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# Early Muslim dogma

A source-critical study

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## Preface

Islam, as Peter Brown has recently reminded us, is a great traditional religion.<sup>1</sup> Great traditions are notoriously Whiggish in what they have to tell us of the manner of their own formation – the process whereby they became *traditions* – and the Islamic case is in some ways particularly opaque. To those who persist in trying to penetrate this opacity, there are two obvious strategies. One is to step outside the tradition, and to piece together such testimonies as are to be found in sources independent of it: the early non-Muslim sources to which the attention of Islamicists was directed by Professor Cahen,<sup>2</sup> and those early Muslim sources which survive archaeologically. The other strategy is to try to isolate and date the oldest elements preserved within the Islamic tradition, and more generally to seek to establish some criteria of stratification for its vast literary remains – a strategy which to date has been best exemplified by the researches of Schacht in the field of law. I have already participated in a venture in the first of these two strategies;<sup>3</sup> the present work is primarily an essay in the second.

Our understanding of the early development of Muslim dogma has recently come to be dominated by a group of texts, mainly epistles, ascribed to authors of the later first century of the Hijra. These documents are somewhat marginal to the various literary heritages, orthodox and heretical, in which they survive, and it is largely thanks to the efforts of Orientalists that they have been singled out for special attention. This line of research goes back to Ritter and even to Sachau; but it is thanks above all to the publications of Professor Josef van Ess that this material has begun to be treated as something of a corpus, and to be exploited systematically for the study of the history of doctrine.

1. P. Brown, 'Understanding Islam', *New York Review of Books*, vol. 26, no. 2 (22 February 1979), p. 33.
2. C. Cahen, 'Note sur l'accueil des chrétiens d'Orient à l'islam', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, vol. 166 (1964). It was this article which first drew my attention to the existence of these sources.
3. P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge 1977.

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The present work is intended as a contribution to this field on various levels. In the first place, I have added to the source-material by publishing a new text bearing on the character of early Murji'ism; this in turn has led me to a substantial reassessment of the history of Murji'ite doctrine. Secondly, I have reexamined the questions of authenticity and dating which arise with all the major documents relating to the Murji'ite and Qadarite controversies. In doing this my concern has been less to reach definite conclusions than to place such opinions as we may hold on a sounder philological basis. Thirdly, I have taken up one of the most interesting questions in this, as in all aspects of the formation of Islamic civilisation: that of pre-Islamic origins. In the light of my new source, I have advanced a hypothesis regarding the origins of early Murji'ite epistemology. On the Qadarite front, I have brought into play the indirect testimony of a Syrian theological epistle of the early eighth century after Christ. My findings here complement those of my article on the origins of *kalām*.<sup>4</sup>

Most of this book consists of detailed philological arguments about a narrow range of sources. Philological argument does not necessarily make tedious reading, and I have done my best to prevent what is presented here from being so. But it must be said at the outset that this is a specialist book. General questions regarding pre-Islamic origins and the authenticity of sources should interest anyone who is curious about the formation of classical Islam; but the details are another matter. The reader who does not know that Ibn Ibād is supposed to have written a first letter to the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik will hardly find it illuminating to be told why he cannot have written him a second one. (On the other hand, the reader who has never heard of Ibn Ibād should take courage: he will in due course find himself in surprisingly good company.) At the same time, the focus of this book is not on cultural history; the question is usually who believed what, when and where, rather than what it meant to believe it. If despite these cautions the non-specialist reader is determined to persevere, I advise him to proceed as follows. First, he should if possible have a general idea of the state of the field at the point at which I enter it; this he can best obtain from van Ess's paper on 'The beginnings of Islamic theology'.<sup>5</sup> He should then begin with chapter 1, which, though specialist in interest, is fairly painless; skip chapters 2 and 3 except for the concluding paragraphs; skip chapter 4, which is a translation of a

4. M. A. Cook, 'The origins of *kalām*', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 43 (1980).

5. Published in J. E. Murdoch and E. D. Sylla (eds.), *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning*, Dordrecht and Boston 1975.

## Preface

rather unreadable source; and read from chapter 5 on with an eye to his interests and the concluding statements of each chapter. (The chapters particularly concerned with pre-Islamic origins are 7 and 15.) If he gets this far, he will experience no great difficulty with the Conclusion. He can also find a simpler presentation of some of the arguments of chapters 6 and 9 in a paper I am publishing elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

For the benefit of specialists who wish not merely to follow the argument, but to test it out for themselves, I give here a check-list of the most intensively cited works.

## I. Primary sources

- (1) The *Sīrat Sālim b. Dhakwān*. The key section is published herewith, and translated in chapter 4.
- (2) The two letters of Ibn Ibād to 'Abd al-Malik. Neither is easy to obtain in the original; see ch. 2 notes 3f, 8.
- (3) The *K. al-irjā'* of Ḥasan b. Muḥammad. This is published by van Ess in item (7) below.
- (4) The *Risāla fī 'l-qadar* of Ḥasan of Baṣra. One version was published by Ritter in *Der Islam*, vol. 21 (1933), pp. 67–82.
- (5) The anti-Qadarite epistle of 'Umar II. This is available both in the *Hilya* of Abū Nu'aym (see below, ch. 2 note 9) and in van Ess's edition in item (8) below.
- (6) The *Questions* of Ḥasan b. Muḥammad. This too is published in item (8) below.

Fuller bibliographical details can be found in the notes indicated, or through the index of works cited.

## II. Modern studies

- (7) J. van Ess, 'Das *Kitāb al-irjā'* des Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya', *Arabica*, vol. 21 (1974).
- (8) *id.*, *Anfänge muslimischer Theologie*, Beirut 1977.
- (9) *id.*, *Zwischen Ḥadīth und Theologie*, Berlin 1975.

These three works of van Ess are not only those I cite most often; they are also those with which I most frequently disagree. That I tend to disagree should hardly be surprising; it would otherwise have been superfluous for me to write this book. I hope that the number of occasions on which I have taken issue with van Ess on points of fact or interpretation will also be seen as a compliment, however back-handed, to the scale of his contribution to the field.

6. M. Cook, 'Activism and quietism in Islam: the case of the early Murji'a', in A. Cudsis and A. E. H. Dessouki (eds.), *Islam and Power*, London forthcoming.



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Some practical points can conveniently be collected here.

I use traditional ascriptions to label documents without implying that the ascriptions are correct. Thus I speak throughout of the second letter of Ibn Ibāḍ to ‘Abd al-Malik, though the epistle in question is certainly nothing of the kind.

Death-dates of Muslim scholars of the first two centuries are nearly always taken from Ibn Ḥajar’s *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*; I do not usually indicate variant dates.

Koranic verses are cited in the numbering of Flügel’s edition; my translations plagiarise, but do not reproduce, those of Arberry.

*Isnāds*, when set out in tabular form, are given with the highest (i.e. oldest) authority at the top.

Line-references (as: p. 76.10) indicate the line in which the passage (in the case of a tradition, the *matn*) begins; I do not usually indicate the line in which the passage ends.

I owe a fundamental debt to those scholars whose researches have made England into something of a *miṣr* of Ibāḍī studies. Dr A. K. Ennamī’s thesis has guided me in many matters, and it is thanks to him that the text of the *Sīrat Sālim* exists in this country. I am much indebted to him for allowing me to quote from both, and to publish the anti-Murji’ite section of the *Sīrat Sālim*. Dr Martin Hinds generously lent me his Xerox of the text, and helped me with the loan of books. He also read a draft of chapters 1–10, and made numerous suggestions and corrections which I have freely incorporated. Dr John Wilkinson has likewise helped me with the loan of books and given time to discussing Ibāḍī questions with me. The typescript was also read by Dr Patricia Crone and Dr G. R. Hawting, and has benefited in many places from their comments. Dr C. J. Heywood has given me valuable assistance in matters concerning watermarks. Others have assisted me on particular points, and their help is acknowledged in context.

I owe a special debt to Dr F. W. Zimmermann for reading the entire typescript twice at different stages, for innumerable criticisms, improvements and ideas, and above all for reacting to the beginnings of this book in a manner which impelled me to finish it.

I would like to thank Mr G. Schofield and Mr S. Devani, both of the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, for their help in obtaining books and microfilms.

The Arabic text of the Appendix was set by the *Imprimerie Orientaliste* of Louvain; I would like to thank those concerned for the care with which this was done.

*Michael Cook*

## Table of dates

I have departed from normal Orientalist usage in chronology by giving most dates in *hijrī* years only. One cannot think perspicaciously in two eras simultaneously; and in a field such as the present, it seems best to use the era employed by the overwhelming mass of the sources. The reader who wishes to know the Christian equivalent of a given *hijrī* date can establish it within a year or so from the table given below. The Christian year is that in which the relevant *hijrī* year began.

| <i>hijrī</i><br>year | Christian<br>year | <i>hijrī</i><br>year | Christian<br>year | <i>hijrī</i><br>year | Christian<br>year |
|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1                    | 622               | 100                  | 718               | 200                  | 815               |
| 10                   | 631               | 110                  | 728               | 210                  | 825               |
| 20                   | 640               | 120                  | 737               | 220                  | 835               |
| 30                   | 650               | 130                  | 747               | 230                  | 844               |
| 40                   | 660               | 140                  | 757               | 240                  | 854               |
| 50                   | 670               | 150                  | 767               | 250                  | 864               |
| 60                   | 679               | 160                  | 776               | 260                  | 873               |
| 70                   | 689               | 170                  | 786               | 270                  | 883               |
| 80                   | 699               | 180                  | 796               | 280                  | 893               |
| 90                   | 708               | 190                  | 805               | 290                  | 902               |