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).
God and Logic in Islam

The Caliphate of Reason

JOHN WALBRIDGE
Indiana University
To Frances, with love,
and to the memory of Elaine Wright.
The first thing God created was mind.

a hadith
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustrations</th>
<th>xi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface and Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling, Names, and Sources</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Introduction**

1. **PART ONE: THE FORMATION OF THE ISLAMIC TRADITION OF REASON**

1. The Problem of Reason in Islam: Is Islam a Non-Rational Religion and Civilization?  
   9

2. The Diversity of Reason  
   15
   - The Definition of Reason and Rationality  
     16
   - Western Conceptions of Reason  
     18
     - Logos and Rationality among the Greeks  
       18
     - Scholasticism: Reason as the Tool of Theology  
       20
     - Enlightenment Reason  
       21
     - Scientific Reason  
       21
     - Utilitarian Reason and Practical Rationality  
       22
     - Relativism  
       23
     - Protestant Textualism  
       24
     - Romanticism  
       25
   - The Civil War of Reason in the West  
     25
   - Islam and Western Conceptions of Reason  
     27

3. **Empirical Knowledge of the Mind of God**  
   30
   - The Enterprise of Hadith Collection  
     32
## CONTENTS

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 *Fiqh* to Hadith ....................... 46
Literalist Challenge and Rationalist Cooption ................. 50

### 4 The Failure of the Fārābīan Synthesis of Religion and Philosophy

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 *Fiqh* and *Kalam* .................................. 81
The Failure of the Fārābīan Political Philosophy of Religion 82

### 5 Mysticism, Postclassical Islamic Philosophy, and the Rise and Fall of Islamic Science

The Emergence of Mysticism ...................................... 87
Mysticism and Philosophy ......................................... 89
  Suhrawardī ........................................................ 89
  Ibn ‘Arabī ......................................................... 93
Aristotelianism in the *Madrasas* .............................. 95
The “Failure” of Islamic Science ................................. 96

### PART TWO: LOGIC, EDUCATION, AND DOUBT

### 6 Where Is Islamic Logic? The Triumph of Scholastic Rationalism in Islamic Education

  “Where Is Islamic Logic?” ....................................... 107
Arabic Grammar .................................................... 111
Arabic Rhetoric .................................................... 113
*Uṣūl al-Fiqh* ...................................................... 114
*Kalām* .............................................................. 117
Institutions and the Boundaries of Logic ...................... 119
## CONTENTS

### 7  The Long Afternoon of Islamic Logic 121
- Islamic Logic to the Thirteenth Century 124
- The Textbooks and Their Commentaries 126
- The Educational Use of the School Logic Texts 129
- Content of the School Logic 135
- The Modernization of the School Logic 139

### 8  The Institutionalization of Disagreement 142
- The Classical Islamic Attitude to Disagreement 143
- An Education of Form without Content 151

### PART THREE: THE FALL AND THE FUTURE OF ISLAMIC RATIONALISM

### 9  The Decline and Fall of Scholastic Reason in Islam 157
- The Collapse of Traditional Education 157
- “What Went Wrong?” 162

### 10  A Chaos of Certitudes: The Future of Islamic Reason 170
- Disagreement in the Contemporary Islamic World 173
- The Great Issues 175

*Selected Bibliography* 187

*Index* 203
Illustrations

1 A page from a lithographed logic textbook.  page 130
2 A manuscript showing a student's interlinear and marginal notes.  132
3 A commentary in a lithographed textbook.  134
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.
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 İslam 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 Suleymaniye 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.
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.