ibn Sīnā’s views by letter to the Qāḍī Zayn al-Dīn ʿUmar b. Sahān al-Sāwī, a pupil of ʿIḍāqī and expert on logic noted for his Kitāb al-Baṣṭaʾir al-Naṣṣirīyya which he had dedicated to the vizier Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Marwāzī. According to al-Sāwī’s extant reply to one of al-Shahrastānī’s letters, the objections, though formulated by the latter, had come to him from someone to whom al-Shahrastānī felt deeply obliged. Most likely his patron, the Naqīb Majd al-Dīn al-Masāwī, is meant. The same objections, in different form, are discussed in the Muṣārāʿa. To what extent al-Shahrastānī was influenced by the views of these correspondents must remain the subject of future research.

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Al-Ghazālī’s Tahāfut falls squarely within the tradition of


16 See the quotation from Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī’s Taʾrīkh dawil Āl Ṣaḥḥ in Adharshah, Taṣfīr al-Shahrastānī, vol. 1, p. 27.

17 See MS Kazan n. 1125, fol. 107.

Ashʿarī theological apologetics and polemics. Its avowed aim was to destroy the basis of philosophy itself, not to correct some views of the philosophers. Although al-Ghazālī insisted that the book was intended only to refute and not to defend any specific religious doctrine and that he would set forth the true doctrines in a separate work, his yardstick of the truth was in fact the Ashʿarī creed. On its basis he chose to refute the philosophers in twenty issues, charging them with infidelity (kufr) punishable with death in three of them, and with heretical innovation in the others. In the common style of kalām polemics, he pictured the philosophers as maliciously motivated to dupe the public by trickery and obfuscation and their followers as frivolous fools.

Al-Shahrastānī, in contrast, does not question the legitimacy of philosophy as a supreme discipline of wisdom. He proposes to challenge Ibn Sīnā, whom he recognises as the foremost expert in it, on his own ground in specific questions, relying on chosen quotations from his major works. While he sharply criticises some of his views and the contradictions which he perceived in them, he never raises the issue of infidelity or heresy. In all questions he counters Ibn Sīnā’s theses, repudiated by him with his own, which, he asserts, were based on the guideline (mīrāʾ) of the prophets.

On the need for such a guideline, there was obviously agreement between al-Ghazālī and al-Shahrastānī. Given this guideline, however, al-Ghazālī saw the use of human reason in religious thought as confined by traditional Ashʿarī interpretation of Qurʾān and hadith, leading him to denounce philosophical inquiry into metaphysics and theology. For al-Shahrastānī, the guideline was rather the solid foundation for sound rational inquiry into the truth. He justified his daring challenge of Ibn Sīnā by assuring his patron Majd al-Dīn that he himself had risen from the depth of blind acceptance (taṣqīd) in religion to the pinnacle of rational investigation of the truth and submission to it (taslīm), as he had drunk a cup from the paradoxical wellspring of prophethood.

The basic idea espoused by al-Shahrastānī against Ibn Sīnā
was, as noted, the absolute transcendence of God beyond existence and comprehension by human reason. God, he maintained, was the existentiatior of existence (majid al-siṣiṣ), the giver of both existence and non-existence. God was above all opposites—such as truth and falsehood, unity and multiplicity, knowledge and ignorance, life and death, good and evil, power and impotence—and their sovereign judge (bākim). As Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī noted in his refutation of the Muṣūrda, this was the doctrine of the Taʾlīmiyya, the Ismaʿīlīs, who said: God is neither existent nor non-existent, rather He is the foundation of being and non-being. In one form or another, this view had been upheld by the Persian Ismaʿīlī writers at least from Muhammad b. ʿAbd al-Nasaf (d. 335/943) on. Al-Ghazālī denounced it in his Faysal al-tashfin bāyn al-isliam wa-l-kaṣmānaqas as an unambiguous unbelief. Al-Shahrastānī was certainly aware of the condemnation. His adoption of it clearly reveals his repudiation of Ḥanbalī orthodoxy.

Al-Shahrastānī did not object to Ibn Sīnā’s designation of God as the Necessary Being (ṣawāhid al-siṣiṣ), but insisted that existence could be predicated of God only equivocally (bāṣl-šahrāh), as meaning that He is the giver of existence and its opposite. In his refutation, al-Ṭūsī suggested that the opinion that existence belonged amongst equivocal terms was the doctrine of the Ashʿāri school and of the Muʿtazilī Abuʾl-Husayn al-Baṣrī. The ontological basis of the doctrine of these kālam theologians, however, was entirely different. For al-Shahrastānī it was a necessary complement to his concept of divine transcendence. Thus he extended the principle of equivocity also to all other descriptions and attributes of God. God is one in the meaning of His giving unity, knowing in the meaning that He gives knowledge, powerful in the meaning that He gives power to the powerful.

21 Al-Ṭūsī, Muṣūrda, p. 84.
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21 Al-Ṭūsī, Maṣāḥī, p. 89.
changing times and places. In the fifth issue, al-Shahrastānī deals with the temporality of the world. He rejects Ibn Sīnā’s thesis that the world is co-eternal with the Creator and affirms that God is beyond both space and time. Eternal circular motion of the heavenly bodies and infinite time, he seeks to prove, are just as impossible as infinite space.

At the end of the fifth issue, al-Shahrastānī states that adverse circumstances and disasters prevents him from completing the book as planned and he will confine himself to presenting a number of philosophical problems, doubts and perplexities. The sixth issue had originally been intended to deal with the enumeration of the principles (mabādī) of the higher world. It is likely that the seventh issue was to be devoted to the question of the Intellect that is the Giver of Forms, which is now treated briefly at the end of the book. Al-Shahrastānī here agrees with the philosophers about the need for an active Intellect to bring human intellects from potentiality to actuality. He questions, however, why their Active Intellect (‘aql fa’alā) should be identified with the Intellect of the lunar sphere, the one closest to earth. Could it not be any of the higher Intellects or even the Necessary Existent? And if closeness to humanity is a consideration, could it not be a human intellect that is active and supported by holy power?

Al-Shahrastānī evidently had in mind here the Intellect of the prophets and Imams which, according to Isma‘īli teaching, conveys the spiritual truths emanating from the hierarchy of higher Intellects to the faithful.

The disasters to which al-Shahrastānī alludes have commonly been identified with the crushing defeat of Sultan Sanjar by the Qara Khitāy at Qaṭwan near Samarqand in 536/1141. It is less likely that he was referring to a temporary imprisonment of his patron, the Naqib Majd al-Dīn, at an earlier date.\(^{22}\) In 536/1141, the defeated Sultan fled to Tirmidh and then to Balkh, while the Khwarizmi-Shāh seized and sacked his capital, Marw. In the battle al-Shahrastānī’s philosophical correspondent al-Ilāqī was killed. It is not known whether al-Shahrastānī was in Tirmidh or in Marw at the time. As Sanjar’s reign began to collapse, the intellectual courtly milieu that had encouraged al-Shahrastānī in his philosophical pursuits evidently vanished. He was in no mood to complete his Musāra’ā as planned.

With its truncated ending, the book probably never had a wide readership. During the time that the Nizārī community was seeking a rapprochement with a broadly conceived Sunnism under the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, the Sufi Shaykh Shihāb al-Dīn ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī seems to have been attracted to al-Shahrastānī’s Isma‘īli thought. In his Rashf al-naṣṣa’ilah al-imānīyya wa-kashf faddā’il al-yūnānīyya, written in 621/1224, he polemically denounced both kalām theology and Greek-inspired philosophy and adopted some of the terms and concepts of al-Shahrastānī’s Mājlis and Musāra’a.\(^{23}\) It was about the same time that Naṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, partly under the influence of al-Shahrastānī’s thought, joined the Nizārī Isma‘īli community.

The subjugation of the Isma‘īlis by the Mongol conquerors after the fall of their seat of power at Alamūt in 654/1256 opened a period of severe religious persecution. Al-Ṭūsī now abandoned Isma‘īlism and backed the Twelver Shi‘i community to which he had originally belonged. In order to distance himself from the Isma‘īli teaching he had earlier espoused, he composed a refutation of the Kitāb al-Musāra’a. His Maṣāri’ al-muṣarā’ offered a brilliant and incisive defense of the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā, in which he exposed the inadequacy and flawed logic of al-Shahrastānī’s criticism. Yet al-Ṭūsī’s own highly polemical attack on al-Shahrastānī, describing him as a mere populist preacher picking his ideas at random from various schools without properly understanding them, falls to do justice to

\(^{22}\) See Nā‘īmi, Du‘a maktūb, pp. 23–4.

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22 See Na‘inī, Dī maqābū, pp. 23-4.
to the latter's thought, which rested on a different, but equally coherent philosophical vision with a vital religious impulse. 

Al-Ṭūsī's refutation further blunted the potential impact of al-Shahristānī's book in the Muslim world. It was now mostly read embedded in al-Ṭūsī's work. The latter enjoyed a certain popularity among Twelver Shi'i students of philosophy, as indicated by the survival of numerous, though badly corrupted, manuscripts of it in Iranian libraries. Mullā Sadrā (d. 1050/1640) quoted an argument of al-Shahristānī from it, siding with al-Ṭūsī's polemical refutation. Among orthodox Sunnis, on the other hand, al-Ṭūsī's defence of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy aroused some sympathy for al-Shahristānī's work. The Hanbali Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) in his Iqṭahat al-laḥfām min muṣāfīd al-shayṭān noted with satisfaction that al-Shahristānī had refuted some of Ibn Sīnā's heresies, which al-Ṭūsī, the 'supporter of atheism' (nāṣīr al-ilmāl), then attempted to reconfirm. From his description of the contents of the two books, it seems unlikely that he had read them seriously. Al-Ghazālī's Tahāfat evidently provided the most persuasive answer to Ibn Sīnā's philosophy from the Sunni point of view. Since in modern times philosophy is no longer so predominantly identified with the Peripatetic tradition, al-Shahristānī's book may perhaps come to be appreciated as a philosophical response from a broad spiritual perspective.

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The present edition of the Kūṭāb al-Muṣārāt‘a is based primarily on two manuscripts:

1. The MS 1103 of the Landesbibliothek of Gotha, on which the previous edition by Sulayr Muḥammad Mukhtar was based. My thanks are due to the authorities of the Gotha Library for providing me with a microfilm of the manuscript. According to the colophon, it was written by Faḍlullāh Abī'l-Ḥasan al-Nasīrī al-Shīrī and completed on 10 Ṣafar 590/20–23 February 1194. Several folios are missing, a few are displaced, and in some places words have become unreadable. In general, however, the quality of the text is fair. In the annotation to the edition, the manuscript is identified by the letter alif.

2. The MS n.1124, fol. 98a, of the library of Kazan. This manuscript was noted by Th. Menzel in Der Islam, 19 (1928), p. 94. My thanks are due to Dr Nurīya G. Garayeva of Kazan and to the authorities of the library of Kazan for kindly providing me with a microfilm of the manuscript. The copyist of the manuscript is not named, and it is not dated, but appears from the handwriting to be considerably later than the Gotha manuscript. While the text of the book is complete, some folios were evidently displaced at some stage in the transmission. This was not noticed by the next copyist, so that the text abruptly jumps in several places of the manuscript. The proper sequence could be restored by comparison with the Gotha manuscript and the text preserved in al-Ṭūsī's Muṣārāt al-muṣārāt‘a. The manuscript is well preserved and readable, but the quality of the text is generally somewhat inferior to that of the Gotha manuscript. In the annotation, it is identified by the letter ba‘. 

Apart from these two manuscripts, the text of the Kūṭāb al-Muṣārāt‘a as quoted in al-Ṭūsī's refutation Muṣārāt al-muṣārāt‘a has also been compared in establishing the text of this edition.
Particularly useful in this respect was the Istanbul MS Aya Sofya 2358, which preserves the text of the Kitāb al-Muṣāra‘a generally better than the Iranian manuscripts of al-Ṭūsī’s work. Since al-Ṭūsī’s work is to be re-edited separately, the variants provided by these manuscripts have not been noted in this edition of al-Shahrastānī’s book.

The title of the book is given as Kitāb Muṣāra‘at al-falāṣīfā in the Gotha MS. In the Kazan MS it is called Kitāb al-Muṣāra‘a li‘l-Shahrastānī ma‘a al-Shaykh al-Ra‘īs Abī ‘Ali Ibn Sīnā, raḥimahu’llāh. In his refutation, al-Ṭūsī states that it is known as al-Muṣāra‘āt. For the present edition, the title Kitāb al-Muṣāra‘a has been chosen.

Wilferd Madelung

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

In translating al-Shahrastānī’s text, the aim has been to combine accessibility with accuracy (for example in putting Arabic technical terms into English). In the interests of accessibility, square brackets have been used sparingly. Ellipses have thus sometimes been filled out in the English without this being made explicit. Such cases will be obvious to those who co-ordinate the Arabic with the English. For all that, the translation avoids paraphrasing al-Shahrastānī and tries to mirror his speech and thought closely.

My special thanks to Professor Wilferd Madelung, whose advice and assistance have been indispensable, and with whom it has been an honour to work. My gratitude also to Dr Farhad Daftary, whose support and encouragement made the project and my involvement in it possible.

Toby Mayer