Introduction
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This volume presents a series of critical scholarly reflections on the evolution and major themes of pre-modern Muslim theology. Given Islam's salience in religious history and its role as final religious inheritor of the legacies of monotheism and classical antiquity, such a collection hardly needs justification. The significance of Islamic theology reflects the significance of Islam as a central part of the monotheistic project as a whole, to which it brings a distinctive approach and style, and a range of solutions which are of abiding interest.

Despite this importance it is fair to say that until recently the study of theology was something of a Cinderella subject within Islamic studies, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world. In part this flowed from the persistence of nineteenth-century assumptions about the marginality of abstract intellectual life in Islam, and about the greater intrinsic interest and originality of Muslim law and mysticism. It was also commonly thought that where formal metaphysics was cultivated in Islamic civilisation, this was done seriously only in the context of Arabic philosophy (*falsafa*), where it was not obstructed by futile scriptural controls, and where it could perform its most significant function, which was believed to be the transmission of Greek thought to Europe.

However, a steady process of scholarly advance over the past two decades, coupled with the publication of critical editions of important early texts, has turned the study of Muslim theology into a dynamic and ever more intriguing discipline. Old assumptions about Muslim theology as either a narrow apologetic exercise or an essentially foreign import into Islam have been successfully challenged. Scholars have moved on from a somewhat mechanical focus on doxography and on tracking the contributions of the Greek tradition, towards the recognition that Islamic metaphysics contain much that is purely indigenous, that is to say, rooted in the language and concerns of the qur'anic revelation.

In decline, likewise, has been the unspoken assumption that what was of value in classical Muslim civilisation was what fed into the story

of the West. On that view, the Muslims acted as no more than ''go-betweens'', a ''devious Gulf-stream which brought back to Europe its Greek and Alexandrine heritage''.[1] Arabic philosophy after Averroes, and almost the entirety of the formal theology, were thus relegated to the status of an intellectual byway. As we shall see, new research, and a less Eurocentric vision of history and of the remit of scholarship, have done much to challenge this outlook.

CLASSICAL THEOLOGY: A DEFINITION

A word about the title of our collection. The term ''classical'' is used to cover the era which stretches between the qur'anic revelation and the eighteenth century, with the accent falling on the period between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. For most of this ''classical'' period the *kalām*, literally ''discourse'', that is to say, the formal academic discipline which one scholar aptly calls ''Islamic doctrinal theology'',[2] stood at or very near the apex of the academic curriculum. However, this book does not identify ''theology'' as coterminous with this *kalām* tradition. Instead, it acknowledges that many issues which most readers will recognise as theological were treated by Muslim civilisation in a wide range of disciplines. As William Chittick defines it in his chapter, theology is ''God-talk in all its forms''.

The most obvious of these disciplines was Sufism, a category of esoteric and ascetical traditions rather larger than ''mysticism'' as commonly understood, which frequently addressed issues of creation, ethics, pastoral care, providence, inspiration, miracle and other topics which in medieval Latin cultures would more usually have been dealt with under a theological rubric. Sufism quickly developed to provide a mystical tradition more fully recognised by mainstream thought than was the case with the other monotheisms. It is not entirely clear why this should have been the case, but we may speculate that the process was facilitated by the Qur'an's radical monotheism, which, by resisting any hint of dualism, thoroughly sacralised the world as a matrix of ''signs''.[3] When integrated into *kalām* through the evolution of doctrines of occasionalism, this resistance in turn gave mainstream theology a natural hospitality to often quite radical mystical concerns.[4]

In this way, and despite their programmatic rationalism, many leading *kalām* thinkers tended to be explicit about their respect for Sufism as a path to knowledge; as David Burrell shows in this volume, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) was destined to be the iconic example of this, but his great Ash'arite successor Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210),

perhaps Islam's greatest philosophical theologian, also showed increasing respect for Sufi approaches to knowledge in his later works.[5] Recognising that the field now acknowledges the validity and even the centrality of Sufism in constructions of Muslim ''orthodoxy'', regular references will be made to Sufi discussions, particularly in the chapters on worship and epistemology, and in the long chapter by Toby Mayer which directly addresses *kalām*'s relationship with Sufism, focusing in a particularly helpful way on the Avicennian component of later Sufi thought. Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), the Andalusian polymath and esoterist, merits a number of titles, but he is certainly a theologian, despite his regular habit of soaring well beyond the reach of reason. William Chittick, in his chapter, suggests that Ibn 'Arabī may even be viewed as the final summation of Islamic intellectuality. Although Ghazālī, in his *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, had sought to integrate the various exoteric and esoteric disciplines in a way which transcended the boundaries between them, thus claiming a universal coherence for Islamic intellectuality, it was Ibn 'Arabī who brought this ambitious reintegrative initiative to a peak of intricacy, by proposing a detailed mystical theology that seemed to incorporate all the great topics of *kalām*, philosophy, law and Sufism into a vast, brilliant (and hugely controversial) synthesis. It has even been suggested, paraphrasing Whitehead's remark about Plato, that ''the history of Islamic thought subsequent to Ibn 'Arabī (at least down to the 18th century and the radically new encounter with the modern West) might largely be construed as a series of endnotes to his works.''[6] This view, which is new in the field, is still not universally accepted, and its neglect of later *kalām* makes it an overstatement, but it is noticeably gaining ground.

Paralleling this shift in our understanding of the historical relationship of Sufism to *kalām* has been a maturing grasp of the revealed law of Islam, the *Sharī'a*. The great lawbooks typically included discussions of issues concerning language and human accountability which were purely theological; indeed, the entire remit of Muslim law could be said to be theological, since it takes the function of the law to be the preparation of society and the individual to receive God's grace. A separate chapter, by Umar F. Abd-Allah, engages with this important dimension of Islam's theological history.

There was still another discipline which incorporated theological concerns. This was *falsafa* (Arabic philosophy, from Greek *philosophia*), a tradition substantially borrowed and adapted from late antiquity. Modern scholars take forensic pains to separate *falsafa* from *kalām*, and medieval Muslims usually did the same; yet since its great exponents

were Muslims who believed in the Qur'an and the Prophet, it can defensibly be seen as a Muslim theology, as well as an intellectual tradition that constantly informed the *kalām* and, as we are now acknowledging, stood also in its debt.[7]

Altogether it is clear that by limiting themselves to the disciplinary boundaries imposed by medieval Muslims themselves, Western treatments of Islamic theology have often neglected the wealth of properly theological discussions appearing outside the *kalām* in the civilisation's literature. As well as imposing on anglophone readers a division of the sciences which may seem to make little sense in their context, the result has often been a somewhat dry and partial treatment of the great issues of Muslim monotheism, a shortcoming which this volume hopes, in part, to remedy.

THE STATE OF THE FIELD

Drawing together the core topics of Muslim theology from these historically distinct disciplines has brought into sharp relief the very fragmented and sometimes idiosyncratic nature of Western scholarship of Islam, the tradition sometimes known as ''Orientalism''. Overwhelmingly this discipline has been built up from contributions made by individuals, not by schools. Thinkers and texts are brought to the fore during a scholar's lifetime, and may then quickly sink into undeserved obscurity. Occasionally, cultural prejudices which designate Islam as a ''religion of law'' with no natural metaphysical concerns have been salient, and on occasion, such presumptions have uneasily recalled anti-Semitic parallels.[8] Yet the huge contributions made by the small number of persistent leaders in this discipline are impossible to ignore: texts have been rescued from obscurity and expertly edited, and important studies have been published on many leading thinkers, particularly al-Ash'arī, al-Māturīdī, al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, with the pace of publication quickening somewhat in recent years. As this volume demonstrates, many of the younger scholars in the field are Muslims, and the fact that, as in other ''Orientalist'' disciplines such as qur'anic studies, they have adapted so well to the discipline's paradigms, suggests that older ideas of Western Islamic studies as a monolithic and structurally anti-Islamic project now need to be modified, if not discarded altogether.

Yet the field is visibly deficient. Resources and posts in Muslim theology in Western universities remain woefully inadequate, even when compared to the situation in Chinese and Indic studies, and the appeal of the field to students whose initial interest in Islam, in

the imperial and modern periods alike, may have been triggered by contemporary political, social, or legal issues, has been limited. This unfortunate situation has been further exacerbated by the sheer immensity of the literature, most of which remains in manuscript. Attention continues to be focused on the central Islamic lands, and although most accept that the *kalām* curriculum was fairly consistent throughout the ''high'' institutions of the pre-modern Islamic world,[9] our detailed knowledge of traditional Muslim metaphysics in regions such as South-East Asia must be described as embryonic. As a result, current Western scholarship cannot, with perfect honesty, present anything like a complete synthetic history of Muslim intellectuality, or even a definitive list of the major thinkers. This is particularly true for the later period. Although, thanks to the efforts of Henry Corbin, Hossein Ziai and others, we are aware of the continuing vitality of Islamic philosophy in the later centuries, and indeed, up to the present day, the history of *kalām* after the thirteenth century largely remains *terra incognita*.

CHARACTERISTICS

We need to ask: what is Islamic about Islamic theology? Most evidently, it is Islamic to the extent that it may be traced back in some way to the Prophet Muḥammad and his distinctive vision of the One God. According to his scripture, he was sent ''as a mercy to the worlds'' (Qur'an 21:107), and one aspect of that mercy, as Muhammad Abdel Haleem suggests in chapter 1, was that he mapped out a religious path of great simplicity. This was to be the simplicity of an Abrahamic and ''primordial'' monotheism (*milla ibrāhīmiyya ḥanīfiyya*), marked by an iconoclastic rejection of idolatry, a call to repentance, and an unshakeable trust in the justice and mercy of God. Emerging, as Muslims believed, to restore unity and a holy simplicity to a confessional world complicated by Christian disputes over the Trinity and the Incarnation,[10] the qur'anic intervention seemed to its hearers to promise a new age for the human relationship with God, one so straightforward that in the eyes of a small but persistent margin, there would be no need for a ''theology'' (*kalām*) at all. Voices are therefore raised against the *kalām* enterprise through the Islamic centuries; the angry *Censure of Speculative Theology* by Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223) assumes that scripture alone suffices; al-Harawī (d. 1089) agrees, suggesting that *kalām* is an unreliable substitute for the true gift of mystical illumination. Both men had their passionate supporters.[11]

Monotheism, however, is never as simple as most of its advocates would wish. Its inbuilt paradoxes, which had already exercised and divided Jews and Christians, ensured that most Muslim thinkers came to recognise the need for a formal discipline of argument and proof which could establish the proper sense of a scripture which turned out to be open to many different interpretations. The trigger, in almost every case, was the need to defeat the whims (*ahwā'*) of heretics and innovators. Khalid Blankinship's chapter provides a survey and assessment of the first such debates. God was indeed One, and Muḥammad was His final Prophet: this much was never contested. But were God's names, so abundant in the Qur'an, in existence before the world? If so, was it right to say that they were identical with His essence, or were they in some way distinct? Did the Qur'an pre-date its bearer? Why did God insist on human accountability, when He, as Omnipotent and All-Knowing Creator, is surely not ignorant of what human beings will do? Are good and evil intrinsic, or are they utterly subject to the divine volition? Is faith enough for salvation? In what sense will the Prophet intercede for sinners? What did he envision when he said that God would be seen by the blessed in Paradise?

Many disturbing questions of this kind in turn seemed to be generated by a tension implicit in the Qur'an itself. Some verses spoke of a God who seemed utterly transcendent, so that "nothing is like him" (Qur'an 42:11). Such a deity "is not asked about what he does" (21:23), and appears to expect only the unquestioning submission (*islām*) which seemed implicit in the very name of the new religion. But there were many other passages which implied a God who is indeed, in some sense that urgently needed definition, analogous to ourselves: a God who is ethically coherent, and whose qualities are immanent in his creation, so that "Wheresover you turn, there is God's face" (2:115). This fundamental tension between transcendence and immanence, or, as Muslims put it, between "affirming difference" (*tanzīh*) and "affirming resemblance" (*tashbīh*), became intrinsic to the structuring of knowledge in the new civilisation. As one aspect of this it could be said, at the risk of very crude generalisation, that the Qur'an's theology of transcendence was explored by the *kalām* folk, and its theology of immanence by the Sufis, which is why, perhaps, we should seek for Islam's greatest theologians among those who emphasised the symbiosis of the two disciplines. It may be thus, rather than for any unique originality, that Ghazālī came to be called the "proof of Islam", and Ibn 'Arabī the "greatest shaykh". Their apparent eclecticism was in fact a programmatic attempt to retrieve an original unity, which is why scripture is so central to their respective manifestos.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ORTHODOXY

If such was the pre-modern culmination of Muslim theology, then its large story, as this volume shows, was that of a white-hot moment of pure revelatory renewal at the hands of a Prophet who, as Hans Küng puts it, was ''discontinuity in person'',[12] which with remarkable speed systematised itself as a set of contesting but seldom fatally divided schools of law, metaphysics and mysticism, which were then woven together again in the eclectic theologies of Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī. For both thinkers, and for the many lesser minds which attempted the same synthetic project, the proof of reintegration was a retrieval of a moral and spiritual understanding of the Law (*fiqh*), and a reinvigoration of the art of qur'anic citation. Ghazālī's *Revival* may, within limits, be read as a qur'anic commentary, and in the case of Ibn 'Arabī, as Mayer attests, his ''intensely esoteric hermeneutic of the Qur'an is often strictly in line with the *literal sense of the text*''.[13]

The various schools contrived to coexist for centuries, building an intellectual landscape of immense diversity. Ahmed El Shamsy, in his chapter, explains how in the midst of this process of contestation and institution-building an ''orthodoxy'' came to constitute itself. Lacking sacraments and a true hierarchy, Islam possessed no mechanisms for imposing dogmatic conformity on a society that certainly did not recognise Enlightenment-style ''tolerance'', but which nonetheless evolved means of allowing and even legitimising profound differences in law, mysticism and doctrine. Hence the four schools of Sunnī jurisprudence came to be seen as equivalently valid, while a less formal attitude presumed the concurrent viability of the major Sufi orders (*turuq*), and of the three great Sunnī theological schools of Ash'arism, Māturīdism and Ḥanbalism. Despite the fury of so much interdenominational polemic, classical Islam knew only two episodes of systematic state-backed inquisition: the Mu'tazilite persecution of their rivals under the Abbasid caliphs between the years 833 and 848, and, in the sixteenth century, the brutal destruction of Iranian Sunnism under the Shī'ī revolutionary regime of the Ṣafavids.[14] Apart from these two experiences, which generated or intensified a bitterness against Mu'tazilism and Shī'ism which lingered for centuries, the central Islamic lands were as religiously diverse as Latin Christendom was religiously homogeneous. Hard-line Mu'tazilism and Shī'ism, which readily invoked the principle of *takfīr* (the anathematisation of fellow Muslims), the move which had characterised the Khārijite revolts of the Umayyad period, were precisely the type of religious extremism (*ghuluww*) which Ash'arite theorists dreaded.[15]

In place of ecclesial authority, medieval Islam came to recognise the infinitely more ponderous and difficult principle of *ijmā'*: the consensus of believers. True belief, it was thought, would always be the belief of the majority (*jumhūr*); sects (*firaq*) were necessarily minorities. The large and detailed heresiographical literature which supplies so much of our information about this history everywhere assumes that God is "with the congregation". His mercy and love for the Muslim community ensure that "it will never agree on an error",[16] and that "the individual who departs from the community departs to Hellfire".[17] Although Sunnī Muslims never agreed on whether the community (*jamā'a*) in question denoted the mass of believers, or only their scholarly representatives, this attitude clearly calmed the psychological fear that heresy might one day prevail. No doubt this supplies one reason why, as van Ess claims, "strictly speaking, Islam had no religious wars like those in Europe",[18] and why Sunnī states seldom ventured to impose doctrines and practices upon the population (*ta'dīb al-'āmma*).[19] Given that the Islamic liturgy does not include the recital of a detailed creed, Muslims of various persuasions could and did attend the same mosque services. Keeping one's own counsel was relatively easy.

Given such opportunities, it is curious that Islamic sectarianism did not develop more exuberantly than in fact it did. It is very difficult to discern, from the pages of the Sunnī heresiographers, the popularity of the early sects. Yet it is clear that the majority of Muslims favoured a simple median interpretation which appeared to be faithful to the plain sense of scripture, but which allowed some room for the formalising of creeds against which error could be defined. Elite Muslims who sought to develop advanced theologies needed to be mindful of the preferences of the believing masses. Perhaps this was seen as fidelity to the Prophet and the original collective spirit of *sancta simplicitas*; perhaps, also, it resulted from the fear that a theology which angered the multitudes might lead to disturbances which could provoke the wrath of a sultan. The Mu'tazilite scholars who successfully persuaded the Abbasid caliph to adopt an elitist and abstract theology which seemed equally far from the scriptures and the comprehension of the masses were obliged to use force to compel conformity, and although most scholars complied, popular incredulity ensured their ultimate downfall.

The power of the masses did much to ensure that mainstream Sunnism developed as a set of median positions. Sayings of the Prophet could be found to support the idea that Islam was a middle way (*wasaṭ*).[20] Perhaps even the "straight path" which Muslims daily prayed to be shown was a middle path, specifically between what were claimed

to be the mirrored distortions of historical Judaism and Christianity.[21] So as an awareness grew that there was a tension between the qur'anic verses which saw God as transcendent or immanent, it was thought necessary to chart what Ghazālī called the "just mean in belief" (*al-iqtiṣād fi'l-i'tiqād*), which lay between two forms of *ghuluww*. Theologians who, like the mysterious Jahm ibn Ṣafwān, stripped God of all attributes, transcendentalised Him beyond all possibility of knowledge, while extremist Ḥanbalites who thought that God literally possessed "dimensions", "altitude", a "hand" and a "face", seemed to advocate a finite God, by developing a corporealism which looked like the opposite extreme of the same spectrum.

This was not the only key controversy in which the Sunnī mainstream liked to define itself as a middle position. Addressing the question of the status of sinners, Blankinship's chapter shows how the early community attempted to negotiate a middle path between the Khārijites, who rejected sinners as apostates, and other groups, who held that sin has no effect on an individual's status as a believing Muslim, or that one should simply suspend judgement. Nader El-Bizri, in his chapter on the debate over God's attributes, shows how orthodoxy situated itself between the extremes of either negating the attributes, or concretising them in a way that might compromise the divine unity and transcendence. Similarly, on the free will versus determinism debate, Steffen Stelzer, David Burrell and others show that Muslims tended to favour a median position in the form of the doctrine of Acquisition (*kasb*), and the merits of the *via media* in this context were explicitly extolled by Ghazālī.[22] Overall, it is fair to see the popularity of Ash'arism, Māturīdism and (on a far smaller scale) of moderate Ḥanbalism as the long-term consequence of the community's instinctive dislike of doctrines that seemed to err on the side of excess. It was only in the context of Shī'ism, with its more hierarchical ordering of authority, that the Mu'tazilite doctrines found a permanent place, and even here, as Sajjad Rizvi shows, some of the more austere Mu'tazilite principles were not maintained.

REASON AND REVELATION

Closely linked to this dialectic was the even more taxing balance which high medieval Islam thought it had achieved between "reason" (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*). Those who stressed the former tended to assume that the Qur'an's arguments for itself proceed on the principle that reason is prior to the authority of revelation; they therefore tended

to support a strongly abstract model of God; strict scripturalists, by contrast, often inclined to anthropomorphism. It was generally admitted that metaphysics was primarily the domain of '*aql*, while issues of prophetic authority, and the features of the next world, could be known only through revelation. Marcia Hermansen's chapter on eschatology brings home the strongly scripturalist nature of the arguments here. Such matters were *sam'iyyāt*, doctrines received *ex auditu*, and were acknowledged to be unprovable by reason, although not unreasonable in themselves.

But the '*aql*/*naql* tension in Islam went far beyond this. To some extent it defined the discipline of *kalām* against the disciplines of law and Sufism, even though, as we have seen, these three were regularly reintegrated and seldom became dangerously divorced. As Ash'arism and Māturīdism evolved, beyond the critical twelfth century they became systematic theologies in the truest sense: in the works of Taftāzānī, Ījī and Jurjānī, scriptural references are common, but the crucial opening treatment of metaphysics (*ilāhiyyāt*) is clearly figured as a reason-based vindication of doctrines which can also be known separately through scripture. The initiative championed by Ghazālī, which sought to show the symbiosis of law, Sufism, scripture and *kalām*, was not incorporated at all into *kalām* in its final stage of development, but flourished, as has been seen, in the tradition of Ibn 'Arabī. *Kalām* remained always a discourse of divine transcendence, of *aporia* and of logic, which vindicated claims made through revelation and mystical insight, but never incorporated them into its epistemology.

The triumph of transcendentalism and of an austere negative theology in *kalām* is striking, and might seem to challenge the claim, made earlier, that doctrines and disciplines tended to emerge as ''orthodox'' through popular sanction. Certainly it is intriguing that the Ḥanbalī alternative in most places represented no more than a small fringe, just as the Ḥanbalī definition of *Sharī'a* remained the smallest of the rites of law. The iconic hard-line champion of this school, Ibn Taymiyya, whose challenge to Ghazālī's approach is referred to in Paul Hardy's contribution to this volume, is not conspicuous in the catalogues of Islamic manuscript libraries; his current renown is a recent phenomenon.[23] Ibn Taymiyya was, indeed, imprisoned for heresy, a relatively unusual occurrence, and it would be hard to imagine Muslim society, or its rulers or scholars, punishing more philosophical thinkers like Ghazālī, or Rāzī, or Taftāzānī, in the same way. ''Hard'' Ḥanbalism offered a simple literalism to troubled urban masses, and occasionally won their violent, riotous support, but the consensus of Muslims passed it by.