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## THE ISLĀMIC ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS

*ʿIlm al-ikhṭilāf* and the Institutionalization of Disagreement

### ABSTRACT

Islām is a religion of unity and of law, but the asking of questions and disagreement about their answers is at the heart of the Islāmic experience.

Three phenomena — each in its way relating to the role of questions and disagreement in Islāmic society — are puzzling:

1. Why did Muslim scholars endorse diversity in matters that would seem to have only one right answer: legal schools, texts of the Qurʾān, authoritative collections of *ḥadīth*, and the like?
2. Why did Muslims adopt a curriculum for training *ʿulamā* that stressed form over content, an educational method that stressed interpretive methods that only a handful of scholars would actually have practical use for?
3. Why were Muslims successful in generating a consensus about the relation of religion and society in the Middle Ages but have been unsuccessful in doing so in modern times?

All relate to the same underlying feature of the Islāmic religion, a tolerance of permanent disagreement, and they ultimately explain each other. Medieval Muslims were able to maintain religious unity by the device of systematically tolerating diversity and disagreement within a certain range. This tolerance was based on an honest understanding of the

tentativeness of each of the great legal schools, as well as of the scope for disagreement in other areas of Islāmic religious scholarship. Eventually, the understanding of the bases of this disagreement in effect became the central theme of Islāmic education. The fact that Islāmic law influenced the state but was not usually enforced by the state allowed this state of affairs to continue without violating the consciences of individual scholars.

The modern Islāmic world is now faced with the task of rethinking the problem of disagreement on issues of religion. The solution will need to take into account the wisdom of the Islāmic learned tradition and the creative experience of the Muslim minority communities of the West.

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This is the fourth Iqbāl Memorial Lecture that I have had the honor to attend. It is a great honor to be invited to give this lecture and to do so in a university at which 'Allāma Iqbāl was once a student and a faculty member.

I have spent more than half of my life studying Islām. It is a curious position for an outsider to have spent so much time studying a religion not his own. Islām is too vast for any one person to know completely, and there is much that one can never entirely understand without spending a lifetime pursuing for oneself one of the great spiritual paths of Islām: Islāmic law, Ṣūfism, and Shi'ism being the most important among them. Still, the time I have spent trying to comprehend a few aspects of Islām have well repaid my efforts. Thus, when I was invited by Abṣār Ṣāhib to give this Lecture, it seemed an opportunity to step back from the scholarly minutiae with which I am usually concerned and reflect on some larger issues that have puzzled me.

The asking of questions and disagreement about their answers is, it seems to me, at the heart of the Islāmic experience. The first believers — and, equally important, the first unbelievers — came to the Prophet with questions. A significant

portion of the Qur'ān and an even larger portion of the *ḥadīth* consist of answers to those questions. After the Prophet's death the believers came with their questions to those who had known the Prophet well and later to those who were versed in the stories passed down from the first generation of believers and in the accumulated religious wisdom of the Islāmic community. And still they came with their questions to those who are reputed to have knowledge.

When Professor William Chittick gave the last Iqbāl Memorial Lecture some months ago, he took as his theme *tahqīq*, ascertaining the truth, arguing that it had been neglected and that too much emphasis had been given to its counterpart *taqlīd*, accepting the intellectual authority of another in religious matters. Professor Chittick is a great scholar of Islāmic mysticism and very much a mystic himself. I am only a historian of philosophy, and my aims today are more modest: to understand something about the Islāmic response to disagreement, the *'ilm al-ikhtilāf*, to give it the name used by Islāmic scholars. I hope to shed some light on how certain puzzling features about the role of unanswered questions and disagreement in Islāmic society might be related.

### *Three phenomena that have puzzled me*

In this lecture I am going to talk about three phenomena — each in its way relating to the role of questions and disagreement in Islāmic society. Each has puzzled me. Today I am going to suggest that they all relate to the same underlying feature of the Islāmic religion, a tolerance of permanent disagreement, and that they ultimately explain each other. I will list them now and then discuss each in more detail.

1. Why did Muslim scholars endorse diversity in matters that would seem to have only one right answer: legal schools, texts of the Qur'ān, authoritative collections of *ḥadīth*, and the like?

2. Why did Muslims adopt a curriculum for training *'ulama* that stressed form over content, an educational method that stressed interpretive methods that only a handful of scholars would actually have practical use for?
3. Why were Muslims successful in generating a consensus about the relation of religion and society in the Middle Ages but have been unsuccessful in doing so in modern times?

### *The acceptance of diversity*

Islām faced its first great crisis very early in the *fitna* that followed the murder of the Caliph 'Uthmān. For the first time Muslim armies faced each other in battle over the gravest of religious issues: the nature of religious leadership after the Prophet. Other *fitnas* followed. Many were battles for leadership, often in protest at corrupt rule, but there were also intellectual *fitnas*. Early Muslims argued about the nature and content of Islāmic law, about the fundamental beliefs of Islām, about the text of the Qur'ān, about which *ḥadīth* was to be accepted and which to be rejected as unreliable or forged. For the most part, these disputes were settled within a few centuries — to take an arbitrary date, 1111, the death of al-Ghazālī. By this time there was a general consensus about the great religious issues within the Islāmic world. The details need not concern us; what does concern us is that the consensus often took the form of an agreement by consensus to disagree within defined limits by accepting a certain range of alternatives as equally valid. Let us consider some examples.

*The four madhhabs.* The most important example of such institutionalized disagreement is the existence of the four Sunni legal schools, with Twelver *Shī'ite* law often effectively being a fifth school. The *madhhabs* do not differ greatly, but they arose out of great controversies in early Islām about the sources and methods of Islāmic jurisprudence. The differences can matter; *Hanbalis* and *Hanafis* differ, for example, on the question of

whether a woman can marry without the permission of her guardian. It is an issue that has troubled Pakistan on occasions. What is more, the *madhhab*s do not claim to be simply schools of thought; they claim to reflect the divine law as revealed to Muḥammad. Yet, by the time of al-Ghazālī Muslims seemed quite comfortable with the notion that there were at least four equally acceptable versions of Islāmic law.

*The seven readings of the Qur'ān.* The Qur'ān, as all of you presumably know, was revealed to Muḥammad in sections ranging in length from a few lines to many pages. At the time of the Prophet's death it had not been systematically edited. It seems certain that some *sūras* took their present form under the Prophet's hand, but that he did not himself compile all of the revelations into their present form and order. Most serious Muslims had memorized parts of the Qur'ān; a few are reported to have had their own written collections. As a result, after the Prophet's death there were several different versions of the Qur'ān in circulation; Ali, for example, is said to have had a copy of the Qur'ān in which the *sūras* were in chronological order, and some other companions of the Prophet had copies in which the *sūras* were arranged in other ways. There were also some minor differences in wording between the various versions, and a few larger differences. There was a disagreement, for example, about whether the Fātiḥa, the last two *sūras*, and two other similar short prayers were properly part of the Qur'ān, for example. 'Uthmān became concerned because there had begun to be disagreements about the exact text of the Qur'ān and because so many of the companions of the Prophet who had memorized parts of the Qur'ān had been killed in battles. He appointed a committee to prepare an official edition of the Qur'ān, and the other versions were destroyed. This is the Qur'ān that we have today — *mā bayn al-daffayn*, "what is between the two covers," to use the medieval expression. While no one seriously questioned the authenticity of 'Uthmān's Qur'ān, the Arabic script of the seventh century lacked the dots and vowel signs of modern Arabic, so there was considerable disagreement about the exact text of the Qur'ān in the early centuries. These mostly



concerned rather minor points, usually which did not affect the meaning, such as whether a given verb was masculine or feminine, active or passive, matters that could only be settled by dots and vowel markings that were only invented later. There were also some disagreements about grammar and pronunciation based on scholarly disagreement about the exact nature of the Arabic in which the Qur'ān was revealed. All of these issues are discussed in great deal in the medieval manuals of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* and *qirā'at*.

In the end Muslim scholars came to a remarkable compromise, agreeing that there were seven equally authoritative "readings" of the Qur'ān, each of which had two slightly different versions. This was said to be a sign of God's bounty to Muslims. To this day there are Qur'ān reciters who can recite the Qur'ān according to all the seven versions.

*Six books of ḥadīth.* Everybody agrees that vast numbers of *aḥādīth* were forged in the early centuries of Islām, but there was a great deal of disagreement about exactly which *aḥādīth* were authentic. Early Muslim scholars developed various ways of dealing with this embarrassment of riches. Again, they agreed to disagree. Two rival collections of *ḥadīth* were accepted as having the highest authority, and four others were also accepted as being authoritative in a slightly lesser degree. *Shī'ites* have their own alternative collections of *ḥadīth*.

*The Marāji' al-Taqlid in Shī'ism.* *Shī'ite* law works slightly differently than *Sūnni* law, though the content is much the same. In the absence of the Imām, *Shī'ites* are left to their own devices in legal matters, and each *Shī'ite* — like any other Muslim — is obliged to make a good faith effort to ascertain the relevant Islāmic law in any situation and follow it. The *Shī'ite* community is divided into a small group of individuals with the legal training to ascertain Islāmic law for themselves — the *mujtahids* — and a much larger number of people who do not have such training or who do have it but choose not to use it — the *muqallids*. Now, there might at any given time be hundreds of *Shī'ite mujtahids*, but in practice only a small number of them

will give legal rulings to others. Each *muqallid* is under an obligation to seek out the most learned of the *mujtahids* for such legal advice as he needs. An individual who is followed by a significant number of *muqallids* is called a *marja' taqlīd* — a source of emulation, as it is sometimes translated. Now we return to our theme: *Shī'ites* are not bothered by the fact that there may be a number of such supreme *marāji'*, and an individual believer may follow any one of them he chooses. The Iranian Government, for example, has pressed the claim of Āyatollah Khamane'i as *marja'*, but has been unable to prevent pious Iranians from following *marāji'* who live in Iraq or even *marāji'* such as Āyatollah Montazeri, who are actually under arrest in Iran.

*Contrary conclusions in different disciplines.* I have written a book and several articles on a thirteenth century Iranian scientist and scholar, Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzi. The 'Allāma, as he was later known, wrote in a number of disciplines, both rational and religious. Though a philosopher and a great scholar, he seems to have been quite content to pursue these disciplines independently, without harmonizing their conclusions or fitting them into a single larger intellectual framework. For example, towards the end of his life he wrote a large survey of the sciences called *The Pearly Crown*. The bulk of this work was a survey of science and mathematics in the tradition of Islāmic philosophy. Later, he added a long appendix in which he treated ethics and political science, *fiqh*, *kalām* theology, and mysticism. This work contained three comprehensive and incompatible accounts of the nature of the universe: one philosophical, following Ibn Sīna and Suhrawardi; one atomistic, following the *kalām* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzi; and one monistic, following the *waḥdat al-wujūd* tradition of Ibn 'Arabi. There were two accounts of politics, one based on the Iranian practical tradition of the mirrors for princes literature and one Platonic, based on a work of Fārābi. He seems to have simply thought that it was natural that pursuing the truth using different methods would produce different results.

The study of Ghazālī's thought has been hindered by similar difficulties. His works in different disciplines seem almost to have been written by different people. The authenticity of *The Niche for Lights*, an essay in mystical metaphysics, has been questioned because its doctrines do not appear elsewhere in Ghazālī's works. There are also inconsistencies between his use of, and his attacks on, logic, philosophy, and theology. So which is the real Ghazālī? All of them, it seems.

I could give more examples, but these are the most important and are sufficient for our purposes. The point is that medieval Muslims were content to accept equally authoritative versions of things that we might think could have only one correct version: Islāmic law, the text of the Qur'ān, authoritative collections of the Prophet's sayings, even accounts of the nature of reality. The principle applied even to leadership. In Europe there is always, in theory, a rightful holder of any post — a rightful king of Scotland, for example. In Islām, except among *Shī'ites*, this is not the case. There are rulers in Islām, and there are religious obligations that specially apply to rulers, but there is no rightful ruler before he becomes ruler.

It is a remarkable phenomenon: a willingness to tolerate equally authoritative alternative versions of religious truth.

### *An education of form without content*

Most of you will know the term *Dars-i Nizāmi*, the name of the curriculum devised by the eighteenth century Indian Muslim scholar Nizām al-Dīn al-Sihālāwī. It is not an innovation on his part since it is based on versions of an Islāmic curriculum that go back to about the thirteenth century. Nizām al-Dīn's curriculum stressed dialectical skill. The student was expected to spend a great deal of time studying traditional logic, Arabic grammar, and rhetoric. Instruction was based on a set of very concise textbooks, which the student might very well memorize, with a series of commentaries and supercommentaries. Classes consisted of very detailed explorations of the difficulties implicit in the texts, with students and teachers competing to raise and



resolve difficulties. It was an extremely rigorous and demanding, though narrow, form of education, much like the education in the medieval European universities. Its most remarkable feature was that it contained relatively little study of religion: Islāmic law, Qur'ān interpretation, and *ḥadīth* were rather neglected. This last feature was much criticized by Muslim reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; so, as a result, the *Dars-i Nizāmi* has been partially supplanted by new curricula like that of Deoband that put more stress on primary religious texts and less on logic.

But why should Muslims have adopted such a curriculum? It was not due to some accident of historical development in India, since very similar curricula had been in use earlier throughout much of the Islāmic world and are still taught in places like Qom in Iran. For now I will simply observe that the central goal of the *Dars-i Nizāmi* curriculum was to teach the student how to understand texts through a deep knowledge of logic, the inner workings of language, and rhetoric. It did not focus on teaching the sacred texts themselves to the students or on explaining to the students what they meant. This did have the virtue that the *Dars-i Nizāmi* and its cousins could be pan-Islāmic curriculum, one that *Shī'ites* and *Sunnis* of any of the four *madhabs* could equally well study. Thus, *Shī'ite* texts on logic and even on theology were taught in *Sunni madāris*.

### ***The failure of consensus in modern times***

The observer looking at the situation of the Islāmic world at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is struck by how different a role is played by unanswered questions, actual disagreement, and striving for agreement. My concern here is particularly with individuals and groups who are actively concerned with Islām and its future, those who are in one sense or another intellectually engaged with Islām and who are convinced that the solutions to the problems facing Islām are also the solutions to the problems facing Islāmic societies. In other words, they hold

that Islām — or at least Islām correctly understood and correctly practiced — is the solution to the problems of Islāmic society.

Such a formulation takes in a very wide range of opinion — revolutionary Iran, Tālibān Afghanistan, groups urging an Islāmic legal, political, social, or economic system, and Islāmic modernists. The answer can also be negative, as with those who see Islām as currently practiced or Islām and religion in general as an obstacle to development. It does not include all shades of opinion, since there are political groups in the Islāmic world that are secular in orientation and for whom Islām is simply a feature of their culture — the Arab Baathists and many of the Palestinian groups, for example. Still, most thoughtful people in the Islāmic world are probably convinced that Islām in one way or another is central to the political, economic and social futures of their countries. It is easy enough to understand why they should think so. The Islāmic religion was the direct cause of the rise of Islāmic societies; it is natural for Muslims to look to Islām for explanations and solutions when things go wrong in their societies.

That said, the observer cannot fail to be struck by the sense that something has changed. In the middle ages the Islāmic acceptance of institutionalized disagreement took place in the context of a general consensus about the structure and functioning of Islāmic society. In the contemporary Islāmic world, the range of disagreement is far broader, and there is not even agreement about the extent to which disagreement should be tolerated. I will take Pakistan as my usual example, since it is in many ways an extreme case in which the phenomena I am discussing can be clearly seen. There are strong, or at least loud, voices opposing the toleration even of the degree of disagreement institutionalized by the consensus of the learned in pre-modern times — recognition of other *madhāhib* and *de facto* acceptance of *Shī'ism*, for example. Awareness and tolerance of this institutionalized diversity is also slipping away in more subtle ways. Beyond these issues is one even larger: the extent of

the legitimacy of culture, Islāmic or otherwise, not derived from the norms of universal Islām.

Let us consider some concrete examples. Pakistani Islāmiyāt textbooks typically do not mention the existence of the four legal schools or of the complex and tentative way in which Islāmic law is actually deduced. Instead, they portray a legal system that sprang full grown and uniform from the brows of the Companions of the Prophet. To students, taught from such textbooks, disagreement about matters of Islāmic law can only appear to be motivated by perversity. Likewise, the Islāmiyāt books are generally legalistic and *Sunni* in orientation and have little to say about the other traditions of Islām: ignoring *Shī'ism* and the great issues of early Islām that gave rise to it and ignoring even *Ṣūfism*, the dominant spiritual tradition in Pakistan.

A more general example is the effort to adopt Islāmic law as the basic law of the state. This is not, as one might suppose, the restoration of a situation that existed during the Islāmic middle ages. An early form of Islāmic law prevailed, of course, under the Prophet and during the tenure of the Rāshidūn caliphs, but Islāmic law in its fully developed form emerged only in the eighth and ninth centuries. This law was almost never the law of the state for a variety of good reasons. Few rulers were willing to give the conduct of the legal system completely into the hands of the 'ulamā', nor were the 'ulamā' willing to relinquish their legal authority to rulers of very uncertain piety. The bulk of Islāmic law was concerned with religious practices that had nothing to do with the state, and most of the rest was law governing voluntary contracts between individuals, such as sales and marriages. Many areas of law of close concern to the state were barely dealt with in Islāmic law, notably criminal law. In each area of the Islāmic world, there was also customary law, usually in several different forms and often pre-dating Islām. Whatever religious scholars may have wished, important areas of life such as taxation and landlord-tenant relations were governed by customary law, not Islāmic law. Finally, the enforcement of one legal school by the

state would do violence to the consciences of 'ulamā' and ordinary believers who followed another school.

Naturally, a pious ruler, like any other conscientious believer, would attempt to act in accordance with Islāmic norms, and even a ruler whose conscience was not much troubled by Islām would try not to offend the sensibilities of the pious unnecessarily. Nonetheless, the state followed its own necessities and enforced its own laws. As a result, attempts to convert Islāmic law into the law of the state were rare and generally not very successful or long-lasting — for example, the British attempt to administer a legal system based on Ḥanafī law in Bengal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a system that is the actual ancestor of the legal system of modern Pakistan. In both British Bengal and Pakistan well-intentioned attempts to base the law of the state on Islāmic law have run afoul of disagreements about the content of Islāmic law and the tendency of state legal systems to evolve according to their own inner logic.

The greatest source of disagreement in the Islāmic world is the role of culture not directly derived from the Islām of the old books. I am not talking here about the challenge of Western and global culture; I am talking about the local culture of the Islāmic lands. The classic example is Iran, where two distinct cultural traditions have coexisted for twelve centuries: an Islāmic culture, whose focus is religious and universalist, and an Iranian culture, embodied in the Persian language and the nationalist traditions of the Iranian monarchy. These two traditions are very different and have always coexisted in a tension that is sometimes fruitful and sometimes destructive. Analogous situations exist in all Islāmic countries, where the local culture may express itself in ways that have nothing to do with Islām — the Lahori kite-flying holiday of Basant, for example, whose origins are probably Hindu but which is now a purely secular holiday. The local culture may also take religious form, resulting in local Islāmic cultural features, such as the *ṣūfī* shrine culture of Punjab and Sindh or the strict segregation of women practiced by the tribal peoples of Afghanistan, the North-West Frontier Province, and Balochistan.



I will come back to these issues, but for the moment I will only remark that attempts to use Islām as a tool to revitalize Islāmic society have made the underlying issues objects of greater controversy.

*The classical Islāmic attitude to disagreement*

Islām is a religion of unity and of law. What I propose to do here is to give an account of how medieval Muslims came to a consensus about how to deal with disagreement, how they created an educational system that reflected that consensus, and how we might understand current Islāmic issues in the light of the medieval Islāmic understanding of disagreement.

Muslims, being human beings, disagreed with each other even in the time of the Prophet, but disagreement posed no intellectual problem in those glorious days: issues could simply be put to the Prophet himself, who would settle them. It was not until two centuries or so after his death with the emergence of distinct legal schools that the question of disagreement became a serious intellectual problem. Before that, there had certainly been disagreements among eminent Muslim scholars, but the issues had been argued on the assumption that only one party could be right and the others must be wrong — in other words, without asking questions about the nature of disagreement as such. Gradually, though, fair-minded scholars realized that they faced the risk of splitting Islām over fine points of law on which there could be honest disagreement. Unwilling to do so, they conceded that disagreement over issues of law and other matters was going to be a permanent feature of Islām.

This tolerance of difference of opinion is expressed in a *ḥadīth*: "Whatever has been brought to you in the Book of God, do it; there is no excuse for failing to do so. If it is not in the Book of God, then follow my *sunna*. If there is no *sunna* from me, follow what my companions say, for my companions are like the stars in the sky, so whatever you take from them will be guidance to you. The disagreement of my companions is a mercy

to you.”<sup>1</sup> This *ḥadīth* is almost certainly spurious, as are similar *aḥādīth* justifying diversity of Qur’ānic texts, but it is nonetheless valuable, for like most spurious *aḥādīth* it reflects a legal or theological position that someone felt strongly enough about to put into the form of a saying of the Prophet.

Though a spurious *ḥadīth* might not be legally decisive, a consensus of the learned (*ijmā’*) certainly is, and a consensus quickly formed that the four major legal *madhhab*s were all legitimate, as were the various trends of opinion within each school. In practice, Twelver *Shī’ite* law tended to be accepted as well, though there was as much intellectual contact between *Shī’ite* and *Sunni* scholars. It was quite common for scholars of one *madhhab* to study and comment on works from another *madhhab*. There was occasional friction, but scholars rarely called into question the Islāmic legitimacy of scholars of other *madhhab*s. This approach of accepting permanent disagreement was then used in other areas of Islāmic scholarship and thought.

There seem to have been two factors leading to such tolerance of diversity. On the one hand, Muslims place great value on unity. The Muslims are one *umma*, and no Muslim is entirely comfortable with an outright split in the community. The Islāmic community was united politically for only about a century, but the yearning for a restoration of that unity is still of real political importance; there is no Christian or Buddhist equivalent of the Organization of Islāmic Conference. Likewise, Muslim scholars are uncomfortable with using schism as a way of resolving disputes.

On the other hand, the nature of the Islāmic religion made disagreement a continuing fact of life. Islām is a religion of law; in principle, every possible human action falls into one of five categories of legal acceptance or condemnation. Moreover, after the death of the Prophet the law was closed; all future legal

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<sup>1</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Ikhtilāf al-Madhāhib*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qayyūm b. Muḥammad Shafī’ al-Bustwai (Cairo: Dār al-‘Itisām, 1989), pp. 19-20.

questions would have to be answered by examining the Qur'ān and the surviving reports of the words and actions of the Prophet and his companions. Under such circumstances honest disagreement was inevitable. Islāmic scholars were constantly faced with the problem of deciding what the Prophet would have told them to do about problems that had not come up during his lifetime — and the most fundamental such problem was precisely how to resolve such disputes about what the Prophet would have done.

Obviously, many thought that some disagreements were important enough to call into question the legitimacy of an opponent's faith — the question of free will and predestination was one such issue — but equally obviously one could not call another scholar an unbeliever over a disagreement about a fine point of contract law. And so a characteristically Islāmic compromise emerged. Islāmic law became the domain of opinion. A believer was obliged to make a sincere effort to ascertain the law and follow it, either by studying it deeply for himself or by following the best judgement of someone who had made such a study for himself. God would reward his good intentions if he was in error and would reward him additionally if he had correctly derived the law and followed it. Thus, by the twelfth century the various Islāmic sciences had assumed their permanent forms, forms in which institutionalized disagreement and diversity were central.

While the substantive content of the Islāmic sciences has changed little in the last thousand years, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw two major new influences on the way they were understood; formal logic and Ibn 'Arabi's theory of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. It was logic that was to shape the way the Islāmic sciences were studied in coming centuries, culminating in the *Dars-i Nizāmi*. Greek logic and philosophy had reached the Islāmic world too late and remained controversial for too long for them to have more than an indirect role in shaping the Islāmic sciences. Ghazālī seems to have been the first important Islāmic scholar to systematically incorporate logic into his legal

theory. He included a summary of logic as an introduction to his manual of *Uṣūl al-fiqh*. He was one of the few to do so, for the widespread study of logic by students of the religious sciences soon made such introductions unnecessary.

The introduction of logic into the curriculum of Islāmic religious colleges seems to have been accompanied by a desire to re-examine the foundations of Islāmic thought. The most striking manifestation of this change is the science of theology, *ʿIlm al-kalām*. *Kalām* means speech or argument and began in the early Islāmic debates about the creed and certain divisive issues like free will, predestination, and the Imamate. The early texts consisted of various discussions on particular disputed points, with the author supporting his opinion by proof texts from the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* and commonsensical arguments. Though the arrangement and argumentation gradually became more systematic and sophisticated, *Kalām* texts for several centuries remained collections of discussions of disputed points of belief. The theologians defined their science as “a science by which one is enabled to establish religious doctrines by offering proofs for them and removing doubts about them. According to the early scholars, its *subject* is the essence of God Exalted and His attributes.”<sup>2</sup> The philosophers, intellectual rivals of the theologians, described *Kalām* as a dialectical discipline offering rhetorical or dialectical arguments for religious beliefs but not giving scientific certainty.

Then, around 1300, the nature of *Kalām* changed radically. Its subject was no longer religious beliefs as such but the ways in which religious beliefs could be known. Theologians began devoting most of the space in their books to complex discussions of logic, epistemology, and metaphysics, and banished the actual discussion of religious beliefs to a relatively short section on *samʿiyyāt*, things heard, in the back of the book. The central subject of theology became the methodology of theology, not

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<sup>2</sup>Tashkubrazada, *Miftah al-Saʿāda*, vol. 2, p. 19.



theology itself. Similar things were happening elsewhere in the curriculum, where logic, Arabic grammar, Arabic rhetoric, and *uṣūl al-fiqh* were becoming the central subjects in the curriculum, at the expense of the study of Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and Islāmic law.

So far as I know, the Islāmic scholars of the time do not explain the reasons for this change. Something similar happened in Europe about the same time, partly due to the intellectual excitement of the rediscovery of Greek philosophy and partly because university authorities did not want undergraduates studying theology, the central intellectual discipline of medieval Christianity. Perhaps something similar was at work in the Islāmic world. Islāmic law, Qur'ān interpretation, *ḥadīth*, and the like were mature disciplines, whereas the application of logic, the new rhetoric, and philosophy to their foundations was a new and exciting area of research. But that does not explain the long-term popularity of the curricula like the *Dars-i Nizāmi*, where logic, dialectic, and the profound study of language were and are central.

Whatever the conscious reasons for adopting a curriculum that stressed the methods of Islāmic research over the content of Islāmic law and belief, the fact is that the curriculum suited the situation in which Islām found itself. No religious scholar could doubt that there was a true and single *sharī'a*, revealed by God to Muḥammad, but our knowledge of it is imperfect. The *fiqh* is a delicate web of inferences whose strength comes from a deep understanding of language, logic, and the texts on which it is based and from the efforts of dozens of generations of scholars patiently weighing and piecing together thousands of bits of evidence. An education in which logic and linguistics are studied dialectically might sharpen the mind of the student, but it also taught him a good deal of humility as he sought to divine the will of God. Sincere disagreement under such circumstances is inevitable and shows only that we are servants before God, not His privileged counselors.

It should be noted that a much more radical interpretation of disagreement swept the Islāmic world at about the same time, Ibn ‘Arabi’s theory of *wahdat al-wujūd*. It would take us too far from the main topic to discuss this in detail, but Ibn ‘Arabi argued that all beings are manifestations of some aspects of God. Human beings, unlike other creatures, can progress towards God, but except for a handful of saints and prophets, we inevitably see God from a limited and idiosyncratic perspective, which is, however, our own particular way of understanding God. There is not really any right or wrong in these perspectives, only varying degrees of deficiency and completeness. Thus, *Ṣūfis* have always recognized the legitimacy of varying spiritual paths based on the diverse temperaments of human beings.

To recapitulate: Medieval Muslims were able to maintain religious unity by the device of systematically tolerating diversity and disagreement within a certain range. This tolerance was based on an honest understanding of the tentativeness of each of the great legal schools, as well as of the scope for disagreement in other areas of Islāmic religious scholarship. Eventually, the understanding of the bases of this disagreement in effect became the central theme of Islāmic education. The fact that Islāmic law influenced the state but was not usually enforced by the state allowed this state of affairs to continue without violating the consciences of individual scholars and thus forcing schism. The fact that travel was slow and Muslims isolated from each other made such tolerance easier to maintain, especially since there was also usually a tolerance of local custom.

### ***Disagreement in the contemporary Islamic world***

In the past century the old ways of handling disagreement among Muslims have obviously broken down. Old quarrels have re-emerged with new vehemence, and disagreements of new sorts have arisen. I will offer some explanations for this fact and then close by suggesting some directions from which a new resolution might come.

*The breakdown of traditional education.* Colonialism, modernization, and secularism have done great damage to the Islāmic educational system. Modern states, colonial and otherwise, have withdrawn the traditional sources of support for Islāmic education. Talented students, who might once have become '*ulamā*', go to modern schools and universities seeking more lucrative careers. Traditions of learning have been broken in many places as *madāris* have closed or gone through bad times. In some places, Islāmic education has been co-opted by other forces in society, as in Indonesia, where well-funded government "Islāmic Institutes" were founded to train government religious officials who know government ideology far better than they know Arabic. As far as I can tell, only Iran, Iraq, and Egypt have managed to preserve vigorous and continuous traditions of Islāmic education and scholarship.

*The role of the educated laity.* Probably, more people in the Islāmic world are literate now than ever before in history, and the major Islāmic source texts are available in inexpensive printed editions in all the major Islāmic and European languages. The combination of traditionalism and dialectical subtlety of the medieval Islāmic scholars and many modern '*ulamā*' do not answer the questions that an engineer or a doctor might bring to Islām. Increasingly, Muslims with modern educations are re-examining the Islāmic sources for themselves, bringing fresh questions and answers to the material, but also bringing a naivete about the nature and interpretation of the primary Islāmic texts.

*Ease of communications.* Muslims of every school and sect now live as a single community, so that Malaysia and Nigeria are in closer contact now than Multan and Tehran were two hundred years ago. It is not surprising that Muslims accustomed to think of the practices of their own community as the Islāmic norm should be shocked by other Islāmic communities that behave very differently.

*The rise of neo-Hanbalism.* A rigorous and literalist Islām deriving from the *Hanbali* tradition and its *Wahhābi* offshoot has become increasingly influential in the Islāmic world. It is

characterized by a literal interpretation of Islāmic texts and a degree of intolerance both towards other Islāmic legal schools and towards cultural traits, whether Islāmic or Western, not based on Islāmic tradition. From the beginning the *Hanbalis* generally preferred to follow the letter of the text rather than reason in deriving law. Although the *Hanbalis* in the past were the smallest of the *madhhabs*, they are becoming increasingly influential. Partly this is due to the historical accident that Saudi Arabia is predominantly *Hanbali*, and the Saudis, both the government and individuals, have generously supported Islāmic causes around the world, thus spreading the influence of *Hanbali* thought.

There is another reason, however, for *Hanbali* influence in the modern world. As literalists the *Hanbalis* can offer the simple and very convincing argument that something ought to be done or not done because there is a Qur'ānic verse or a *ḥadīth* that commands or forbids it. The argument that the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* are the only legitimate source of Islāmic practice is almost as compelling — that something not commanded by the Qur'ān or *ḥadīth* ought not to be done. Most Muslim scholars throughout the centuries have rejected these arguments, holding that individual texts must be understood within a much larger textual, intellectual, and social context. However, the arguments against the *Hanbali* position are not simple ones and can only be understood on the basis of the complex intellectual heritage of medieval Islām. And so, the *Hanbali* argument tends to prevail in popular debate.

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As a non-Muslim it is not my place to say which of these positions is right or wrong or what Muslims ought to do to restore the unity of their community. I will, however, close by suggesting two quite different sources that, I think, are likely to be needed in order to resolve these issues.

First, the Islāmic learned tradition cannot be disregarded. It is easy to be impatient with traditional Islāmic scholarship. It is



old, narrow, often hidebound, and slow to deal with current issues. Many of the issues it has debated strike even sympathetic Muslims as rather silly. And, in fact, both Muslim modernists and many so-called fundamentalist groups have rejected the learned tradition. In Egypt, for example, both secularists and the revolutionary Islāmic parties are suspicious of the traditionalist '*ulamā*' of al-Azhar. On the other hand, I do not think the Islāmic learned tradition can be lightly discarded. The medieval '*ulamā*' had a profound understanding of how Islāmic law and teaching could be extracted from the material available to them. They understood the limitations of their own reasoning, and they knew the Islāmic tradition intimately. They taught a responsible humility before the sources of their tradition. Most of all, they understood the need for and limitations of interpretation in deriving Islāmic law and teaching.

"Fundamentalists" and modernists are, it seems to me, united in a willingness to naively interpret texts in a way that imposes their own interpretation on them. Disagreements arise whose basis is no more than the limited understanding of a single reader of the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth*. Such interpretations can even be cynical, as in Indonesia, where students are taught to do "*ijtihād*" — by which is explicitly meant, finding Islāmic justifications for government policies. Without the Islāmic learned tradition, it seems to me, the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* will become nothing more than a screen on which Muslims of varying temperaments will project their own preconceptions and prejudices.

Second, I think the Muslims living in the West are likely to play a key role in the renewal of the Islāmic consensus. Though comparatively small in numbers, they are quickly evolving into a vigorous and successful community. As a minority in a new cultural setting, they have had to ask themselves new questions about the meaning and nature of Islām. As a minority of very diverse origins, they do not have the luxury of preserving the divisions of the societies they came from. Mosques, whose congregations might come from a score of countries across the

Islāmic world, have to face issues of diversity, cultural difference, modernism, unity, and the role of women, and to do so while trying to win acceptance from a larger non-Muslim society that has not usually been very sympathetic. 'Ulamā' have had to learn to play new roles and to deal with new problems. Muslim communities in American or European cities are microcosms of the Islāmic world in a larger world society. I suspect that the lessons they are learning will prove invaluable to their homelands.

(2001)