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978-0-521-19534-8 - God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason

John Walbridge

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### GOD AND LOGIC IN ISLAM

This book investigates the central role of reason in Islamic intellectual life. Despite widespread characterization of Islam as a system of belief based only on revelation, John Walbridge argues that rational methods, not fundamentalism, have characterized Islamic law, philosophy, theology, and education since the medieval period. His research demonstrates that this medieval Islamic rational tradition was opposed by both modernists and fundamentalists, resulting in a general collapse of traditional Islamic intellectual life and its replacement by more modern but far shallower forms of thought. The resources of this Islamic scholarly current, however, remain an integral part of the Islamic intellectual tradition and will prove vital to its revival. The future of Islam, Walbridge argues, will be marked by a return to rationalism.

John Walbridge is Professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Indiana University. He is the author of nine books on Islam and Arabic culture, including four books on Islamic philosophy, two of which are *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism* (2001) and *Suhrawardi, the Philosophy of Illumination* (with Hossein Ziai, 1999).

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# God and Logic in Islam

*The Caliphate of Reason*

JOHN WALBRIDGE

Indiana University



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*To Frances, with love,  
and to the memory of Elaine Wright.*



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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

The first thing God created was mind.  
a hadith

Contents

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

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

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-19534-8 - God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason  
John Walbridge  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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



Illustrations

1	A page from a lithographed logic textbook.	<i>page</i> 130
2	A manuscript showing a student’s interlinear and marginal notes.	132
3	A commentary in a lithographed textbook.	134

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19534-8 - God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason

John Walbridge

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Preface and Acknowledgements

I have written this book with three readers in mind: the educated Western reader whose knowledge of Islam may be no more than impressions formed from television and newspapers; the Muslim reader troubled by the misfortunes of his community in the modern world; and the scholar of Islamic studies. They have, unfortunately, quite different needs, and I hope that each will be tolerant of the needs of the others.

I have tried to write this book in a way that will be understandable to an educated Western reader without specialized knowledge of Islam. I have therefore avoided assuming much knowledge about Islam and in particular extensive use of Arabic words and names. I have usually defined technical Islamic terms and identified names when they first occur. I also give brief definitions and identifications in the index. However, there are inevitably places where I have to deal in technicalities, for which I ask the patience of the nonspecialist. For my Muslim readers, this is essentially a theological work, a plea to reexamine the riches of the Islamic rationalist tradition in light of the needs of the modern Islamic community. For my scholarly reader, this book is a reminder of what I hope he already knows – the central importance of rationalism, and particularly scholastic rationalism, in the Islamic intellectual synthesis.

This book represents ideas that have developed over the course of my career, going back to my first undergraduate Islamic studies paper. It took this specific shape as a byproduct of work that I conducted first in Pakistan on the role of logic in Islamic education and later in Turkey on the relation of Islamic science and medicine to philosophy. These projects were generously funded by several organizations, including the Fulbright program, which allowed me to spend a year each in Pakistan

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

and Turkey; the American Institute of Pakistan Studies; the American Research Institute in Turkey; the American Philosophical Society; the Guggenheim Foundation; and Indiana University. Some sections were first published in the journal *Islamic Studies*, and I gratefully acknowledge their permission to reprint material from these articles and even more their support of my work on the role of logic in Islamic education, particularly the encouragement of Dr. Zafar Ishaq Ansari. Considerable parts of the book were first presented as lectures at Punjab University in Lahore and the İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi in Üsküdar, Turkey. The latter also provided me with a fellowship that allowed me access to their excellent research library, as well as office space, research support, and – not least – sociable, intellectually stimulating, and delicious lunches. In particular, I would like to thank my chief hosts there, Drs. Nüri Tınaz and Aydın Topoloğlu. I would also like to thank the librarians at Punjab University, the Ganj-Bakhsh Library in Islamabad, the wonderful Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul, the İSAM library, and the Indiana University Libraries.

Though I have discussed these ideas with various people over the years, I would like to particularly thank my friend, Emeritus Distinguished Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science Edward Grant, who somewhat inadvertently started me thinking about the relation of science and reason in Islamic civilization and whose books on the role of reason and science in medieval Europe have been a model for my decidedly more modest contribution.

As always, I owe thanks to my family for their support and forbearance – my sons, John and Nathaniel, who put up with my scholarly research and long trips abroad, and my late wife, Linda Strickland Walbridge, who accompanied and supported me for most of my career. Finally, I owe special thanks to my wife, Frances Trix, who entered and brightened my life at the end of a very difficult period, interpreted for me in Turkish libraries, sat through the lectures that were the penultimate form of this work, and has encouraged me in all that I have done these last seven years.

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Spelling, Names, and Sources

Arabic terms are spelled with slight modifications according to the system commonly used by scholars of the Middle East. It will be familiar to specialists. In the occasional cases where I am citing names or terms from other Islamic languages, I treat them as Arabic for simplicity unless they have established equivalents in English. I also frequently omit the “al-” from Arabic names, again for simplicity.

In a work such as this, Arabic terminology and names are unavoidable, but I have tried to keep it accessible to a general reader, at least a patient one. Whenever possible, I use English equivalents rather than Arabic terms. Almost any translation of an Islamic religious term can be objected to as imprecise, but on the whole I think it is better to use a term that the reader starts out understanding, explaining how it differs from its usual sense, rather than start with a term the reader does not know and try to explain the meaning to him or her from scratch. I include brief definitions of terms and names in the index, which the reader can use as a glossary. I also explain terms and identify people at first mention. Dates are given only according to the Common Era except in the case of books whose publication dates are given according to the Islamic calendar.

One term deserves special comment: “fundamentalist.” It is widely used but is subject to objections. It is, after all, a term for a specific trend in modern American Protestantism. It is now used in Arabic – *uṣūliya* – a calque from English, but it is not a term accepted by the people to whom it is applied. I use it in a very specific sense: those modern adherents of a religion who wish to return to the original textual roots, bypassing in the process the medieval high religious syntheses. I thus use it for the Islamic groups who tend to refer to themselves as Salafi, followers of the *salaf*,

the pious forefathers, as well as for analogous modern Christian groups – and for my Puritan ancestors who came to America fleeing the wrath of the Stuart kings.

A book such as this takes place through the accretion of knowledge over many years. The notes mainly document specific points and quotations and do not necessarily include all of the sources I have consulted, particularly for facts that will be generally known by specialists. For more general sources, the reader should consult the bibliography, where I give a summary of the sources I have used and books that the interested reader might wish to consult.