

# MODERNIST ISLAM, 1840–1940

A SOURCEBOOK

---

Edited by CHARLES KURZMAN

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2002

## Laws Should Change in Accordance with the Conditions of Nations and The Theology of Unity

Muhammad 'Abduh (Egypt, 1849–1905) was, along with his mentor Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (see chapter 11), the most prominent figure of modernist Islam. Born to a peasant family of modest means in the Egyptian Delta, he received a traditional Islamic education in his hometown, then continued his education at the celebrated al-Azhar seminary. During Afghani's sojourn in Egypt (1871–1879), 'Abduh became closely associated with him and his reformist ideas. In 1882, 'Abduh was exiled to Beirut for his association with the 'Urabi revolt. In 1884, he joined Afghani in Paris, where they produced the famed journal *al-'Urwa al-wuthqa* (*The Strongest Link*), which agitated against imperialism and called for Islamic reform and unity. 'Abduh returned to Beirut, where he taught for several years before being pardoned by the Egyptian ruler. Returning to Egypt, he served as a judge and then as Egypt's leading religious official, al-Azhar administrative board member, and Egypt's Legislative Council member. 'Abduh devised programs for the reform of the educational system, the Arabic language, and the education of girls, and labored to introduce reforms in al-Azhar, the religious endowment administration, and the court system. 'Abduh's influence extended beyond Egypt, inspiring reformists throughout the Islamic world. The first piece presented here makes a case for legal reform; the second piece highlights the role of reason in understanding religion and the *shari'a*. Through a return to the fundamental sources of Islam, 'Abduh hoped to liberate the Muslim mind from traditional patterns of stagnation, enabling Muslims to address the requirements of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

### Laws Should Change in Accordance with the Conditions of Nations

The First Creator, God the Sublime, entrusted to humanity two powers, one practical and one theoretical, so that through them we might attain the perfection intended for us. God also bound one of them to the other, making the perfection of the first dependent on the perfection of the second. Humanity is thus

innately disposed to seek out a theoretical understanding and to discover the true state of matters before he begins any practical work, for he undertakes no task unless the results thereof induce him to do so. Now, not every activity produces the results desired; indeed, in order to do so, it must be accomplished in a particular fashion. Certainly, the ability to envision results and knowledge of the methods involved in activities are among those things that depend on the capacity for rational inquiry. If this

Muhammad 'Abduh, "Ikhtilaf al-qawanin bi-ikhtilaf ahwal al-umam" (Laws Should Change in Accordance with the Conditions of Nations), pp. 309–315 in *al-A'mal al-kamila* (*The Complete Works*), ed. Muhammad 'Imara (Beirut, Lebanon: Mu'assasat al-'Arabiyya li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1972); *The Theology of Unity* (*Risalat al-tawhid*), translated from Arabic by Ishaq Masa'ad and Kenneth Cragg (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), pp. 29–40, 151–154, reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers. Translation of first piece from Arabic by Devin Stewart. First published in 1881 and 1897, respectively. Introduction by Emad Eldin Shahin.

1. Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad 'Abduh* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933); Osman Amin, *Muhammad 'Abduh* (Washington, D.C.: American Council for Learned Societies, 1953); Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Ahmed Amin, *Zu'ama' al-islah fi al-'asr al-hadith* (*The Leaders of Reform in the Modern Era*) (Cairo, Egypt: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Masriyya, 1979), pp. 302–369.

capacity is fully developed, then work turns out in the best fashion, the benefit that results is greater, and the outcome is more complete.

For this reason, all humans are bent on rounding out their theoretical knowledge, first and in particular so that through it they might be guided to the proper methods for the work they perform in order to lead a full life. They also do so in order to distinguish results according to their relative benefits, so that they might put each result opposite a particular task, arranged in a known manner, beginning with that which produces benefits most quickly, is accomplished most easily, and is set forth most reliably.

Human knowledge is in effect a collection of rules about useful benefits, by which people organize the methods of work that lead to those benefits, so that they will not stumble along their path and confuse the beneficial with the harmful, thus encountering hardship and suffering at the hands of misfortune.

Since the conditions of nations depend on their collective stores of information, and the two are related in terms of cause and effect, each nation adopts rules for its activities and chooses laws for its circumstances in accordance with its power of theoretical investigation and its level of thought. At no time does it contradict the customs and traditional values that its natural disposition has established, unless fortune provides it the chance to ascend to a higher level of rational examination and a more elevated plane of thought.

Because laws are the basis of activities organized properly to produce manifest benefits, the results of theoretical inquiry, and the outcome of intellectual investigation, the laws of each nation correspond to its level in understanding. Laws vary in accordance with nations' varying levels of knowledge, or the lack thereof.

It is not permissible, therefore, to apply the law of one group of people to another group who differ from and surpass the first in level of understanding, because the law will not suit their state of thinking and will not match their customs and traditional habits. Otherwise, order among the second group will be disturbed, their path toward good sense will be obscured, and the road to understanding will be closed before them. They will consider the correct to be invalid and the right to be wrong. They will pervert the application of these laws, change them, and put others in their place, so that what is a cure for others will become a disease for them. This is because of short-sightedness on their part and ignorance of what these laws were intended to accom-

plish, what motivated them, and what made them necessary. Need is the guiding master, and the first teacher. When people properly recognize need, they strive to fulfill it. They are restricted by it, and do not go against its dictates and prescriptions. If the institution of laws within a nation is motivated by its need for them, it will not contravene them simply because of circumstances. However, people who were not induced by need to institute such laws do not consider them among life's fundamental necessities. They are not to be blamed for discarding such laws, and demanding that they abide by such laws would impose an impossibly difficult obligation. It is more appropriate for them to learn first what the need is, so that they might be equal with others in their level of knowledge and united with them in the consequences thereof.

It has been the custom of legislators in every age, in instituting laws, to take into account the level of intelligence of those for whom laws are to be instituted, so that the people will not find them unclear, incomprehensible, or devoid of discernible purpose. [Legislators have also customarily] paid full attention to customs and traditional habits. In establishing laws, they do not deviate from the harshness or leniency that customs and traditional habits require. A little reprimand suffices and the threat of a light punishment restrains many a group of people whose temperaments are readily compliant, whose spirits are noble, and whose senses are quick to be affected. Such people should have prescribed for them laws that suit their conditions. They should not be burdened with severe laws, for they will be harmed by these laws, like someone who takes more than the proper dose of medicine.

For example, suppose that one of these people we have described did something that required punishment. If imprisonment, for him, troubles his temperament and severely pains his spirit, because of his pride and delicate sensibility, and if the spirits of his clan and the inhabitants of his town cannot bear that someone should say "So-and-so was imprisoned for such-and-such a crime," the occurrence of such a thing to one of them would be a very great check against perpetrating the crime he committed. The sentencing of this criminal, then, to a more severe punishment, such as banishment, exile, or hard, humiliating labor, would be a clear injustice. It might cause his death soon thereafter, or produce long-lasting dejection and perennial rancor in the hearts of his folk and clan, due to their certainty that the

ruling was wrong and the judge unjust. This would only lead, in the long run, to the fires of rebellion being lit and the heat of hatred flaming up among them. Either they would be destined to commit evil acts or else their spirits would be extinguished, their temperaments humiliated, and their pride utterly crushed, a miserable end indeed.

Many a nation has raised its members on coarseness and the shunning of delicacy. Their insides are filled with vileness and baseness, and their spirits are far from honorable. Such people are only deterred from perpetrating offenses or restrained from the pursuit of immoral aims by harsh laws based on severe punishments. It is a clear mistake to sentence a guilty party from among such a group to imprisonment, for example, since his spirit considers even harsher punishments to be trifling. The purpose of instituting laws is to prevent that which disturbs order, disrupts the structure of society, harms individual interests, and detracts from public welfare. If laws do not serve this purpose, then they are but empty burdens thrown on the shoulders of the people. Indeed, we should see them as merely widening the sphere of corruption and increasing instances of injustice.

As an example of what we have just stated, we may cite the former state of our own land. Some time ago, Egypt's inhabitants were barbarians who did not know what was good for themselves, for ignorance had a tight hold on them in that era. They did not pay attention to agriculture, despite the availability of the necessary means for it and the suitability of the soil. Landowners did not know the value of the land they owned. They continually wished that their properties would be transferred to someone else, so that they would not be burdened with paying the taxes that the government had imposed on them. They avoided tarrying in town long enough for the hands of the governors to grab them. Villagers left and settled in other villages, fearing that they could not survive through farming and seeking better ways to accumulate wealth and fortune. The government was thus compelled to force villagers to take possession of the land and farm it, instituting harsh laws for violators, including provisions for severe punishment. When the time came for the government to demand the royal taxes, the prisons filled up with those left behind by the others who had fled their villages, and the market for whips became brisk. It appeared that everyone had either fled, been imprisoned, or ached from beatings. The country regularly withered and

flourished at particular times of the year, without variation. It continued in this sorry state for a long time, until the populace's spirits became attached to work, and agriculture was made easy for them. Egypt entered a new stage of development as a result of measures which made the methods of farming easier and got the populace to remain in their villages. They adopted a unified plan for the farming of their lands and were no longer overly concerned with government taxes, because they had begun to learn the importance of agriculture, taking it seriously and competing in their crop yields. So the laws that the government had adopted to prevent farmers from fleeing, neglecting to work the land, and defaulting on the submission of taxes changed to a certain extent. Then various oppressive hands had successive control over them for quite a long period, but they remained settled in their properties. They grew tired of abuse, and their spirits longed for a just law by which the matter of their tax payments would be put in order. The hand of divine Providence brought to them, through the government of Tawfiq [Egyptian ruler, 1879–1892], someone who established for them a just law concerning this issue. With this new law, Egypt entered a new era, and the sound of the whip was removed from among its people. The punishment for falling behind in the payment of taxes was changed so as not to debase a person's honor, and public welfare was regulated according to laws that do not go against the inclinations of the populace, in a fashion different from that followed in earlier laws. This was a consequence of the difference between the two conditions and the change in the two inclinations, former and latter. If the punishment for falling in arrears in earlier times had been seizure of the owner's land, then falling in arrears would have been their dearest wish, so that they could be relieved of writing their names in the landowners' register. This recompense would have been a reward for them, in actuality, and not a punishment, but now it has become the most severe punishment.

The time has come for our government to turn its consideration to the laws of our courts, to make them appropriate for present conditions, choosing laws that are not difficult to understand, whose texts do not suggest multiple interpretations. The articles of the new law should not be the sort of general rules whose verdicts are meant to apply to various punishments for many diverse crimes. This will prevent the laws themselves from serving as a pretext for those who

harbor immoral designs to play with people's rights as they wish. [We urge this] while recognizing the fact that those who exercise control over the law do not have the status of legislators able to derive the rulings which apply to the actual situations at hand from general rules or from texts which support interpretations contrary to their evident meaning.

Moreover, those of us who have legitimate claims are not beyond entertaining invalid suspicions and conjectures. We might suspect someone who is innocent of error or treachery, while the actual articles of the law do not provide a clear ruling and their texts are not transparent. This leads to repeated appeals for judicial inquiry: The matter takes a long time, the welfare of the people is obstructed, expenses increase, resentments grow strong, and the gates of corruption are flung wide open, given an abundance of legal cases and disputes, as is the case in our land at present. It is therefore necessary that the articles of the law be written explicitly, indicate rulings in a straightforward manner, apply to all possible cases, be set forth in logical categories, and use simple linguistic constructions.

The laws that have been in common use in our land up to now—in addition to being insufficient, too general, and written in an unclear style—are not precise and well organized, nor are they known by the people. Certain laws are known as "The Imperial Law," some laws are named "Regulations," some are called "Directives of the Ministry of Justice," some are called "Decisions of the Privy Council," others "Proclamations of Legal Rulings," some "The Royal Decree issued on such-and-such a date," and so on *ad infinitum*. How could this scattered mess reasonably serve as a law by which the people should abide? Even if they were informed of the law, it would remain inconceivable to them, because it is foreign to their conditions and beyond their capacity to understand.

It is necessary to reform this obvious flaw in our legal system, which has deprived people of their rights and jeopardized security. It behooves us to do this quickly and avoid wasting time in pointless discussions. The laws must fulfill all of the necessary restrictions and conditions, and should refer us back neither to the "Proclamations" nor to the "Regulations." This should facilitate the determination of legal rulings and make them conform with the exigencies of the present situation. The laws should suit the conditions of the populace and their level of comprehension, enabling them to understand the laws and abide by their require-

ments, each one according to his own situation. Otherwise, they will be nothing but ink on paper.

Scholars and political leaders of both ancient and modern times have long recognized that legislators and institutors of laws must always take into account customs and traditional habits in order to establish laws in a just and beneficial manner. Indeed, the conditions of nations are themselves the true legislator, the wise, regulating guide. The governing power is actually dependent on the capacities of its subjects; the former does not take a single step unless induced to do so by the latter. True, we do not deny that the preparation of means and measures depends on the governing power. The government imposes these things on its subjects willy-nilly, but these impositions must be in accordance with the capacity of those ruled. Changes in the form of government and the replacement of its laws depend on the citizenry's legitimate claims, and these are tantamount to the condition of the populace. The shift of the government of France, for example, from an absolute monarchy to a restricted monarchy, then to a free republic, did not occur by the will of those in authority alone. Rather, the strongest contributing factors were the conditions of the people, the increase in their level of thought, and their new awareness of the need to ascend to a state higher than their present one. By learning what their true obligations were, they were able to overcome all the outside forces that had stood between them and the attainment of their desires. Moreover, they only arrived at this noble goal after breaking through the obstacles that stood before them; otherwise, they could not have reached their goal or attained their desire.

Since the identification of the proper means and measures presents a difficult puzzle for human intelligence and discernment, it is extremely difficult to learn and acquire them in their essential forms. It often occurs that a certain group of people think themselves prepared to move to a higher level of civilization and legal organization, but the matter is not as they had imagined, so they end up regressing to a less desirable state. While they set out to make legislation and participation in the establishment of laws free and open to all, they are not safe from the machinations of special interests, nor do they possess the means necessary to prepare them for such an undertaking. The disease of discord spreads rapidly through their collective body, and the disorder of obstinacy pursues them relentlessly. They fail to ar-

rive at correct decisions, settle on firm opinions, and give decisive verdicts. They spend ages in pointless argument, and so lose the benefits of decisive action and squander their own welfare. They are thus aptly described by the proverb, "He who hastens something on before its time, will be punished by being deprived of it." In sum, the form of civil rule for a nation is nothing but a reflection of the capacities that its members have acquired, including their familiar practices and the customs on which they have been raised. During the course of a nation's ascent or descent, its laws are inseparable from these capacities, no matter how much its classes change or its affairs vary. This is what makes intelligent people, when they desire to establish a sound system to regulate the nation's social life, strive first to change the people's capacities and traditional habits, placing genuine education before all else in order to be able to attain this goal. Indeed, they include in the governmental laws themselves chapters and sections that serve to regulate customary habits and preserve meritorious aptitudes, guide individuals in their activities and their conduct, so that their work may be transformed from a burden to a custom and natural disposition. In this way, morals may become virtuous and customs excellent, and the nation may follow the path of rectitude toward the best ultimate goal.

### The Theology of Unity

The theology of unity (*tawhid*) is the science that studies the being and attributes of God, the essential and the possible affirmations about Him, as well as the negations that are necessary to make relating to Him. It deals also with the apostles and the authenticity of their message and treats of their essential and appropriate qualities and of what is incompatibly associated with them.

The original meaning of *tawhid* is the belief that God is one in inalienable divinity. Thus the whole science of theology is named from the most important of its parts, namely the demonstration of the unity of God in Himself and in the act of creation. From Him alone all being derives and in Him alone every purpose comes to its term. Unity was the great aim of the mission of the Prophet Muhammad, the blessing and peace of God be upon him. This is entirely evident from the verses of the mighty Qur'an, as will fully appear below.

The doctrine of unity could equally well be called scholastic theology. One reason for this lies in the fact that the chief point of debate at issue between the learned of the early centuries was whether the Qur'anic word was created or preexistent. Another may lie in the fact that theology is built on rational demonstration as alleged by each theologian in his spoken case. For in their rationality they only occasionally appealed to dogmatic tradition (*naql*) and then only after establishing the first principles from which they went on yet again to further deductions, like branches of the same stem. The name may perhaps also be credited to the fact that these scholastic methods of proof in theology were comparable to those of logic in its procedures of argument within the speculative sciences. So *kalam*, or scholastic theology, was used as a term in preference to logic, to denote the distinction between the two, with their identical procedures but differing subject matter.

This branch of science, dogmatic theology and prophetic interpretation, was known among the nations before Islam. There were in every people custodians of religion concerned with its protection and propagation, of which the first prerequisite is expression. They had, however, little recourse to rational judgment in their custody of belief. They rarely relied for their ideas and dogmas on the nature of existence or the laws of the universe. Indeed there is an almost total contrast between the intellectual cut and thrust of science and the forms of religious persuasion and assurance of heart. Oftentimes religion on the authority of its own leaders was the avowed enemy of reason, and all its works. Theology consisted for the most part of intricate subtleties and credulous admiration of miracles, with free play to the imagination—a situation familiar enough to those acquainted at all with the condition of the world before the coming of Islam.

The Qur'an came and took religion by a new road, untrodden by the previous Scriptures, a road appropriate and feasible alike to the contemporaries of the revelation and to their successors. The proof of the prophethood of Muhammad was quite a different matter from that of earlier prophecies. It rested its case on a quality of eloquence, belonging even to the shortest chapter of it, quite beyond the competence of the rhetoricians to reproduce, though in his recipience of the revelation he was simply a man. The Book gives us all that God permits us, or is essential for us, to know about His attributes. But it does not require our acceptance of its contents simply on the



ground of its own statement of them. On the contrary, it offers arguments and evidence. It addressed itself to the opposing schools and carried its attacks with spirited substantiation. It spoke to the rational mind and alerted the intelligence. It set out the order in the universe, the principles and certitudes within it, and required a lively scrutiny of them that the mind might thus be sure of the validity of its claims and message. Even in relation of the narratives of the past, it proceeded on the conviction that the created order follows invariable laws, as the Qur'an says: "Such was the way of God in days gone by and you will find it does not change." [Sura 48, Verse 23] And again: "God does not change a people's case until they change their own disposition." [Sura 13, Verse 11] "... the shape of religious man as God has made him. There is no altering the creation of God." [Sura 30, Verse 30] Even in the realm of the moral it relies on evidence: "Requite evil with good and your worst enemy will become your dearest friend." [Sura 41, Verse 34] Thus for the first time in a revealed Scripture, reason finds its brotherly place. So plain is the point that no elucidation is required.

Saving those who give place to neither reason nor faith, all Muslims are of one mind in the conviction that there are many things in religion which can only be believed by the way of reason, such as the knowledge of God's existence, of His power to send messengers, of His knowledge of the content of their inspiration, of His will to give them particular messages, and, with these, many consequent points relating to the comprehension and evidence of prophetic mission. So Muslims are of one mind that though there may be in religion that which transcends the understanding, there is nothing which reason finds impossible.

The Qur'an describes the attributes of God, by and large, with a far surer accent of transcendence than the earlier religions. Nevertheless, there are several human attributes, which, in name or form, are made comparable, such as power, choice, hearing, and seeing. In what is ascribed to God we find points that have counterparts in man, like taking one's seat upon a throne, and like the face and the hands. The Qur'an deals at length with predestination and human free will, and takes controversial issue with those who exaggerate on both sides of this theme. It affirms the reward of good deeds and the retribution of evil deeds and leaves the recompense of approbation and punishment to the arbitrament of God. In this introduction there is no need to expatiate further on similar topics.

This Qur'anic esteem for the rational judgment, together with the use of parables in the allegorical or ambiguous passages in the revealed text, gave great scope to alert intelligences, therefore so inasmuch as the appeal of this religion to reason in the study of created things was in no way limited or hedged about with conditions. For it knew that every sound study would conduce to belief in God, as Qur'anically depicted. So it had no need of either excessive abstraction or over-rigorous definition.

The Prophet's day passed—he who was men's recourse in perplexity and their lamp in the darkness of doubt. His two immediate successors in the caliphate [Abu Bakr and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, 632–634 and 634–644] devoted their span of life to repelling his foes and ensuring the unity of the Muslims. Men had little leisure at that time for critical discussion of the basis of their beliefs. What few differences there were they took to the two caliphs, and the caliph gave his decision, after consultation, if necessary, with the available men of insight. These issues, for the most part, had to do with branches of law, not with the principles of dogma. Under those two caliphs, men understood the Book in its meaning and allusions. They believed in the transcendence of God and refrained from debate about the implications of passages involving human comparisons. They did not go beyond what was indicated by the literal meaning of the words.

So the case remained until the events which resulted in the death of the third caliph ['Uthman in 656]—a tragedy which did irreparable damage to the structure of the caliphate and brutally diverted Islam and the Muslim people from their right and proper course. Only the Qur'an remained unimpaired in its continuity. As God said: "It is We who have sent down the Reminder and We truly preserve it." [Sura 15, Verse 9] And thus the way was open for man to transgress the proper bounds of religion. The caliph had been killed with no legal judgment and thus the popular mind was made to feel there could be free rein to passion in the thoughts of those who had not truly allowed the faith to rule in their hearts. "Lawless anger had possessed many of the very exponents of pious religion. Both worldlings and zealots together had overborne the steadfast people and set in motion a train of consequences they could only deplore.

Among the actors in that crisis of disloyalty was 'Abdullah Ibn Saba' [7<sup>th</sup> century, reputed founder of Shi'ism], a Jew who had embraced Islam and an

excessive admirer of 'Ali [ibn Abi Talib, son-in-law and fourth successor of the Prophet, reigned 656–661] (whose face God honor) to the point of asserting that God indwelt him. Ibn Saba' claimed that 'Ali was the rightful caliph and rebelled against 'Uthman, who exiled him. He went to Basra where he propagated his seditious views. Evicted from there, he went to Kufa, taking his poison with him, and thence to Damascus, where he failed to find the support he wanted. He proceeded to Egypt where he did find collaborators with the dire consequences we know. In the time of 'Ali, when his school showed its head again, he was exiled to Mada'in. His ideas spawned a lot of later heresies.

Events took their subsequent course. Some of those who had pledged allegiance to the fourth caliph broke their fealty. Civil war ensued, issuing in the hegemony of the Umayyads [reigned 661–750]. But the community had been sundered and its bonds of unity broken. Rival schools of thought about the caliphate developed and were propagated in partisanship, each striving by word and act to gain the better over its adversary. This in turn gave rise to forgeries of traditions and interpretation, and the sectarian excess brought sharp divisions into Khawarij [extreme pietists], Shi'a [supporters of hereditary succession of the Prophet], and moderates. The Khawarij went so far as to declare their opponents infidels and to demand a republican form of government. For a long time they maintained their "excommunication" of those who resisted them, until after much fighting that cost many Muslim lives their cause grew weak. They fled into remoter parts but continued their seditious activities. A remnant of them survives to the present in certain areas of Africa and of the Arabian peninsula. The Shi'as carried their heresy to the point of exalting 'Ali or some of his descendants to divine or near-divine status, with widespread consequences in the field of dogma.

These developments, however, did not halt the propagation of Islam and did not deprive the areas remote from the center of controversy of the light of the Qur'an. People came into Islam in droves—Persians, Syrians and their neighbors, Egyptians and Africans, and others in their train. Freed from the necessity of defending the temporal power of Islam, great numbers were ready to busy themselves with the first principles of belief and law, in pursuance of the Qur'an's guidance. In this task, they gave due place to the delivered tradition without neglecting the

proud role of reason or overlooking the intellect. Men of sincere integrity took to the vocation of knowledge and education, the most famous of them being Hasan al-Basri [642–728]. He had a school in Basra to which students came from every part, and various questions were examined. People of all religious persuasions had come into Islam without knowing it inwardly, but carrying with them into it their existing notions, seeking some kind of mediating compromise between the old and the Islamic. So after the tempests of sedition came the tensions of doubt. Every opinion-monger took his stand upon the liberty of thought the Qur'an enjoined. The newcomers asserted their right to an equal stake with the existing authorities, and schisms raised their heads among the Muslims.

The first theme of contention to arise was that of will—man's independence in willing and doing and choosing, and the question of the supreme sin unrepented of. Wasil ibn 'Ata' [founder of Mu'tazilism, died 748] and his [spiritual] master, Hasan al-Basri, differed on this issue and the former broke away, teaching according to his own independent lights. Many of the first Muslim masters, including Hasan al-Basri, or so it is alleged, were of the view that man truly has choice in the deeds which proceed from his knowledge and will. So they opposed the school of *jabr*, or determinism, which held that man in his volitional activity is like the branches of a tree swaying necessarily. Throughout the period of the rule of the sons of Marwan [Umayyad caliph, died 685], no effort was made to regulate the issue or to get people back to first principles and bring them to a common position. Individual idiosyncrasy had free play, though 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz [caliph, 682–720] gave directions to [Muhammad ibn Muslim] al-Zuhri [died 741] to record the traditions he had come by, and he was the first tradition-collector.

These two problems, however, were not all. Controversy developed also over the question whether the real attributes of God should be posited of the divine essence or not. There was also the question of reason and its competence to know all religious principles, even the ramifications of law and matters pertaining to worship, which some espoused even to the point of excessive pleading of the Qur'anic text. Others limited the writ of reason to the first principles, as explained above. Others again—a minority—in a spirit of contention against the first group, totally repudiated reason and thus went counter to the



Qur'an itself. Opinions on the caliphs and the caliphate marched with those on matters of doctrine, as if they were an integral part of Islamic dogma.

With the disciples of Wasil the paths diverged further. For they had recourse to drawing congenial ideas from the Greeks. They had the idea that it was a work of piety to establish dogma by scientific corroboration, without discriminating, however, between what went back to rational first principles and what was merely a figment of the imagination. So they mingled with the tenets of religion what had no valid rational applicability. They persisted on this tack until their sects multiplied apace. The rule of the 'Abbasids [caliphs, 750–1258], then in the prime of power, helped them and their views prevailed. Their learned scholars began to write books. Whereupon the adherents of the schools of the early masters took up their challenge, sustained by the power of conviction, though lacking the support of the rulers.

The early 'Abbasids knew the extent of their debt to the Persians for the successful establishment of their power and the overthrow of the Umayyad state. They relied strongly on Persian collaboration and brought them into high positions among their ministers and retainers. Many of them thus came into authority without any part or lot in Islam religiously, including Manichee sectaries and Yazidis, and other Persian persuasions, as well as utterly irreligious people. They began to disseminate their opinions and by attitude and utterance induced those to whom their views were congenial to accept their direction. Atheism emerged, and views inimical to belief in God became rife, to the point that [Abu Ja'far] al-Mansur [caliph, reigned 754–775] ordered the issue of books exposing their errors and negating their claims.

At this juncture the science of theology was still a young plant, a still partly reared edifice. Technical theology took its point of departure from its perpetual principle, namely the study of the created order, within the terms laid down by the Qur'an. There ensued here the dispute over the createdness or uncreatedness of the Qur'an. Several of the 'Abbasid caliphs adopted the dogma of the Qur'an's being created, while a considerable number of those who held to the plain sense of the Qur'an and the *sunna* [the practice of the Prophet] either abstained from declaring themselves or took a stand for uncreatedness. The reticence arose from a reluctance to give expression to what might conduce to heresy. The dispute brought much humiliation to men of reason and piety, and much blood was

criminally shed. In the name of faith, the community did violence to faith.

It was in this way that the lines were drawn between the thoroughgoing rationalists and the moderate or extreme upholders of the text of the law. All were agreed that religious principles were a matter of obligation for their followers, both in respect of acts of worship and mutual dealings, and should be stringently followed. It was recognized that the inner attitudes of heart and the spiritual life constituted a binding obligation to which the soul must be set.

A further element in the picture was the sect of the Dahriyyun [materialists], who believed in *hulul* [the incarnation of God in humans] and sought to foist upon the Qur'an the notions they brought with them on assuming the externals of Islam. They strayed far in their exegesis and pretended to find in every plain deed some hidden mystery. In their handling of the Qur'an they were as far from the import of the text as error is from truth. They were known as the Batiniyya [esoterics] and the Isma'iliyya [a gnostic Shi'i sect], as well as by other names current among historians. Their schools of thought had a disastrous influence on the faith and undermined conviction. Their deviations and deeds are only too familiar.

Despite the identity of purpose shared by the orthodox and those at issue with them, as to the combating of these atheist sectarians, there were considerable areas of contention between them and the vicissitudes were prolonged. This did not prevent them, however, from mutual borrowing, each group profiting from the other, until the emergence of *Shaykh* Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari [873–925] early in the fourth century [A.H.]. He plotted a middle course, as is well known, between the early "orthodox" and the subsequent tendencies towards extremes. He based dogma on the principles of rational enquiry. The disciples of pristine loyalties doubted his views and many maligned him. The followers of [Ahmad] ibn Hanbal [780–855] called him an infidel and demanded his death. A number of eminent '*ulama*', however, came to his support, among them Abu Bakr [Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib] al-Baqillani [circa 948–1013], the *Imam al-Haramayn* [the *Imam* of Mecca and Medina, that is, Abu'l-Ma'ali al-Juwayni, 1028–1085], and [Abu Ishaq] al-Isfira'ini [died 1027]. His school came to carry the name of "the people of the *sunna* and consensus." Two powerful forces were effectively overcome by these esteemed thinkers—

the temper that leans wholly on the literal and the instinct that runs off into the imaginary and the extravagant. Two centuries or so later these types survived only as insignificant pockets of opinion in the periphery of the Islamic world.

The disciples of al-Ash'ari's school, it should be remembered, having based their doctrine rationally on the laws of the universe, required the believer as a matter of obligation to hold the certainty of these rational premises and deductions in the same assurance with which he accepted the dogmas of faith, insisting that where proof was wanting, the to-be-proven was nonexistent also. That outlook continued until the rise of [Abu Hamid Muhammad] al-Ghazzali [1058–1111] and [Fakhr al-Din] al-Razi [1149–1209] and those who adopted their position, according to whom one or even several proofs could be shown to be false, and yet leave open the possibility of the object whose existence it was intended to demonstrate being substantiated from more adequate evidence. There was, they held, no justification for making the argument from the negative instance absolute. As for the schools of philosophy, they drew their ideas from pure reason, and the only concern of philosophic rationalists was to gain knowledge, to satisfy their intellectual curiosity in elucidating the unknown and fathoming the intelligible. They were well able to achieve their objectives, inasmuch as they were sheltered by the mass of religious believers who afforded them full liberty of action to enjoy and give rein to their intellectual interests, the pursuit of crafts and the strengthening of the social order through the disclosure of the secrets hidden in the universe—all in accordance with the divine mandate for such exploration by thought and mind: "He created for you all that is in the earth," [Sura 2, Verse 29] which exempts neither the seen nor the unseen. Not a single intelligent Muslim sought to debar them or to impede their findings, the Qur'an having espoused the high role of reason and confirmed its competence as the ultimate means to happiness and the criterion between truth and falsehood, worth and loss. Had not the Prophet observed: "You are most cognizant of the world and its ways," and given at the battle of Badr [in 624] an example of behavior based on intelligent discernment and the proof of experience.

Nevertheless, it is clear that most of the philosophers were subject to two influences that got the better of them. The first was an admiration for all that derived from the Greek philosophers, notably Plato [circa 427–347 B.C.] and Aristotle [384–322 B.C.],

and with it a too precipitate inclination to accept their authority. Second, there was the prevailing contemporary trend of will, and this had the more mischievous effects. For they got themselves into controversies obtaining among speculative thinkers in the field of religion. Though there were relatively few of them, they clashed with the beliefs predominantly held, and so came under attack. Then came al-Ghazzali and his school, who brought sharp criticism to bear upon the entire content of philosophical lore in the fields of theology and related themes, including the principles of substance and accident, theories of matter and physics, and, indeed, the whole gamut of rationality in relation to religion. Later exponents of this criticism became so extreme as to forfeit their following. Ordinary people turned from them and the specialists became indifferent to them. In due course, time precluded the results the Muslim world might have expected from their activities.

All this explains why matters of theology mingle with philosophy in the writings of later authors like ['Abdullah] al-Baydawi [Shafi'i scholar, died circa 1286], al-'Adud [al-Din al-Iji, Ash'ari scholar, died 1355], and others, and why various rational sciences became concentrated in a single pursuit, the assumptions and debates of which approximated more to a traditionalism than a rationalism, whereby the progress of knowledge was arrested.

Then there supervened the various successive insurrections aimed at the civil power, in which it was the obscurantists who got the upper hand, destroying the remaining traces of the rational temper which had its source in the Islamic faith. They betook themselves to devious by-paths, and students of the writings of the previous generations found themselves limited to mere wrangles about words and scrutiny of methods—and that in a very few books characterized by feebleness and mediocrity.

As a consequence, a complete intellectual confusion beset the Muslims under their ignorant rulers. Ideas which had never had any place in science found sponsors, who asserted things Islam had never before tolerated. Fostered by the general educational poverty, they gained ground, aided too by the remoteness of men from the pristine sources of the faith. They evicted intellect from its rightful place and dealt arbitrarily with the false and the valid in thinking. They went so far as to espouse the view of some in other nations who alleged an enmity between knowledge and faith. They took up highly misleading po-

sitions on questions of both morals and doctrine, things allowed and things forbidden, that is, and even the issues of Islam and the very denial of God. Their fantasies fell very far short of the real meaning of religion, while their ideas and language sadly misrepresented God. There can be no doubt that the consequences befalling the masses of men in their beliefs and principles from this prolonged disaster with its widespread confusion were grievous and heavy.

The foregoing is a summary of the history of theology, indicating how it was founded on the Qur'an and how at length partisanship sadly distorted its true goal and quality.

We must, however, believe that the Islamic religion is a religion of unity throughout. It is not a religion of conflicting principles but is built squarely on reason, while divine revelation is its surest pillar. Whatever is other than these must be understood as contentious and inspired by Satan or political passions. The Qur'an has cognizance of every man's deed and judges the true and the false.

The purpose of this discipline, theology, is the realization of an obligation about which there is no dispute, namely, to know God most high in His attributes that are necessarily to be predicated of Him and to know His exaltation above all improper and impossible attribution. It is, with Him, to acknowledge His messengers with full assurance and heart-confidence, relying therein upon proof and not taking things merely upon tradition. So the Qur'an directs us, enjoining rational procedure and intellectual enquiry into the manifestations of the universe, and, as far as may be, into its particulars, so as to come by certainty in respect of the things to which it guides. It forbids us to be slavishly credulous, and for our stimulus points the moral of peoples who simply followed their fathers with complacent satisfaction and were finally involved in an utter collapse of their beliefs and their own disappearance as a community. Well is it said that traditionalism can have evil consequences as well as good, and may occasion loss as well as conduce to gain. It is a deceptive thing, and though it may be pardoned in an animal, it is scarcely seemly in man. [ . . . ]

It is said by some that if Islam truly came to call diverse peoples into one common unity, and if the Qur'an says "You have nothing to do with those who divide over religion and make parties," [Sura 6, Verse 159] how does it come about that the Islamic com-

munity has been sundered into sectarian movements and broken up into groups and schools?

If Islam is a faith that unifies, why this numerous diversity among Muslims? If Islam turns the believer in trust toward Him who created the heavens and the earth, why do multitudes of Muslims turn their faces to powerless things that can neither avail nor harm, and apart from God are helpless either way, even to the point of thinking such practice part of *tawhid* itself?

If Islam was the first religion to address the rational mind, summoning it to look into the whole material universe, giving it free rein to range at will through all its secrets, saving only therein the maintenance of faith, how is it that Muslims are content with so little and many indeed have closed and barred the door of knowledge altogether, supposing thereby that God is pleased with ignorance and a neglect of study of His marvelous handiwork?

How does it happen that the very apostles of love have become in these days a people who nose around for it in vain? They who were once exemplary in energy and action are now the very picture of sloth and idleness?

What are all these accretions to their religion, when all the time Muslims have the very Book of God as a balance in which to weigh and discriminate all their conjectures, and yet its very injunctions they abandon and forsake?

If Islam really is so solicitous for the mind and hearts of men, why today in the opinion of so many is it somehow beyond the reach of those who would grasp it?

If Islam welcomes and invites enquiry into its contents, why is the Qur'an not read except by chanting, and even the majority of the educated men of religion only know it very approximately?

If Islam granted to reason and will the honor of independence, how is it that it has bound them with such chains? If it has established the principles of justice, why are the greater part of its rulers such models of tyranny? If religion eagerly anticipates the liberation of slaves, why have Muslims spent centuries enslaving the free?

If Islam regards loyalty to covenants, honesty, and fulfilment of pledges as being its very pillars, how does it come about that deception, falsehood, perfidy, and calumny are so current among Muslims?

If Islam forbids fraud and treachery and warns imposters that they have neither part nor lot in it, how is it that Muslims practice deception against God, the

sacred law, and the true and loyal believers? If it prohibits all abomination, whether evident or hidden, what is it we see among them, both secret and open, both physical and spiritual?

If Islam teaches that religion consists in sincerity before God, His Apostle, and fellow believers in both immediate and general relationships, if "man is the loser, save those who believe, do good works, and enjoin upon each other justice and patience" [Sura 103, Verses 1-3] and yet, not enjoining kindliness or forbidding evil, they go altogether to the bad, and their honest folk call and get no response, and if this which they quite fail to fulfill is in fact their most bounden duty, why is it that they thus so totally fail to counsel each other and lay upon each other squarely what the divine will requires? Why do they not hold to it with fortitude and speak truth about right and wrong? Who do they in fact take each their own way, letting things go as they will in rabid individualism, ignoring each other's affairs as if they were totally unrelated the one to the other, having nothing in common? Why do sons murder fathers, and daughters prove refractory toward their mothers? Where are the bowels of mercy, of compassion for a neighbor? Where is the just dealing the rich owe to the poor with their possessions? Rather the rich plunder even what remains in the hands of the wretched.

A glimmer of Islam, it is said, illuminated the west, but its full light is in the east. Yet precisely there its own people lie in the deepest gloom and cannot see. Does this seem intelligible? Is there any parallel in the annals of men? Does it not appear that the very Muslims who have known something of science are precisely those who, for the most part, instinctively regard Islam's doctrines as superstitious and its principles and precepts as a farce? They find pleasure in aping the free-thinking people who scoff and jeer and think themselves forward-looking. Do you not see Muslims whose only business with the scriptures is to finger their pages, while they preen themselves on being memorizers of their precepts and expert in their laws? How far they are from the rational study of the Qur'an which they despise and regard as worthless to religion and the world! Many of them simply pride themselves on ignorance, as if thereby they had evaded prohibited things and achieved some distinction. Those Muslims who stand on the threshold of

science see their faith as a kind of old garment in which it is embarrassing to appear among men, while those who deceive themselves that they have some pretension to be religious and orthodox believers in its doctrines regard reason as a devil and science as supposition. Can we not, in the light of all this, call God, His angels, and all men to witness that science and reason have no accord with this religion?

It may well be said that the foregoing has not exaggerated the plight of Muslims today, indeed, these several generations past. But is the objection the whole story? Parallels could be found in the descriptions of Islam in their day given by al-Ghazzali, [Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad] Ibn al-Hajj [died 1336], and other writers on religion, filling whole volumes, both about the general population and the intelligentsia. But the reading of the Qur'an suffices of itself to vindicate what I have said about the essential nature of Islamic religion, provided it is read with care to understand its real import, interpreted according to the understanding of those among whom it was sent down and to the way they put it into practice. To admit the validity of what I have said of its fine effects, it suffices to read the pages of history as indited by those who truly knew Islam and the objective writers in other nations. Such Islam was—and is. We have earlier said that religion is guidance and reason. Whoever uses it well and takes its directives will gain the blessedness God has promised to those who follow it. As a medicine for human society its success when truly tried is so manifest that not even the blind and the deaf can deny or gainsay it. All that the objection just elaborated leads to is this: a physician treated a sick man with medicine and he recovered; then the doctor himself succumbed to the disease he had been treating. In dire straits from pain and with the medicine by him in the house, he has yet no will to use it. Many of those who come to visit him or seek his ministrations or even gloat over his illness could take up the medicine and be cured, while he himself despairs of life and waits either for death or some miraculous healing.

We have now set forth the religion of Islam and its true character. As for those Muslims who by their conduct have become an argument against it, these must be dealt with not here, but in another book, if God wills.