

Theological thought

One of the most commonly used terms for Islamic theology is *kalam*. In Arabic, the word *kalam* can mean several things. Broadly translated it refers to speech, debate and discussion. The term is used for theology because of this association to debate and argument in theological matters. *Kalam* is an area of knowledge which deals with basic religious beliefs, proofs and defences against attacks on the foundations of Islamic faith. In this sense it does not deal with an area of law. Rather, it centres on the belief system underpinning Islam. *Kalam* thus diverges from *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), which focuses on deeds and actions.

The beginning of this area of knowledge goes back to the earliest period of Islamic history, when Muslims began to debate religious belief. The issues included matters such as the unity of God and His existence and attributes, prophecy and prophethood, scripture and revelation, and resurrection and the afterlife. While many theologians developed arguments for various theological positions and were engaged in theological debates, some Muslims opposed the arguments and debates. They did not believe there was any need for the discipline of theology or for Muslims to engage in such debates at all. For them, the creeds of Islam were manifestly established by the Qur'an and explained by the Prophet. Thus there was no need to prove the beliefs of a Muslim rationally; such a procedure was an innovation in Islam. The well-known statement 'He who is involved in *kalam* will never receive salvation, for never does a man take to *kalam* unless his heart was lacking in faith' is attributed to Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Certain Hanbalis simply considered the discipline of *kalam* as sinful and wrote many epistles discouraging Muslims from expressing an interest in it.

The development of *kalam*

Debates about theological matters and appropriate Islamic belief emerged early within the Muslim community, but were rare during the Prophet's time. In one hadith, there is a report that several Companions were discussing the nature of God's predetermination of events (*qadar*) and the Prophet

asked them not to talk about it. The Prophet also reportedly asked Muslims not to debate the nature of God.¹ If these reports are correct and authentic the Prophet was cautioning against too much unnecessary theological debate.

The Qur'an has numerous references to the Creator, God and creation, and asks Muslims to reflect on these topics. The Qur'an argues that God is closely involved in creation by sending messengers and prophets to the people so that they can understand and put into practice the basic teachings that they need in order to function in a godly manner. The Qur'an uses logic and reason so that people can understand its messages in a rational manner. It also provides guidance and information about the meaning of life and life after death. It has a lot to say on questions related to belief and unbelief, good and evil, right and wrong, and salvation. The Qur'an was on the whole comprehensible to the average person in the Arabian peninsula, who was characteristically illiterate, sometimes nomadic, and had little time for sophisticated forms of thought or reasoning. This simplicity permeated an essentially oral culture with hardened attitudes towards life, dominated by tribalism and feuds. For all the Qur'an's clarity, a number of events soon triggered major debates on its interpretation.

Early theological debates: the political context

For Sunnis, at his death, the Prophet Muhammad had not named a successor to rule the community. He was succeeded by two of his close companions, Abu Bakr and Umar, whose caliphates operated without major difficulties. The community was generally happy with their performance and did not dispute their rule much, although there were some who were keen to see someone from the family of the Prophet, preferably Ali, at the helm. It was only after the assassination of the third leader, Uthman (d. 36/656), that Ali was proclaimed caliph. His nomination was not received without resistance, mainly from the people of Iraq and the governor of Syria, Mu'awiya (d. 60/680). Early inter-Muslim fighting at the Battle of the Camel (36/656) between Ali's forces and those of his opponents, and the Battle of Siffin (37/657) between Ali's forces and those of Mu'awiya had lasting effects not only on the unity of the community but also on the future development of the discipline of theology.

During the Battle of Siffin, Ali agreed to arbitration with his challenger Mu'awiya, but a group of Muslims who had sided with Ali in the battle argued that he should not have agreed to arbitration. For them, by agreeing to that Ali effectively relinquished legitimate power to an illegitimate ruler (Mu'awiya). In protest, these Muslims seceded from Ali's camp and opposed both Ali and Mu'awiya, becoming known as Kharijis (seceders or rebels).

The Kharijis held a number of politico-theological positions:

- They rejected the political leadership of both Ali and Mu'awiya (and later of the Umayyads) on the basis that agreeing to arbitration by Ali was against the concept 'judgement belongs to God alone'. They elected their own leader.
- They argued that a Muslim who committed a grave sin (such as unlawful killing of another Muslim, which Umayyad rulers were accused of later) was no longer a Muslim and would go to Hell.
- They adopted an uncompromising attitude towards application of the commandments and prohibitions of the Qur'an.
- They believed that Muslims who did not support their position were unbelievers or religious hypocrites and could be killed with impunity.
- They believed that leadership of the Muslim community was not based on tribal kinship, and that the most God-conscious and pious Muslim among them should be the leader of the community. Furthermore, they held that a leader who is not righteous – one who did not strictly follow the sacred law – could be deposed.

The Kharijis themselves were divided on a range of issues, such as who was a true Muslim and how salvation might be attained. Early on, a multitude of subgroups sympathetic to Khariji positions or associated with Kharijis emerged. Despite the extremist nature of many of their positions, the Kharijis exerted enormous influence on the theological debates of other Muslims. In time, the mainstream Muslims (later to be known as Sunnis) adopted refined versions of several Khariji positions. At a political level, the Kharijis, particularly the most extremist among them, remained hostile to Umayyad rule and suffered violent repression for decades.

A second group, the Shi'a, arose as a result of the early political divisions. They remained loyal to Ali. There is some evidence to suggest that even while Ali was alive, some of those claiming to be his followers exaggerated his status. This tendency to exaggerate the status of key members of the Prophet's family continued after the death of Ali. Two of his sons, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, were also viewed by some as being more than human. Some Shi'a developed strong messianic beliefs, including that an infallible imam would appear at the end of time to restore justice and the rule of God, not only in the Muslim community but also in the world at large. Some of the early extremist Shi'i groups even abolished fundamental practices of Islam and adopted esoteric interpretations of the Qur'an to justify their position. This tendency among the Shi'a to exaggerate the status of the family of the Prophet and to adopt esoteric interpretations of religious texts is referred to as extremism (*ghuluw*) and those who display it are called extremists (*ghulat*) by Sunnis. Out of this chaos emerged the more moderate Shi'a in the form of Twelver (or Imami) Shi'ism, whose name is based on the recognition of twelve descendants of the Prophet as rightful heirs to leadership of the community. Twelver Shi'is came very close to Sunnis on a range of issues,

and their legal school, the Ja'fari school, has relatively few areas of major interpretative difference with the main Sunni legal schools. Several Shi'i rebellions were put down by the Umayyads (41–134/661–750) and their governors, thus laying the foundation of a bloody history of persecution between Shi'i and Sunni Muslims.

In addition to the Kharijis and Shi'a, several other groups emerged in the first two centuries of Islam, often in response to the views of the Kharijis or the Shi'a. These early trends were highly fluid, as no systematic theological schools then existed. This period saw the emergence and disappearance of several theological orientations and groups.

The Mu'tazila

Much of the debate on theological matters from the mid first/seventh century to the mid second/eighth century was heavily concentrated in Iraq. This may have been because Iraq witnessed much of the opposition to Umayyad rule, and was a safer place for the Shi'i and Khariji movements.

One of the most influential figures in Iraq at this significant time was Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728), a well-known teacher and ascetic in Iraqi religious circles. Even though al-Basri appeared on the scene before the Mu'tazili-Traditionist debates began in earnest, he undoubtedly left ideas that influenced their development, and planted the seed of a different religious movement.

Hasan al-Basri had a disdain for politics and all worldly matters. He saw sectarian disputes and acute differences of legal opinion as a threat to the proper practice of the law. His repeated call for the remembrance of the hereafter and his constant denigration of the worldly life made asceticism his cornerstone. Hasan al-Basri was critical of the fatalistic and deterministic visions of the world that were becoming influential amongst Muslims. He said that human beings were responsible for their own actions. Unless human beings have the capacity to act freely, it is hard to argue the point of rewards and punishments. Al-Basri was not debating these issues based on specific philosophical or political positions; rather, his arguments were couched within the text and ethos of the Qur'an.

It was in this context of the early second/eighth century that the first systematic theological school, the Mu'tazila, emerged in Iraq. The person believed to be the first Mu'tazili and the father of the Mu'tazili movement is known as Wasil ibn Ata (d. 131/749). He was a student of Hasan al-Basri. A commonly told story in relation to the emergence of the Mu'tazila is the following. One day, when al-Basri was with his pupils, someone came and asked whether people who committed grave sins should be considered Muslims or, according to the Khariji view, be declared unbelievers. The mainstream view at the time was that such a person was a sinner but still a Muslim. Hasan al-Basri wanted to take the time to reflect on the question

and provide a properly considered opinion. But his student, Wasil, apparently became impatient with his slow decision-making and said, 'I do not say that the person who commits a major sin is an absolute believer or an absolute non-believer. For me he is between two states (belief and unbelief). He is neither a believer nor an unbeliever.' Wasil then left al-Basri's study circle, at which the teacher reportedly said, 'He broke away from us'. The word al-Basri used for this was *i'tazala* (broke away, seceded), from which it has been claimed came the name Mu'tazila.

Abbasids and the emergence of kalam

While political dissension and the intermingling with people of other faiths, particularly the Christians, left their mark on earlier theological debates, the coming to power of the Abbasids in 133/750 heralded a significantly different political climate. Unlike the Umayyads, the Abbasids represented the ascent of a non-Arab regime to power. Abbasids claimed to be the defenders of the true spirit of Islam: no distinction was to be made between Muslims on the basis of race (for example, Arabs versus non-Arabs). Scholars of religion from all surrounding areas flocked to Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasids, to play a part in creating a climate of authenticity which the Abbasids were keen to display. The Abbasids' insistence on not disregarding the law and taking legal council attracted the best legal minds to the new caliphate.

Moreover, several other factors also played a significant role in the development of kalam, such as the sophistication in legal reasoning that developed in *fiqh*, which in turn influenced the construction of theological arguments as well as the translation of Greek philosophical works into Arabic. The interaction and debates between Muslims and followers of other religious traditions such as Christians and Zoroastrians on issues such as prophecy and the prophethood of Muhammad, and the Muslim concept of the unity of God, also facilitated the development of kalam, as such debates often required Muslims to defend their religious beliefs on the basis of rational arguments.

Mu'tazilis versus Traditionists

It was during the Abbasid period that the consolidation of Mu'tazila as a theological school took place. This was strengthened by the support of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (d. 218/833), and later by al-Mu'tasim (d. 227/842) and al-Wathiq (d. 232/847). The Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun instituted Mu'tazili theology as the orthodoxy. To ensure its dominance in the theological arena, al-Ma'mun instituted an inquisition (*mihna*) to force some of the state functionaries to adopt the Mu'tazili position on the 'createdness' of the Qur'an. Non-Mu'tazili scholars were persecuted by the

inquisition if they did not assent to this doctrine, a situation that continued until the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 247/861) turned against the Mu'tazila in favour of the Traditionists and reversed the decision of al-Ma'mun.

Key theological positions of the Mu'tazila

Mu'tazili kalam reached its peak during the third/ninth century. Those who were considered the main voices of this school of theology were far from unanimous vis-à-vis the issues that were being debated during that period and later. However it appears that Mu'tazilis were in agreement on at least five theological principles, which set them apart from other theologians and from what came to be regarded as orthodoxy. These were as follows.

Tawhid (unity of God)

Mu'tazilis adopted strict interpretation of 'monotheism'. For them, monotheism required an uncompromising observance of the transcendence and absolute unity of God. For them, God is pure Essence without any attributes, as from their point of view, assigning attributes, as their opponents did, implied multiplicity. While other Muslims argued, for example, that speech was an attribute of God and therefore uncreated, Mu'tazilis believed that it could not be uncreated as this would compromise the unity of God. Given that the Qur'an was the speech of God, the Mu'tazilis argued that the Qur'an was created in time. For them, anyone who believed that the Qur'an was an uncreated attribute of God compromised the absolute unity of God.

It has been said that the Mu'tazili position on the created nature of the Qur'an was partly a reaction to the Christian notion of the incarnation of Jesus, which they saw as infringing the unity of God:

[T]o say that the Qur'an *is* the divine uncreated Word which manifests itself in time in the form of Arabic speech, is equivalent to saying what Christians say about the Incarnation: that Christ *is* the divine uncreated Word, who manifests himself in time in the form of a human being.²

Famously, the Traditionist Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855) refused to agree with the doctrine that the Qur'an is 'created', and was imprisoned and flogged for teaching the eternality of the Qur'an. The Traditionists, as exemplified by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, rejected Mu'tazili rationalism and gave precedence to the letter of the scripture. Ibn Hanbal believed that the mode of the attributes of God, according to the teachings of the Qur'an, does not lend itself to human reason, and thus must be accepted without qualification.³ Asking whether God's attributes, particularly speech, are 'in' Him or 'without' Him was an unacceptable religious innovation in his view. Divine speech

is 'essentially' of God, it subsists in Him, and He expresses it. He does not create it inside anything else; it is He Himself who speaks. Therefore the Qur'an, according to Ibn Hanbal, is the uncreated word of God, not just metaphorically, but with words, letters and ideas.⁴

Divine justice

Human beings are capable of creating and performing acts both good and evil, and it is on this basis that they are rewarded or punished in the hereafter. It is not God who creates evil and injustice, for this would mean that God is unjust. God in His wisdom only wills well for people. God does not ask human beings to commit evil. Part of God's well-wishing is to send prophets to guide humanity.

Promise and threat

Believers who depart from this world having obeyed God and repented of all major sins 'deserve' reward in the hereafter. Otherwise, they are damned eternally, although their punishment will be lighter than that inflicted on the infidels of other faiths.

Commanding good and prohibiting evil

Humans ought to be able, through reason, to have knowledge of and perceive good and evil, and acknowledge the gifts that God bestowed before revelation. Divine laws were revealed through the prophets to make the observance of those laws obligatory. Mu'tazilis did not agree on how the laws were to be observed. Some saw that this task was the sole prerogative of an imam (the political-religious leader of the Muslim community). Others believed that it was up to the community to decide, while a third group believed that the task had to be divided between those laws which were the proper domain of the imam, and those which could be decided by the community.

The intermediary state of the sinner

The Mu'tazilis believed that the *fasiq* (sinner who does not repent) from among the Muslim community is in an intermediary state between 'belief' and 'non-belief'. This means the *fasiq* is neither a believer nor a non-believer.

When the tables were turned against the Mu'tazilis (from 236/850), the intolerance they showed during the inquisition (212–36/827–50) towards those Muslims who did not share their views was visited on the Mu'tazilis by the Traditionists. The downfall of the Mu'tazila meant that the Traditionists, with their literal reading of texts related to theology, were in the ascendancy. Between the two extremes of the Mu'tazila and the

Traditionists, the Ash'ari school of theology emerged to become the most dominant and pervasive theological school within Sunni Islam. On the other hand, the Shi'a came to adopt many Mu'tazili theological views.

Ash'ari and his school of theology

The third/ninth century also witnessed the advent of the important theologian Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Isma'il al-Ash'ari (d. in Baghdad circa 330/941), after whom the Ash'ari school of theology is named. Born in Basra, he began as a Mu'tazili. However, he later broke away and began teaching doctrines that denied his Mu'tazili past.

In addition to contradicting the Mu'tazila on the question of God's essence and attributes, including that of speech, al-Ash'ari attacked the Mu'tazilis on free will, the nature of the divine law, the definition of evil and the role of reason, all of which had much to do with the concrete attitude of the community.

Although it is not clear why al-Ash'ari broke away from the Mu'tazilis, one of the more famous stories surrounds a dispute he had with a former teacher over the hypothetical case of three brothers (a believer, an unbeliever and a child) and the fates of their souls in the hereafter. His Mu'tazili teacher could not give a satisfactory answer. Al-Ash'ari thought that the answer given highlighted some important weaknesses in the principle of 'the promise and the threat', after which he came to doubt the entirety of Mu'tazili doctrines.⁵

Ash'ari theological beliefs

Knowledge of God

The first duty of the human being is to know God. According to the Ash'aris, it is possible to know through reason, but the obligation to know comes through revelation, which is superior to reason (for example, distinguishing good and evil, or believing in the realm of the 'unseen', cannot be achieved through reason alone). We can know God's attributes through His acts, and examination of the self leads to knowledge of God.⁶

The argument is that, for example, when human beings reflect on the way they were conceived, how they grew from one state to another until they reached perfection, and realized that they could not have instigated or performed this, they will be in no doubt of a creator who is all-powerful, all-knowing, willing, wise and all-merciful. The human being who has a sound intellect, according to al-Ash'ari, would find it inconceivable that these acts were brought about by chance or autonomously, since their manifestly deliberate choice and perfection would deny that claim, pointing instead to their creator.⁷

Attributes of God

God is transcendent and there is nothing like Him in creation. Only those attributes mentioned in the Qur'an may be used in describing God. The distinguishing feature of the Ash'ari conception of God's attributes is that his positive attributes – knowledge, power, will, life, hearing, sight, and speech – subsist in Him eternally and are inherent in His essence (unlike the Mu'tazili view, which held that God's essence and attributes are identical).⁸

The Qur'an

Ash'aris believe that the Qur'an is the eternal, immutable and uncreated word of God. The letters, the ink and the paper however are created.

Vision of God in the next life

The Mu'tazilis rejected the possibility of seeing God in the next life. The Ash'aris believed that while this is not possible in this life, Qur'anic references and many sound hadith refer to the possibility of sighting God in the hereafter. To resolve the problem of the inference that sight would spatially limit God, the Ash'aris said that it is possible in the next life to perceive God, but in a manner unlike our 'seeing' in the physical world through the eye.⁹

Sinners as believers or unbelievers

The notion that a person is neither a believer nor an unbeliever, neither a friend of God nor His enemy, is untenable, according to the Ash'aris. Thus, they reject the Mu'tazili belief in the intermediate state of grave sinners. The Ash'aris believe Muslims can be sinners and may receive God's mercy provided they do not abandon their faith before or after committing sin. Sinful acts therefore do not have any bearing on faith.¹⁰

Theory of kasb (acquisition)

In contrast to those (such as the Jabris – the determinists) who took a deterministic view of human actions, and the Mu'tazilis, who believed human beings possessed free will and power to act, the Ash'aris adopted a doctrine called *kasb* (acquisition). According to this doctrine, human beings do not possess the power to originate or complete an act; that power belongs to God alone. Rather they are given the ability to choose freely between right and wrong, and thus acquire responsibility for their choices. The Ash'aris held that power is of two types: original and derived. God alone possesses true originating or creative power, whereas human beings have derived power, which cannot create an act in itself. Human beings are, therefore, the

loci for God's creative power, which completes the choices they make. Human beings possess 'free choice' and it is God's habit to create the action that completes the choice. From this, the human being is rewarded for choosing good or punished for choosing evil. The result of the doctrine of *kasb* was that Ash'aris believed that God creates good and evil. The theory of *kasb* was controversial within the Ash'ari school itself.¹¹

**From the Creed of Adud al-Din al-Iji
(circa 1281–1355 CE), an Ash'ari theologian**

The following is a summary of the key points in Iji's Creed (known as Adudiyya).

- The world is originated, and is capable of becoming non-existent.
- The world has a maker who has been from eternity.
- God is characterized by all the attributes of perfection and is free from all the marks of deficiency.
- God has no similar, no rival, no like, no partner, no helper.
- God does not inhere in anything else; no originated (thing) subsists in His essence.
- God is not a substance, an accident or a body.
- God is not in any place or in any direction.
- God is seen by the believers on the Day of Resurrection.
- What God willed came to be, and what He did not will did not come to be. Unbelief and sins (in human beings) are by (God's) creating and by His willing but not with His approval.
- God is rich (and independent); He has no need of anything.
- There is no judge over God; and nothing is obligatory for Him.
- God is not divided into parts or portions. He has no limit and no end.
- God has angels possessing wings, in twos, threes and fours. The angels include Jibril, Mika'il, Israfil and Izra'il.
- The Qur'an is the speech of God, uncreated.
- The return (to life) is a reality; the bodies will be gathered together, and their spirits will be restored to them.
- Everlastingly abiding in Paradise are the people of Paradise, and in Hell the unbelievers. The Muslim who has committed a great sin does not abide everlastingly in Hell, but finally goes to Paradise.
- The punishment [that is reported to take place] in the grave is a reality.

- The sending of messengers (by God), from Adam to our prophet, with evidentiary miracles (to confirm their claims) is a reality.
- Unbelief is the absence of faith. We do not declare any Muslims unbelievers except where they deny the Creator who is all-powerful, effectively willing and all-knowing, or (where they) associate others with God, or reject the prophethood of Muhammad, or reject the evidence by which the coming of Muhammad is necessarily known, or reject a matter on which there has been definite agreement, such as the five pillars of Islam, or consider forbidden things permitted.¹²

Maturidi school of theology

Closely related to the Ash'ari school of theology is that of the Maturidis. Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. circa 333/944) of Maturid, Samarqand, sought to introduce to the eastern provinces of the caliphate what his younger contemporary al-Ash'ari would achieve in Baghdad. A Hanafi in law, al-Maturidi was also keen to use reason within the limits of orthodoxy, and shunned literalism. No writings of Al-Maturidi appear in published form. It is thus easier to speak of Maturidism than to speak of al-Maturidi himself. The creed of Najm al-Din al-Nasafi (d. 537/1142) and its commentary by Taftazani are renowned Maturidi sources to this day. With the Ash'aris, Maturidis held that all of God's attributes are eternal (the alternative would mean that God changes), and criticized the Mu'tazila for divesting His attributes of real meaning.¹³ Vision (of God) in the next life does not have to conform to the rules of optics of this world.¹⁴ Faith occurs by assent of the heart.¹⁵ Grave sinners may receive mercy, but judgement lies with God, who may punish them eternally in Hell if He so wills.¹⁶ But Maturidism came close to Mu'tazili thought on a number of issues: al-Maturidi introduced theories on the sources of knowledge, and reserved a particular place for reason in his epistemology, as well as his theology.¹⁷ Reason by itself, not only revelation, could prompt in us the need to know God. Despite its general acceptance of the theory of *kasb* ('acquisition'), Maturidism also maintains that God endows human beings with both choice and power to act.¹⁸

Imami Shi'i theology

There are three main groups within Shi'ism – Imamis (Twelver-Imamis), Ismailis and Zaydis – and all have theological positions which often differ significantly from one another. The Imamis and Zaydis are heavily influenced by Mu'tazili theology, so on many theological positions they could be

considered an extension of the Mu'tazilis. The Ismailis however, with their emphasis on esoteric interpretation, differ significantly from Imamis and Zaydis. The systematic elaboration of Imami belief was the work of a number of scholars such as Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (d. 381/991). The earliest full statement of doctrinal belief is the Epistle (*Risala*) on Imami beliefs composed by Ibn-Babawayh.¹⁹ Key Imami theological positions include:

- Insistence on God's unity and acceptance of a distinction between essential and active attributes of God. The active attributes originate in time. For example, God cannot be Provider (*raziq*) until there is a creature for which He makes provision (*rizq*).
- Interpretation of anthropomorphic terms, such as 'face' and 'hand', are applied to God metaphorically.
- Acceptance of common eschatological beliefs, although some are interpreted metaphorically.
- Acceptance of the idea of the createdness of the Qur'an. If the Qur'an is created, it is not necessarily the expression of God's being, and may therefore be modified by an inspired imam.

What is noticeable is that the Imamis come very close to Mu'tazili positions in theology. Much like Sunnis, there have been two contrary tendencies in Imamism: one that uses reason and engages in kalam and another that mostly restricts itself to the Qur'an and Sunna and criticizes the use of reason.²⁰

Gradual decline of kalam

With its tendency to take the middle ground between the Mu'tazila and the Traditionists, Ash'arism came to dominate the theological scene in much of the Sunni world. The Malikis and Shafi'is, on the whole, became Ash'aris in theology, while a significant section of the Hanafis became Maturidis (who in many respects are similar to Ash'aris). The Imami Shi'a and Zaydi Shi'a came to adopt the Mu'tazili theology. However, within the Sunni world, much of the Traditionist unease with theological debate and rationalism came to dominate, gradually leading to a significant decline and marginalization of kalam among Sunnis. This was perhaps facilitated by figures such as al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), a Shafi'i, through his attacks on philosophy, and by Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328), a Hanbali, through his anti-kalam approach. The sidelining of the Mu'tazilis with their staunchly rationalist outlook after the inquisition of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun, the triumphalism of the Traditionists under Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and the emergence of Ash'arism with its highly traditionalist positions, meant that kalam was unable to sustain itself within a rationalist framework. The Traditionist framework, with its strong bias against rational thought, was no place for a vibrant kalam to flourish.

Kalam in the modern period

In the modern period, reformers such as Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), one of the key figures of the modernist movement and one-time head of al-Azhar seminary in Cairo, attempted to revive theological thought. The intellectual task that Abduh set for himself was to simplify Islam through a return to its early sources. Two aspects of modern thought played a central part in Abduh's theological thought. One is the theory of evolution, which he employed to demonstrate that the Prophet Muhammad was the culmination of the prophets.²¹ The second is the concept of scientific law as a formulation of a relationship between cause and effect.²²

Fundamental to the idea of prophecy in Islam is the doctrine of its conclusion by the Prophet Muhammad. Theologians taught that God willed that communication with humanity through revelation should end with a specific prophet at a specific time. Rather than supporting this doctrine solely by quoting Qur'anic verses and hadith, Abduh attempted to support it through a sociological rationale. He suggested that revelation varied in accordance with human development. For instance, when human beings were in the stage of 'childhood' (early history),

[r]eligions in that sort of context could not intelligibly relate themselves to men on subtle aspects of consciousness or 'extend' them with rational proofs. . . . The religions took men and gave them straight commands and firm restraints, to which they required obedience to the utmost degree. Though the meaning and purpose were there to be known, obedience was irrespective of actual comprehension and intelligible knowledge.²³

It is then understood that the coming of Muhammad, the 'seal of prophecy', ushered in the age of maturity, or the age of reason to be more precise. Through this evolutionary account, Abduh tacitly urges a rethinking of religion to align it with the changes that were brought about by the spirit of Muhammad's message in the first place.²⁴

Steering away from Ash'ari theology, Abduh strove to show that Islam accommodates and urges the upholding of the principle of causality. Abduh charges with committing the sin of association of other beings with God (*shirk*) all those who do not employ the normal procedures of causation, as ordained by God, and holds them responsible for the false reliance on God and a fatalistic view of the world that he believes is behind the stagnation of the Muslim community (*umma*) at large.²⁵ Having resurrected the Mu'tazili view of the world, Abduh aimed at the same time to limit the miraculous, of which he was sceptical. Conversely, Abduh wanted to limit the scope of 'reason', lest his thesis develop into a stand for 'rationalism'. He considered the message of the prophets to be complementary to reason: 'How then can

reason be denied its right, being, as it is, the scrutineer of evidences so as to reach the truth within them and know that it is Divinely given?’²⁶ But once it concludes that the utterances of the Prophet are truthful, reason must accept the information or teaching they contain.

The adoption of such theological thought within the seminaries of Muslim religious education has been slow; in fact, the resurgence of neo-revivalism in the twentieth century (in the form of Muslim Brotherhood, for instance), and the significant revival of traditionalism and literalism in the form of Wahhabism and Salafism has further curtailed the revival of theological thought along the lines of Abduh.

- 31 D. Pearl and W. Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, 3rd ed., London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1998, p. 72.
- 32 Pearl and Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, p. 72.
- 33 An-Na'im, *Islamic Family Law*, p. 18.
- 34 Pearl and Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, p. 51.
- 35 Pearl and Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, p. 64.
- 36 Pearl and Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, p. 67.
- 37 Pearl and Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, p. 67.
- 38 Pearl and Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, p. 68.
- 39 Pearl and Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, p. 69.
- 40 J. Hussain, 'Family Law and Muslim Communities', in A. Saeed and S. Akbarzadeh (eds), *Muslim Communities in Australia*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001, p. 184.
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* I am grateful for Redha Ameur who helped me in utilising the following sources in French in several sections of this chapter.

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