Imparted through the teaching of the Neoplatonic commentators of Aristotle, accompanied by the Aristotelian doctrine of principles, and purged through a Christian adaptation of the religious stamp of Greek polytheism, the Neoplatonic doctrines of cosmos and the soul were prepared to live on in the Weltbild of philosophy in Arabic-Islamic civilization. Which were the texts, which were the authorities, which were the schools shaping this process? In our quest for the sources of the early Arab philosopher-scientists working within the Greek tradition, we find a twofold library:

- On the one hand, we find an academic tradition, apparent in commentaries based on lecture courses, going back to (a) a school authority, (b) a canon of authoritative texts, (c) a continuous, personal teaching tradition.
- On the other hand, we find a mass of materials, transmitted without the apparent support of a scholarly institution, but adduced in order to endorse the ideological interests and the religious legitimation of professional groups: popular ethics, gnostic and occult ideologies, religious ideology based on pseudo-epigraphical and apocryphal texts, used as quarries, under names unknown or interchangeable, and taken seriously in the mainstream tradition only once they were sanctioned under the authorship of Aristotle and the Peripatetic school.

1. Multiple Traditions

The civilization of Islam was born within the living and manifold intellectual culture of Near Eastern Hellenism. The rise of Islam gave new incentives to professional practice and the renewal of teaching traditions in the rational sciences, and fostered new interpretation and innovation
from within. The variety of intellectual traditions corresponds to the diversity of professional activity, and individual lines of transmission. Neither the science nor the philosophy of the Ancients reached the Arabs, but the concurrent and competing schools and systems of the transmitters. The construction of the identity of the schools, emerging from manifold foundations in theory – expressed in the Platonic ethics of knowledge and the Aristotelian science of demonstration –, and in professional practice, are bound up with their religious origins and political creeds and their fields of activity (between market, forum and the court) and practice, between institutions of science and of administration: the paradigmatic science of Pythagorean and Platonist mathematicians, the Platonic ethics of knowledge used as an initiation to the study of the sciences, mathematical and medical, and – arising in the long run to become the leader of all rational activity – the Aristotelian science of demonstration. While such traditions merged with the teaching of Islam, in the adab of Islamic administration, in the philosophers’ interpretation of the religious community, and finally, in the curricula of the late medieval madrasa, they resulted in new systems of knowledge acquisition and knowledge organisation, documenting constructions of identity in the schools of knowledge bound up with the groups of the society.

The transmitters of the sciences to Arabic-Islamic society were members of a polyethnic and polyglot culture, divided into confessional and professional segments. Their conceptual structures, linguistic instruments and methodological discourse, in translation as well as in the original sources, kept the brand of the Greek authorities and their schools of thought. Still, the unity of the Hellenistic tradition, a unity in view of a common heritage of erudition and of political and legal culture, had lost the bond of a common systematic doctrine. After the loss of a common world view, philosophy had lost its prerogative of definition; not one philosophy, but several philosophies served religion and the professional sciences, each in endorsement and legitimization of their doctrines and authority. The Christian Aramaic (in Mesopotamia and Iran), the Christian Arab, and then the Muslim Arab heirs of the ancient tradition encountered philosophy as a methodology and an ideology of the rational sciences.

Philosophy as a corpus of transmitted texts and as a system of instruction entered Arabic-Islamic society in the baggage of specific social and professional groups: scientists and physicians. It is true that pre-modern societies did not know the narrow professionalism typical