

God and Logic in Islam

The Caliphate of Reason

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Contents

<i>Illustrations</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Spelling, Names, and Sources</i>	<i>xv</i>
Introduction	1
PART ONE: THE FORMATION OF THE ISLAMIC TRADITION OF REASON	
1 The Problem of Reason in Islam: Is Islam a Non-Rational Religion and Civilization?	9
2 The Diversity of Reason	15
The Definition of Reason and Rationality	16
Western Conceptions of Reason	18
<i>Logos</i> and Rationality among the Greeks	18
Scholasticism: Reason as the Tool of Theology	20
Enlightenment Reason	21
Scientific Reason	21
Utilitarian Reason and Practical Rationality	22
Relativism	23
Protestant Textualism	24
Romanticism	25
The Civil War of Reason in the West	25
Islam and Western Conceptions of Reason	27
3 Empirical Knowledge of the Mind of God	30
The Enterprise of Hadith Collection	32

The Historicity of the Hadith	34
The Intellectual World of the Hadith Scholars	38
The Authority of the Hadith	42
Classification as Codification	43
The Historical Priority of <i>Fiqh</i> to Hadith	46
Literalist Challenge and Rationalist Cooption	50
4 The Failure of the Fārābīan Synthesis of Religion and Philosophy	55
Philosophy and Religion before Islam	57
The First Encounter of Islam with Philosophy:	
From the Syrians to Kindī	64
Fārābī's Philosophy of Religion	67
Religion Subsumed within Philosophy	74
God as Intellect and the Intelligibility of God	76
Prophecy as a Matter of Psychology	78
The Symbolic Interpretation of Scripture	80
The Role of <i>Fiqh</i> and Kalām	81
The Failure of the Fārābīan Political Philosophy of Religion	82
5 Mysticism, Postclassical Islamic Philosophy, and the Rise and Fall of Islamic Science	86
The Emergence of Mysticism	87
Mysticism and Philosophy	89
Suhrawardī	89
Ibn 'Arabī	93
Aristotelianism in the <i>Madrasas</i>	95
The "Failure" of Islamic Science	96
PART TWO: LOGIC, EDUCATION, AND DOUBT	
6 Where Is Islamic Logic? The Triumph of Scholastic Rationalism in Islamic Education	107
"Where Is Islamic Logic?"	107
Arabic Grammar	111
Arabic Rhetoric	113
<i>Uṣūl al-Fiqh</i>	114
Kalām	117
Institutions and the Boundaries of Logic	119

7	The Long Afternoon of Islamic Logic	121
	Islamic Logic to the Thirteenth Century	124
	The Textbooks and Their Commentaries	126
	The Educational Use of the School Logic Texts	129
	Content of the School Logic	135
	The Modernization of the School Logic	139
8	The Institutionalization of Disagreement	142
	The Classical Islamic Attitude to Disagreement	143
	An Education of Form without Content	151
PART THREE: THE FALL AND THE FUTURE OF ISLAMIC RATIONALISM		
9	The Decline and Fall of Scholastic Reason in Islam	157
	The Collapse of Traditional Education	157
	“What Went Wrong?”	162
10	A Chaos of Certitudes: The Future of Islamic Reason	170
	Disagreement in the Contemporary Islamic World	173
	The Great Issues	175
	<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	187
	<i>Index</i>	203

Introduction

The visitor to an Islamic bookstore is struck by the orderly rows of Arabic sets, usually handsomely bound in rich colors with calligraphic titles framed in arabesque and stamped in gold or silver. Nowadays, the title commonly runs boldly across the spines of all the volumes. A well-run bookstore will have these works sorted by discipline: commentaries on the Qur'ān; collections of the reported words and deeds of the Prophet and his Companions, with their commentaries; Islamic law, both rulings and studies of the principles to be followed in deducing law; theology; large biographical dictionaries of individuals of various classes, most commonly scholars; histories and geographies; and Arabic grammars and dictionaries.

The casual visitor may be excused the suspicion that sometimes these sets serve a decorative purpose. He may have visited a mosque and noticed that the imam's office walls were lined with such sets and that they showed few signs of use. Watching visitors he may also observe that it is the decorative Qur'āns and popular tracts that sell most briskly.

Nevertheless, he would be unwise to dismiss the imposing sets as mere pretentious ornament. Scholars wrote these books for a purpose. They are, moreover, mostly old books, written between five and twelve centuries ago. The age of printing did not start in Islamic countries until the nineteenth century, so that even the younger works survived fifteen or more generations being copied and recopied by hand, defying the threats of damp, fire, neglect, and white ants. Even this understates the effort that went into their preservation, for a work written in the fifteenth century most likely represents the synthesis of a succession of earlier works written during the previous seven or eight hundred years.

A knowledgeable visitor would also understand that the sustained effort of copying books that might take many weeks to read – let alone write out by hand – was done with great care, with copied manuscripts checked against oral transmission accompanied by oral commentary. The precision with which this had to be done varied by discipline, but for the core religious subjects, a student could not simply buy a copy of a book; he had to copy it out under the supervision of a scholar who himself had learned the work from a teacher. When a scholar copied a collection of hadith, the recorded sayings of the Prophet and his Companions, under the supervision of his teacher, he became the latest link in a chain of teachers and students, generation from generation, back to the days of the scholars who first collected these sayings soon after the deaths of the last Companions of the Prophet. A scholar's most precious possessions were the books he had copied under the supervision of his teachers and the licenses that his teachers had given him to teach these books.

If our casual visitor saw fit to leaf through the books, he would notice that many include commentary in the margins or at the foot of the page. Often the books themselves are commentaries, with the original texts interspersed through the page. If he is lucky, he will stumble on a reprint of one of the old lithographic editions, in which commentary, super-commentary, and glosses by various authors snake around the page and between the words of the text in elegant confusion, so that text ultimately being commented on may be represented by only a few words on each page. If his interest were piqued and he visited an Islamic manuscript library, he could see this process at work in the dusty books: a humble student's manuscript in which the carefully written text is surrounded by notes taken in class or a scholar's manuscript with a carefully crafted commentary and glosses and corrections and variant readings in the margin. He would quickly realize that thousands of such commentaries and supercommentaries exist explaining the works commonly studied, and that few of them have been printed.

This is not, our visitor might reflect, the Islam that he sees in newspapers or on television, a fanatical devotion to the arbitrary interpretation of a single text, the Qur'ān, preached shrilly and politically to excited throngs at prayer. It is something else, a cooler, a thoughtful and earnest intellectual world, a scholastic world much like the traditional study of the Torah and Talmud in Jewish yeshivas or the study of Aristotle and

theology in medieval European universities. It is not modern – in the sense that it is not secular and does not address the post-Enlightenment intellectual world of the modern West – but it also is not modern in that it is not the absolutist fundamentalism of much modern religion, Islamic or otherwise.

And, he might think to himself, the popular tracts addressing current issues are cheaply printed and carelessly bound, stacked in racks to be sold to those without the training to understand the old, long, difficult Arabic books. It is the dry works of Islamic scholasticism that are treated with respect. Everything about them – the color of their bindings, the care of their editing and printing, the increasingly high quality of the paper, the elegance of their design, their respectful placement – indicates that these books, second only to the lavishly printed copies of the Qurʾān, are important.

Why, we might ask, is this so?



THIS BOOK IS AN ARGUMENT FOR A SINGLE PROPOSITION, THAT *ISLAMIC intellectual life has been characterized by reason in the service of a non-rational revealed code of conduct.*

The “non-rational revealed code of conduct” is the Shariʿa, the Law of God, which occupies the same position of primacy in Islamic intellectual life that theology does in Christianity. I do not wish to say that the Shariʿa is irrational or contrary to reason or beyond reason, these being issues on which Muslims themselves disagreed – only that the Shariʿa is given and that Muslims by and large did not think that the reasons for any particular command of God need be accessible to the human mind.¹

Whereas the foundation of Islam was the revelation given to Muḥammad, which thus is fundamentally beyond reason, reason was

¹ For a slightly different account of the role of reason in Islamic civilization with a stress on political philosophy, see Muḥsin Mahdi, “The Rational Tradition in Islam,” in Farhad Daftary, ed. *Intellectual Traditions in Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000), pp. 43–65. In a book that arrived too late for me to use systematically, Jeffrey R. Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam: The Muslim Brotherhood, Ashʿarism, and Political Sunnism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), makes a similar argument. He argues that by the end of the middle ages *athari* thought, the term he uses where I would use “literalism” or “fundamentalism,” had succeeded in replacing rational theology with uncritical literalist creeds, with unfortunate effects for Islamic religious thought.

the tool normally chosen by Muslims for the explication of this revelation – from the time when Companions of the Prophet still lived down to the dawning of our day. This legacy of rational methodology is to various degrees ignored by Muslims, both modernist and fundamentalist (though they are not as different as we might believe) and by outsiders seeking to understand Islam. This book is thus a reminder to my Muslim friends and readers that the core intellectual tradition of Islam is deeply rational, though based on revelation. This tradition has been largely rejected by modern Muslims, or at least ignored by them. Non-Muslims are usually unaware of it and thus misunderstand Islam.

I chose the word “caliphate” in my subtitle for the relationship of reason to the content of revelation to indicate that reason served revelation and thus was secondary to it. *Khalīfa*, “caliph,” comes from a root meaning “to follow,” in the sense of coming afterwards. It has two major uses in Islamic religious thought. First, the Qur’ān says that man is God’s caliph on earth. Second, it is the title used by the first rulers of the Islamic world after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad and by occasional later rulers, such as the Ottoman sultans, who were able to claim universal authority or legitimate succession from earlier caliphs. Abū Bakr, Muḥammad’s first successor, chose the title *khalīfat Rasūl Allāh*, “successor of the Messenger of God,” in an act of political modesty. Later rulers sometimes styled themselves *khalīfat Allāh*, “Caliph of God,” to some disapproval from the pious.² The title “caliph” was also used by Sufi leaders who had been granted a considerable degree of authority of the heads of their orders. In all of these cases, “caliph” implies authority under sovereignty granted by another and higher authority. This, it seemed to me, was a fair term to characterize the role of reason in Islam.

There have been many who have either denied that reason plays a central role in Islamic intellectual life or objected to its doing so. In our troubled times, many non-Muslims see Islam as an inherently anti-rational force, pointing to a supposed failure to adapt to the modern world (“What went wrong?”), a cult of martyrdom, well-publicized examples of bizarre applications of Islamic law, and a general modern secular suspicion of religion as an organizing principle of human life, particularly of social and political life. Within Islam, there have always been

² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Khalīfa.”

critics of the role of reason in the religious sciences. The hadith literature, as we will see, arose in part as a reaction to the incipient rationalism of early Islamic legal scholarship. The great fourteenth-century fundamentalist reformer Ibn Taymīya hated reason wherever it expressed itself in Islamic intellectual life. In modern Islam, the traditional legal scholars, with their intricate systems of scholastic reasoning, have been condemned by both modernists, who with some justice considered their legal systems to be medieval and obsolete, and the exponents of Islamic revival, heavily influenced by the hadith and the criticisms of Ibn Taymīya.

My contention in this book is that the logic of the central ideas of Islamic life as they were launched by the Prophet and the earliest generation of Muslims drove relentlessly toward a situation in which religious knowledge was placed in a rational context, with reason providing the organizing principles for bodies of knowledge whose origin was non-rational. This book is my argument for this proposition.



MANY MODERN “FUNDAMENTALIST” ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS ARE ACTIVELY hostile to this tradition of rationalism. The thoughtful observer of Islam will notice the damage done to the integrity of Islamic intellectual life by this disregard of the careful analysis of the heritage of Muḥammad’s revelation performed by fifty or more generations of Islamic scholars. The result is a plethora of arbitrary personal interpretations of the Qur’ān, the hadith, and Islamic law. The damage done is plain for all to see.

I am a Protestant and, in particular, an Anglican. My ancestors came to America three and a half centuries ago escaping religious war and persecution, fundamentalists fleeing persecution by other fundamentalists and sometimes persecuting yet other sectarians in the New World with whom they disagreed. The Reformation had broken the religious unity of the Western Christian world, opening the gates for floods of personal interpretations of Christian doctrine and the Bible. The wounds are not yet healed in Christendom. The Anglicans attempt to walk a tightrope, open to the reforms and new ideas of the Reformation yet remaining loyal to the ancient tradition of the Church Universal and never admitting the finality of Christian division or condemning those who follow other ways. It is a path I commend to my Muslim friends. I do not wish on them the two centuries of war that drove my ancestors across the sea

into the American wilderness or the five centuries of unhealed divisions that Western Christians have endured in conflict over the tradition of the ancient and medieval Church. Moreover, the poverty of much modern Islamic thought compared with the subtlety and richness of the medieval Islamic intellectual tradition leads me to think that the solution to the problems facing contemporary Islam lies, at least in part, in reclaiming an older and more intellectually rigorous tradition of Islamic thought.

For my non-Muslim readers, my task is historical: to show the richness of pre-modern Islamic scholastic rationalism. Many modern expressions of Islam do not deserve much respect, but fortunately they are also not the best – or even, historically speaking, up to the average – that Islam can produce. Islam is another path from Christianity, a path in which the spiritual experiences of a single man, Muḥammad, the son of ‘Abd Allāh, a merchant of the town of Mecca in the seventh century, are taken as normative. During the fourteen centuries since then, serious Muslims have undertaken to preserve that experience, using all the scholarly tools at their disposal and devoting every resource of reason to explicating that experience and its ethical, legal, and spiritual implications. By doing so, they hoped that as individuals and as a community they might know how to live a life pleasing to God and righteous among men. It is, from a Christian point of view, an act of terrifying bravery, and it deserves our respect.



The Problem of Reason in Islam: Is Islam a Non-Rational Religion and Civilization?

In a widely circulated article on the state of the Islamic world in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks of 2001, the Pakistani physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy argued that a thousand years ago, there was an Islamic golden age of reason and science under the ‘Abbāsids, a period in which theology was dominated by the rationalist Mu‘tazilites and science and philosophy by translations of Greek works. This age of tolerance and creativity, Hoodbhoy claimed, came to an abrupt end when Ghazālī attacked logic and science in the name of an antirationalist Ash‘arite theology. Thereafter, the Islamic world settled into a dogmatic slumber that has not yet ended, as evidenced by the miserable state of science in the Islamic world.¹ A variation of this view stresses Ghazālī’s defense of Sufism as the source of his antirationalistic position. Of course, the picture could be reversed, with the early centuries of Islam being seen as a time when advocates of pagan rationalism challenged the young Islamic revelation, only to be defeated by defenders of orthodoxy like Ghazālī, leaving the stage open for a purer Islam based on the practice of the Prophet, not the fallible speculations of human philosophers and scientists. This is the view of Ibn Taymīya and his modern followers.

Outside perceptions of Islam are more negative. The Western view of Islam is dominated by media coverage that stresses terrorism, a supposed innate Islamic hostility to the modern Western world in general and to America and the Jews in particular, headscarves as a tool for

¹ The article is Pervez Amir Ali Hoodbhoy, “How Islam Lost Its Way: Yesterday’s Achievements Were Golden: Today, Reason Has Been Eclipsed,” *Washington Post*, December 30, 2001. The argument is presented in more detail in Hoodbhoy’s *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality* (London: Zed Books, 1990).

the oppression of women, and violent responses to trivial offenses like tasteless cartoons. However shallow this view of Islam might be, there are serious intellectual arguments against the compatibility of Islam and reason, some of them made by Muslims themselves.

There is first the phenomenon of “Islamic fundamentalism” itself. This term can be used in several ways or rejected entirely. In chapter ten, I will use it to refer to a specific religious response to the medieval Islamic heritage, one very similar to that of my Puritan ancestors. However, I will use it here, as the Western press tends to use it, to refer to all the problems of Islamic civilization in the modern world, and especially to its maladaptations: the terrorism, suicide bombings, bizarre fatwas, obsessions about women’s dress, and so on. The cult of martyrdom, with its willingness to kill innocents for a religious ideal that seems unconvincing to non-Muslims, would seem to indicate a failure to engage rationally with the larger modern world. These acts – monstrous, pitiable, or simply embarrassing – are done in the name of Islam. Their irrationality seems obvious to outsiders, and so it would seem to follow that Islam itself is irrational or antirational.

We could, and probably should, dismiss such phenomena as suicide bombers as more a product of the stresses of the modern world than of Islam as a religion, but a form of antirationalism has explicit defenders within Islam. The twentieth century saw the rise of a new kind of Islamic fundamentalism that is often referred to as Salafī – that is, following the example of the *salaf*, the pious forefathers of the first generations of Islam. The Salafis, diverse though they most certainly are, seek to go back to the pure truth of early Islam before it was corrupted by the scholastic speculations of medieval Islamic scholars. They are doing something very similar to what my Protestant ancestors did when they sought to rid Christianity of the encrustations of medieval theological speculation and post-Apostolic religious doctrine and custom in order to return to the pure spirituality of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the practice of the primitive church. Despite their claim to go back to the roots of Islam, they are, like their Christian fundamentalist counterparts, a modern phenomenon, the product of the mass education that allows a technician or engineer to have direct access to the Qur’ān and the other foundational texts of Islam.

The influence of Salafi Islam has grown steadily, in good part because the Salafis have a point: the foundations of Islam are the Qur'ān and the life and practice of the Prophet, everything after them being human speculation grounded in the intellectual and social conditions of the times when Islamic scholars wrote. Nonetheless, most non-Muslims, however sympathetic they might be to Islam, would see the Qur'ān and *sunna*, the practice of the Prophet, as being in some sense the product of the social and religious context of seventh-century Arabia. Certainly, the amount of religious information and text preserved from the time of the Prophet is finite. The Qur'ān is a single, not especially large book, and the hadith that have any claim to be considered authentic number no more than a few tens of thousands. Restricting the foundations of religion and society to these few books seems to non-Muslims a rejection of independent reason.

We also note the overwhelming presence of mysticism in Islamic life from about the year 1000 C.E. up through the nineteenth century. Mysticism, too, is anti- or non-rational. Sufism, the usual term for Islamic mysticism, produced sophisticated intellectuals like Rūmī and Ibn 'Arabī but also innumerable enthusiasts, charlatans, and wandering dervishes. In the second half of the nineteenth century, both colonial administrators and modernizing Islamic reformers saw Sufism as a prime example of the superstition that needed to be extirpated before Islam could be reformed. Salafis, by and large, still think so.

On the other hand, there is a case to be made for the compatibility of Islam and reason. Most Muslims are perfectly able to conduct their lives in a constructive way in the modern world. Even a country like Iran, despite its revolutionary break with certain aspects of modernity in the name of Islam, has continued to modernize in most senses. Apart from Tehran's new metro system, the consolidation of the revolution has led, for example, to an efflorescence of Islamic software in Iran. Also, if we look back, we can see that certain rationalistic endeavors did flourish in medieval Islam. There was a tradition of philosophy, originating with the Greeks but continuing to our own day, particularly in Iran. Until about 1500, Islamic science was the most advanced in the world, and it seems beyond question that Islamic science, as transmitted to medieval Europe, played a critical role in preparing the ground for the Scientific

Revolution. We now know, for example, that Copernicus borrowed much of the mathematics of his heliocentric system (though not the idea of heliocentrism as such) from Islamic astronomers.²

Most important, the Islamic religious sciences in their mature form represent a kind of scholasticism, the mode of study in which reason is employed to explicate religious texts. This kind of scholasticism is the basis of postclassical Islamic religious education, wherein students are rigorously trained in Aristotelian logic, the tool used in more advanced subjects like jurisprudence.

It is my belief that such rationalism was basic to Islamic intellectual culture in its classical and postclassical forms. Chapters three through eight of this book are devoted to showing precisely what I mean by this: what was the nature of Islamic rationalism, particularly scholastic rationalism, how it developed, and what were its strengths and limitations. The final chapter of this book deals with the enemies of this kind of reason, its decline and fall, and the role it might play in the development of Islamic thought in the modern world.

There is an ontological issue here that I wish to clarify. I do not believe in a “Muslim mind” or in “Islam” as an autonomous and eternal entity. The human world consists of individual human beings and their individual thoughts and actions. Nevertheless, ideas have power and their own logic, though historical circumstances shape and constrain the expression of those ideas. The Islamic religion came into being from the religious experience of a single man, the Prophet Muḥammad. What shaped that spiritual experience is a question for a different historical inquiry, but that experience had a particular quality expressed in a set of ideas passed on and given more specific form by the personalities and experiences of the men and women around him. Those ideas have shaped and limited the possibilities available to Muslim intellectuals down to our own day. Much happened later, but the unfolding of Islamic intellectual life grew in large part, although not exclusively, from the potentialities inherent in the complex of ideas inherited by the earliest generations of

² George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Transformations: Studies in the History of Science and Technology; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 193–232; F. Jamil Ragep, “Copernicus and his Islamic Predecessors: Some Historical Remarks,” *History of Science* 14 (2007), pp. 65–81.

Muslims, and in turn, the intellectual life of later centuries was shaped by the choices made by earlier generations.³

I do not wish to assert that there was some essential intellectual determinism at work in Islamic intellectual life, but rather that the nature of Muḥammad's experience opened some options and tended to foreclose others. The characteristic legalism of Islam was present from the time of the Prophet, so it is no accident that Muslim legal scholars in every age enjoyed a prestige that was never shared by Christian canon lawyers. The form that this legalism took was shaped by decisions made by the earliest generations of Muslims about how to respond to the withdrawal of the direct divine guidance that the Prophet had formerly provided. Some intellectual approaches, like scholastic legalism and mysticism, prospered; others, like Fārābī's attempt to make rationalistic political philosophy the central organizing principle of Islam, failed. Still others, like Greek logic and metaphysics, faltered but eventually found their place. Greek philosophy was never accepted as the mistress of the sciences but eventually found respectability as the handmaid of legal dialectic and mystical speculation.

The ideas that shaped Islamic life had an inner logic that defined the options open to Muslim intellectuals and thus channeled Islamic intellectual life in particular directions. The issue was not a lack of freedom for individual creativity or other alternatives, but rather that those whose efforts cut across the grain of the formative ideas of Islamic society, like Fārābī and the early philosophers, did not shape the central core of Islamic thought. Those who could make their intellectual creativity flow into channels that the founding ideas of Islam had opened won enduring influence. Such thinkers included Ghazālī, who saw that the place for logic was in the legal curriculum, and Suhrawardī,

³ This point is elegantly made by Marshall Hodgson in *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1: *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 34–39, where he incisively criticizes various essentializing interpretations of Islamic history (p. 37): “Accordingly, it is wise to posit as a basic principle, and any deviation from which must bear the burden of proof, that *every generation makes its own decisions*. . . . A generation is not bound by the attitudes of its ancestors, as such, though it must reckon with their consequences and may indeed find itself severely limited by those consequences in the range of choices among which it can decide.”

who saw that the natural role of philosophy was as the interpreter of mysticism.

The interrelationships among the disciplines of thought were different than in Latin Christendom but, as in medieval Europe, reason in due course came to serve faith.

But what, we may ask, do we mean by reason?