

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of this University are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA Licence which allows you to:

- Access and download a copy
- Print out a copy

This Digital Copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this Licence are for use in connection with this module or course of study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by the University.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

Title of extract: **Tradition in the Making**

Name of Author: **Waines, D.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **An Introduction to Islam. Waines, D.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Cambridge University Press**

Pages scanned: **33 - 61**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Muslim Networks TRDL7065**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning:

E. L. Hamb

Date authorised: 31.08.12

Moodle/Powerpoint

CHAPTER 2

Tradition in the making

COMMUNITY EAST AND WEST

The first generations of Muslims lived through extraordinary times. In less than a century after the Prophet's death in 10/632, the community's twin birthplaces of Mecca and Medina had become the religious centers of a far-flung patchwork of dominions stretching west across North Africa and into the Iberian peninsula¹ and to the east as far as the Great Wall of China. The famous scholar Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/923) traced the course of Muslim expansion in his *History of Prophets and Kings*. In the year 92 of the new Muslim era (710 CE), he records how some 12,000 troops crossed from North Africa into al-Andalus and fought hard "until God killed the Christian king Roderick." This marked the beginning of a Muslim presence in the peninsula which lasted eight hundred years, until it was finally reconquered for the church in Rome. In 96/714, again according to al-Tabari, there occurred in the East a brief encounter between a delegation of Muslims and "the ruler of China." No enduring Muslim presence, however, resulted from this exchange. Indeed, the first short session between the Muslims and the emperor's courtiers seems only to have left the latter bemused at their guests' appearance. Clad in simple white domestic garments, sandal-footed, and perfumed with musk and ambergris, the Arabs conveyed the impression to their Chinese hosts that they were women! A Chinese account of these encounters records the Muslims' arrogant behavior in refusing to prostrate themselves before the emperor, a gesture of submission which Muslims could make only before Allah. Apart from the occasional enclave of Muslim Arab and Persian traders on Chinese territory, an indigenous Chinese Muslim community did not emerge until many centuries later. For the moment, however, rich though the contacts and exchanges were in these early decades

between Muslims and varied ethnic-religious communities throughout the Middle East and North Africa, the Great Wall of China in the east remained more than a mere physical barrier shutting out the new Muslim order.

Islamic tradition began to set down its own roots in the fertile cultural soil of these regions during the period of rapid expansion north, west, and east of the Arabian peninsula. Tradition constituted a complex response to a number of inter-related challenges. Foremost, in a strictly religious sense, was the challenge of the prophetic-revelatory event. What did the divinely revealed message and the life of its Messenger mean in detail, and how was each source relevant to the new community's daily concerns? These were questions which took time and immense effort to answer.

In the process, concerted and deliberate inquiry and debate contributed its measure to the growth of tradition. So, too, did violent dissent. Not surprisingly, therefore, tradition reflects the currents and counter-currents of the myriad points of view which went into its making. Moreover, tradition mirrored the challenge confronted by the community in its continuing experience of the founding event. That is, the community continued to reinterpret the event from different perspectives in changing historical circumstances and different cultural locales. Thus, while the prophetic-revelatory event itself can be said to have *transformed* both history and the lives of subsequent generations of Muslims, at the same time the emerging tradition was being *moulded* by the impact of history upon the community.

In this chapter only a rather impressionistic picture of this tradition-in-the-making can be attempted. Despite much recent effort given to questions of the origins and early development of the complex phenomena which comprise the tradition, modern scholarship is as yet far removed from any consensus as to how, when, where, and why the tradition developed as it did. Probably we shall never know with any comfortable degree of certainty the details of "what really happened" during, say, the first Islamic century. This has not prevented the more adventurous spirited from venturing, cautiously or boldly, into the minefield of the Arabic source material bearing upon the period. The reconnoitre, however, has left few entirely unscathed. While this state of affairs is grist for the specialist's mill, the interested non-specialist reader cannot be expected to share the expert's apparently suicidal enthusiasm.² Thus in the story that follows, some of the more important signposts will be charted for the

period under present consideration, that being roughly the first two to three centuries of the community's existence. This will be done, it should be said, from the safety of the sidelines rather than by plunging again through the minefield.

The first two "generations" or classes of Muslims are remembered in the tradition by their relationship to the Prophet. The Companions of the Prophet (*sahabah*) were the men and women who lived, worked, and fought beside him in his lifetime. They included those who led the community after his death. Abu Bakr was the first Caliph or successor to Muhammad, followed by 'Umar, 'Uthman, and then 'Ali. This generation of leaders oversaw (from 10-41/632-661) the opening stage of Muslim expansion in regions well beyond the Arabian peninsula, although in many areas Muslim rule would not be firmly consolidated for some decades to come. In mainstream Muslim historical works, these leaders became known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*al-khulafā' al-rashidun*), a term which implied not only model leadership of justice and prudence but also a golden-age model community. Yet, this same generation of Muslims also witnessed, as well as exhilarating successes, the first traumatic shocks of internal division and conflict.

The second "generation" was logically called the Successors (*tabi'un*) to the Prophet's Companions. Many lived to between the years 81-107/700-725, the oldest of them dying even later. Thereafter, succeeding generations received no special label of merit, although individuals who, until the present day, claim descent (*ashraf*) from the Prophet have enjoyed a certain dignity within their local communities.

The lands and peoples brought under Muslim rule were in the trust of the Caliph, who governed through cadres of political and military personnel, a task which included, of course, the fiscal control of these territories and subjects. The administrative details of Muslim rule do not, however, form part of the present account. It is germane to note here that the course of development of Islamic tradition was unlike that of either Judaism or Christianity in one important respect. Jews had received the Covenant from God well before experiencing its fulfilment in the earthly kingdom of Israel; much of the characteristic ethos of the tradition was nevertheless implanted in Jewish thought *after* the loss of terrestrial power, a loss which then had to be accounted for and rationalized by the rabbis. Christians for their part had struggled against centuries of imperial pagan power until the

Emperor Constantine converted to the faith and changed their worldly fortunes; but much of what characterized Christian thought had already been formed during a long period of the community's political impotence. Islam, on the other hand, grew swiftly from a tiny central Arabian commonwealth to an empire of international compass, confident in its own divine commission to rule. From the beginning Muslims were charged with the grave task to *Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger and those among you who have been entrusted with authority* (4:59), and, as historical circumstances favoured their enterprise, the experience of power and domination shaped much of what became characteristic in the tradition.

THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

The individuals who dedicated themselves to tradition building undertook activities in which each laboriously mined one or more of the numerous rich shafts of knowledge embedded in the prophetic-revelatory event. Some of this labor, but by no means all, was carried out by the Muslims of these first two generations. The mining process was known as "the quest for knowledge" (*talab al-'ilm*), the persons engaged in the activity were the "people of knowledge" (*ahl al-'ilm*, or '*ulama*'). An individual was known as an '*alim*', referring in its crudest sense to a person possessing a degree of knowledge ('*ilm*') of the Qur'anic revelation and the life of the Prophet Muhammad as well as the contributions of the best known of his Companions. In other words, knowledge essential for the proper worship of Allah and of life in society. Even knowledge extracted from sources outside the community, from Jews, Christians, and the like, was initially firmly embraced. From the second/ninth century onward, experts in separate disciplines directly related to scripture and the Prophet emerged; and, in addition to their creating auxiliary sciences to support these primary concerns, they collectively contributed to the elaboration of Islamic doctrine and practice. At the same time, it must be stressed that the intellectual output of these centuries was not confined to religious matters. Numerous Muslim scholars, with their training in the religious sciences as well, devoted their lives to a range of other disciplines including philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. Their labors, indeed, constituted a crucial pool of knowledge inherited by Europe through Latin translations from these Arabic treatises from the fifth/eleventh century.

The motives behind the urgent desire to accumulate knowledge of a particularly religious nature are not difficult to imagine. As one prominent scholar among the Successors, Abu Bakr b. 'Abd al-Rahman b. al-Harith (d. 93/712), is reported to have put it, the purpose of knowledge was to gain honor, to strengthen one's faith and to win favor with the ruling Caliph in order to serve him. The individual's motivation could also have been found in revelation. There, the incessant refrain was that true knowledge was knowledge of religious insight, even a mark of faith itself: *Allah will exalt by many degrees those among you who have attained to faith and those who have been given knowledge* (58:11). There was in addition the wider pragmatic consideration of the *ummah's* needs. In the historical confrontation of the new community with the older, established religious communities of Jews and Christians, knowledge of its own founding experience was essential to confirm the faith of its own flock, to tackle internal dissent considered dangerous to the community's welfare, and to fend off challenges from the others. The body of knowledge was potentially vast, albeit finite, encompassing as it eventually did a formidable range of religious sciences. Polymaths there were, but only the rare scholar of exceptional gifts could possibly be acclaimed an expert in nearly *every* discipline. In any case, as theologians later concluded, no one could possibly know *everything* about Allah. Indeed, what was more important, as we have already seen, was to understand and then obey the *will* of Allah. For the average Muslim layman of some cultural pretension and social standing, religious education and learning covering at least *some* knowledge of scripture and tradition was deemed essential. The rest, the unlettered masses, had access at least to the recitation of the Qur'an and the tales of the story-tellers.

The pursuit of knowledge began informally among individuals or families which, by the time of the Caliphate of 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (99-102/717-720), had taken on all the aspects of a fairly well-developed movement. One event of particular importance prior to this period had been, of course, the successful collecting of the Qur'an into a single canon completed, according to the traditional Muslim account, during the Caliphate of 'Uthman (23-35/644-655). This left many problems unresolved, for example the meaning of unfamiliar terms or obscure passages, the occasion of individual revelations, and the elucidation of matters of legal or theological importance. Next, the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (66-86/685-705), one of the most outstanding leaders of the Marwanid branch of the Umayyad Caliphate

(41-132/661-750), decreed Arabic as the official language of the chancellory. This move helped ensure that Arabic, as the language of both God and government, would in time displace other contemporary idioms of high culture (such as Greek) in favor of the new *lingua franca*. This official act may have helped stimulate the study of the Arabic language, for grammars and lexicons clearly served the religious purpose of aiding understanding of scripture as well.

The repository of religious knowledge was the collective mind and memory of the Prophet's Companions in Mecca and Medina. Through mutual contacts among the Companions themselves and with others, information on the prophetic-revelatory event was exchanged and slowly disseminated. Such contacts and exchanges were not confined to these two centers alone. Some Companions moved to other cities in the burgeoning Muslim dominions as the political fulcrum shifted from central Arabia to Damascus in Syria under the Umayyad dynasty. Indeed, the growth of Islamic culture is intimately connected to the urban centers throughout the community. Some, like Damascus, Alexandria and Cordoba, had venerable histories of their own, while others, such as Kufah, Basrah, and Baghdad in Iraq, Fustat (Cairo) in Egypt, and Qayrawan in Tunisia were creations of the new order. Most were initially military outposts which gradually became transformed into centres of cultural creation and dissemination. Everywhere teaching was undertaken in places of worship, the mosque (*masjid*), or else in a scholar's private home, where he would meet with a small circle (*halqah*) of students. Instruction, originally given by a Companion or Successor, who were chiefly Arabs, with increasing frequency became the charge of persons among the rapidly growing body of converts to Islam, eager to spread the knowledge they themselves had recently acquired.

THE "RIHLAH" AND THE PILGRIMAGE

A chief feature of this process was the institution of the *rihlah*, the journey undertaken by student-scholars in search of persons, wherever they were to be found, reputed to be sources of information. Journeys were embarked upon in the spirit of a saying attributed to Luqman, the pre-Islamic sage who had advised his son to "sit with the learned men and keep close to them. Allah gives life to the hearts with the light of wisdom as He gives life to the dead earth with the abundant rain of the sky."³ The practice may have been rooted in the cultural and

spiritual stirring among the Arabs prior to Islam as stories of *hanifs* tell how some "roamed the earth" in search of true knowledge of God. In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Ishaq tells of delegations of tribesmen received by Muhammad during his lifetime who were instructed in certain matters of the faith which they in turn imparted to their own people.⁴

The following story, preserved in one of the major third-/ninth-century collections of Traditions, appears in keeping with this pattern of searching for knowledge. A man from Medina journeyed one month's distance north to Damascus seeking out the Companion Abu Darda', who was known to transmit a certain tradition from the Prophet. When the man found him seated in the *masjid* and explained his purpose, Abu Darda' quoted the Prophet, who said,

For one who travels a road in search of knowledge, Allah will have him travel one of the roads of Paradise. Angels will lower their wings, approving the seeker of knowledge, while those in the heavens and the earth, and the fish in the depths of the sea, will seek pardon for the man of learning. The excellence of the learned over the devotee is like that of the full moon over the other stars. The learned (*'ulama'*) are the heirs of the prophets. The prophets bequeathed neither dinar nor dirham but rather knowledge; so he who receives it, obtains an abundant portion.⁵

This saying of the Prophet incidentally illustrates a problem of historical interpretation inherent in the sources. It may indeed reflect the general sense, if not the precise wording, of something a Companion remembered the Prophet having said; in the light of the corresponding emphasis on the importance of knowledge in scripture, it would not be surprising for the Prophet to have expanded upon the theme. There may be, on the other hand, reasons for suspecting that the saying is entirely the product of a later period, or perhaps merely the object of tampering: for example, the phrase "The learned are the heirs of the prophets" could be construed as an insertion by a later hand to justify a status in Islamic society of the *'ulama'* above that of the Caliphs. Much effort and ingenuity has been expended by scholars on trying to distinguish the genuine from the false in such sayings. What is important to recognize in any event is that within the tradition itself, Muslims in general will defend such prophetic sayings as genuine, or will accept them at worst as pious frauds, important nevertheless for the spiritual edification of the community.

Other famous Companions were sought out for their knowledge, including the Prophet's cousin 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 40/661) and his

uncle Ibn 'Abbas (d. 68/687), and even closer members of his family like his wife 'A'isha (d. 58/678) were consulted. An early extant compilation of Traditions, that of al-Tayalisi (d. 203/818), cites material from some six hundred Companions, suggesting that the initial pool of knowledge was by no means small, even if not every person was approached.

The career of the scholar Makhul al-Shami, who died sometime toward the end of the first century, illustrates another aspect of the development of religious culture in this early period. Born in Kabul in the province of Sind (present-day Afghanistan), he traveled extensively gathering religious learning and then settled in Damascus, where he issued legal opinions (*fatawa*) and transmitted his collected material to other students and scholars. It is said that he never lost his foreign accent when speaking Arabic. Makhul was part of the ever growing number of non-Arab converts (*mawali*) from the outlying provinces making their mark on the emerging religious culture of Islam. A marked change in *Muslim society* was in motion: from a conquering stratum of Arabs who happened to be bound together by Islam, it was perforce becoming a society of Muslims who happened to use the Arabic tongue and adhere to certain aspects of the Arab heritage.

Another major institution which served as a point of exchange and dissemination of knowledge was the annual pilgrimage to the holy shrine at Mecca. The Meccan scholar Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) enjoyed a double advantage. He received at home scholars from various parts of the Islamic domains and traveled himself to the Yemen, where he taught others. The pilgrimage, in this sense, has not altered its function over the centuries to the present day. By the close of the first century, therefore, the pool of transmitters, drawn from most corners of the expanding community, had become concentrated in several major regional centers: Medina and Mecca in central Arabia, the Yemen, Damascus, and Homs in Syria, Basra and Kufa in Iraq and Egypt. In al-Andalus, where neither Companion nor Successor had set foot, this development necessarily occurred at a later period.

TRADITION ("HADITH") IN THE TRADITION

How this body of knowledge was transmitted from one generation to the next is still a matter of unresolved debate. Almost certainly both oral and written methods were employed for transmitting it from the

beginning. However, as opposition had early been expressed against the recording of religious knowledge (apart from the Qur'an), the written form probably took longer to become firmly established (perhaps toward the end of the second/eighth and early third/ninth century) than would otherwise have been the case without opposition. When, with time, the system of transmission reached maturity, a number of technical terms were employed to distinguish different methods: for example, the *'ard* method meant that a student who had received a work from his teacher either by dictation or from an authenticated manuscript would read his newly completed manuscript back to the teacher for correction; then there was the *mukatabah* method, where a manuscript of a work received by correspondence was copied; the *munawalah* method meant that manuscripts changed hands without an accompanying oral reading; finally, the *ijazah* method meant that a teacher would provide a certificate that a particular student was permitted to transmit his master's material, regardless of the methods by which the student acquired it. No method, however, guaranteed perfect accuracy of transmission, or indeed prevented the appearance in circulation of forgeries, whether committed from purely pious motives or not.

A single Tradition is called a *hadith*, literally a story, anecdote, or narrative of an event. The same term applies also to the entire corpus of Tradition literature. Each Tradition in its classically accepted form was supposed to have two components, the substance of the Tradition (*matn*) or the point it conveyed, and a chain of transmitters (*isnad*) listing the persons allegedly responsible for handling it as far back as the original source, whether a Companion, a Successor, or the Prophet himself. Two examples will illustrate the form a *hadith* could take. Both are taken from a work called the *Kitab al-Muwatta'*, compiled by the Medinan jurist Malik b. Anas (d. 179/795), which contains many Traditions. The first, which is traced back to a decision of a Companion of the Prophet, became technically known as an *athar*.

{A} Malik informed us that al-Zuhri reported from Sa'id b. al-Musayyab to the effect that: {B} Nufay'a, a slave of Umm Salamah, had as a wife a free woman against whom he uttered a double-divorce formula. The husband sought a legal opinion on the matter from 'Uthman b. 'Affan, who said that the wife had thus become forbidden to him.⁶

The *isnad* {A} cites two persons, the famous collector of Traditions Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 124/742), and Sa'id b. al-Musayyab (94/713),

a man reputed for his expertise in legal matters. The *matn* {B} of the Tradition involves an instance of the divorce formula "I divorce you," uttered twice by a man against his wife. The normal procedure required a triple utterance of the phrase "I divorce you" for a divorce to be considered legally absolute. But as the man concerned was a slave, the Caliph 'Uthman (d. 35/655) who was responsible for the legal opinion (*fatwa*), declared that the double-divorce formula was sufficient for the marriage union to be severed absolutely. It seems that Nufay'a regretted his impulsive act and, wanting his wife back, sought the Caliph's opinion, hoping that he had not irrevocably dissolved his marriage! In the period before legal terminology became fixed, however, *hadith* was applied alike to sayings of the Companions, the Successors and the Prophet himself.

The second Tradition is an example of what technically is called a prophetic *hadith* (*hadith nabawi* or *hadith al-nabi*).

{A} Malik informed us that Ibn Shihab reported from Abu Bakr b. 'Ubaydallah from 'Abdallah b. 'Umar that the Apostle of Allah (May the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: {B} Whenever any of you eats, let him do so with his right hand, and drink as well with it, for the devil eats and drinks with his left hand.

The *isnad* again cites al-Zuhri of the previous chain of authorities and includes also 'Abdallah, the son of the second Caliph 'Umar. 'Abdallah, a Companion famed as a traditionalist and a man of high moral qualities, died in 73/693. Unlike the previous Tradition, this *matn* does not appear, from today's vantage point, to concern a matter of law but rather of table manners or etiquette. As it deals, however, with the seductions of the devil, Allah's dissident angel, it expresses the need for awareness of their danger. Both Traditions were therefore regarded as part of the *religious* law of Islam, about which more will be said in the next chapter. The source of this second Tradition is unimpeachable, the Prophet himself; hence the formulaic expression of respect which follows each mention of his name or title in Malik's work. It represents the strictly non-scriptural or Prophetic dimension of the prophetic-revelatory event, that is, the *prophetic* word as distinct from the *divine* word.

In the previous Tradition, 'Uthman might have decided the matter of divorce according to prevailing custom, or he could have based his decision upon how he believed the Prophet *would* have acted had he still been alive. Either way, his decision was understood to

constitute part of the community's new dispensation, which one was obliged to obey. These two *hadiths* constitute but a minute fraction of Traditions slowly being excavated throughout the first and second centuries by dint of the labor of hundreds, possibly thousands, of persons pursuing the same quest for knowledge.

THE DIVINE SAYING

Early Islamic tradition knew another, special, type of *hadith* which stood part way between the Qur'an and Traditions of the type just described. This was called the *hadith qudsi*, or divine saying. It was a pronouncement from Allah reported by the Prophet, but which did not constitute part of scripture itself. Few of them had any relevance to matters of strictly legal or creedal importance, but concerned rather the believer's spiritual life and his or her proper relationship to Allah. They tended to be didactic in nature, as indeed were many *hadiths* transmitted from either the Prophet or his Companions. As a source of inspiration guiding an individual's faith, divine sayings were particularly favored in the mystical piety of the Sufis. The following two related and representative examples of divine saying stress the unbounded mercy of Allah: "the Messenger of Allah said: When Allah completed creation, He wrote in His book which is with Him above the Throne, 'Truly, My mercy overcomes My wrath.'" And again, "the Prophet said: Allah says, 'The angels have interceded, the prophets have interceded and the faithful have interceded; there remains only the Most Merciful of the merciful to intercede.'" Thus the Qur'an, the divine sayings and the prophetic *hadith* form a continuum of revelation in which divine and prophetic authority cannot easily and simply be isolated one from the other.

PREACHERS AND STORY-TELLERS

The study of scripture in its broadest sense included a concern for grammar and the Arabic lexicon and the collection of sayings of the Prophet, his Companions and Successors, but these were only a few of the areas of inquiry conducted by Muslims from the earliest period. Their appearance as fully developed disciplines of course occurred later. Another group of individuals who contributed to the enrichment of nascent Islamic culture comprised the popular preachers (*mudhak-kirun*) and story-tellers (*qussas*), although this last term was taken to

include the others as well.⁷ Some *qussas* are reported to have been appointed to the position of religious judge (*qadi*).

Their activities, like those of other teachers, centered upon the mosque, relating stories of an edifying nature drawn from a wide range of sources, at times elaborating upon Qur'anic allusions, at others employing Christian and Jewish material directly, or else recasting such tales and pre-Islamic stories in an Islamic idiom. It is true that criticism of story-tellers was, from time to time, leveled by some who accused them of, among other things, a lack of proper religious knowledge and moral rectitude, membership of sectarian groups, and in general engaging in practices considered to be innovations (*bid'ah*), since story-telling had allegedly not been sanctioned in the times of the Prophet or his Companions. Many of the charges were true of some, but not all, story-tellers. A scholar's rebuff stung one story-teller to respond in a manner which also contained an embarrassing grain of truth. A noted Iraqi jurist, Shu'bah (d. 160/776), once dismissed a story-teller from his presence saying "We do not relate Traditions to the *qussas*!" To which the story-teller rejoined, "Why not? Scholars receive Traditions from us the width of a hand span and stretch them into a cubit!"⁸ Despite the strictures, story-tellers remained important as public communicators to popular audiences of educated and uneducated people alike.

The purpose of the *qussas* was, by means of narrating and interpreting stories of the pious people of old, to instill in their audiences a sense of awe in the majesty of Allah and the blessings he has bestowed upon them and to arouse in them a desire for his promised rewards. In this sense, they continued one aspect of the Prophet's mission (4:64; 88:21; 51:55). If the *qussas* performed this task with dignity and with a serious goal in mind, well and good, but if only for cheap theatrical effect, their performances were liable to censure. Moreover, according to the view of a sixth-/thirteenth-century scholar, only a learned person (*'alim*) was capable of properly fulfilling this task, since he could be questioned by his audience on any subject relating to religious matters. An ascetic temperament was important, too, in order to set a good example to the people.⁹ Clearly, not every story-teller met these standards. Personal probity was an essential quality of all scholars, for the "errors of the learned" could lead to confusion and disorder. This danger was explained by the Medinan story-teller and early Christian convert Tamim al-Dari (d. ca. 40/661), who said that "when a

learned man ('*alim*') commits a sin before the people, they imitate him; but while he might repent his action, they continue to follow his sinful way."¹⁰ The same man is reported to have advised a friend to "take from your religion something for yourself and give to it something of yourself, so that you might achieve in worship what is within your capability."¹¹ In these words of personal advice there seems to lie a deeper truth about the historial reality: a community of individuals, each accepting the new dispensation as he or she finds it, while at the same time bringing to it his or her own understanding and experience. Both sides slowly and subtly emerged affected by the exchange.

SCHOLARSHIP AND POLITICS

In the foregoing we have followed some of the factors which brought about the formation of a broad group of learned persons, known collectively as '*ulama*', who throughout succeeding centuries became responsible for the reproduction and dissemination of religious knowledge in the *ummah*. They were, in other words, the carriers and custodians of the literate memory of Islamic culture. If they appear at first to have been an amorphous, disparate body, they were probably just that. They were, however, united from the first in purpose, namely to bring to full light the mysteries concealed in the prophetic-revelatory event. Later, together with the growth of diverse and specialized subject areas of religious knowledge, the '*ulama*' as a body became socially differentiated. They represented neither the state itself nor society; rather, different group of scholars held positions in both.

Nevertheless, those trained in the religious law eventually did achieve greater status and wealth than the others, such as Qur'an readers or preachers in mosques. The legal profession too, however, was socially and economically stratified. Notwithstanding these developments, Islamic society never produced a clerical hierarchy or, indeed, a formal priestly office of any kind. There is no direct parallel between Muslim religious authorities and the offices of bishop or rabbi. It has often been said that church and state were united in Islamic culture, but since no institution like a church ever existed, it was pointless to invent a distinction between the two. On the personal level, recognition of an individual's religious status was simply that he or she appeared to be a good Muslim, the more so when he or she was

scholarly, pious, and ascetic. The sense of community, fostered and nourished by the '*ulama*', became the effective and affective bond between individuals.

CONFLICT AND SCHISM

While performing their tasks of discovery, or rather recovery, of religious knowledge, the '*ulama*' never shrank from engaging in polemics amongst themselves or against other religious communities; nor did they eschew involvement in campaigns of political dissent, for the realm of the political was merely an extension of the religious, as the Prophet's own life had exemplified. Every member of the *ummah* was affected in one way or another by the traumatic consequences of the murder of the third Caliph, 'Uthman (d. 35/655). 'Ali b. Abi Talib succeeded him but was soon embroiled in a bitter quarrel with 'Uthman's nephew, Mu'awiyah, the governor of Syria. When 'Ali's own support failed him, ensuring his downfall, Mu'awiyah succeeded as Caliph in 40/661 and founded the Umayyad dynasty, which survived until 132/750.

The conflict, or trial (*fitnah*), as Muslim accounts describe it, was explicitly political, but was nevertheless fraught with religious implications for the community. Henceforth, the *ummah* would be divided by rival visions of salvation. The majority, although with varying degrees of commitment, sided with the Umayyad victors and forged the mainstream of Islamic culture, which finally emerged as Sunni Islam. The losers, who had sided with 'Ali, became identified with an ethos which sustained them through their centuries-long status as a religious minority. A modern scholar has described this ethos as "an attitude of mind which refuses to admit that majority opinion is necessarily true or right, and – which is its converse – a rationalised defense of the moral excellence of an embattled minority."¹² These became known as the Shi'ah, from the phrase *Shi'at 'Ali*, the faction of 'Ali. One way in which their differences with the majority may be seen is in the manner historians with Shi'ah sympathies dealt with the pre-*fitnah* period of the Caliphate. Abu al-'Abbas al-Ya'qubi (d. 284/897) uses the word "Caliphate" for the period of 'Ali's rule alone, simply describing the "days" of the previous three rulers Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman. For the Shi'ah, there was only one Rightly Guided Caliph. Another point which would, in time, separate the

Sunni from the Shi'ah was the view each had of its past. For the Shi'ah the most exemplary generations of their history were those of their leaders, 'Ali's descendants the *imams*, of whom the majority of Shi'ah accepted twelve in all. The line ended when the last *imam* vanished toward the end of the third/ninth century. Sunnis, on the other hand, viewed the generations of the Companions and Successors collectively as the "pious ancestors" (*salaf*) of blessed memory.

More radical than either the Sunni or Shi'ah, however, were a group which had at first been among 'Ali's supporters and later abandoned his camp when he agreed to submit his dispute with Mu'awiyah to an arbitrator; they became known in Islamic history as the *Khawarij*, or the Kharijites, a name which was virtually synonymous with rebellion against established authority. One of their doctrines, which was at once theological and political, was that a person who had committed a grave sin was thereby excluded from the community; from this they could regard themselves as the "people of paradise" and all others as the "people of hell." Although their initial impact upon the course of historical events in time waned, some of their ideas and attitudes have never entirely lost their attraction. Muslim groups which the Western media are fond of labeling indiscriminately "fundamentalist" could trace their inspiration to the early Kharijites.

In any event, each group to emerge from the conflict between 'Ali and Mu'awiyah found its supporters and detractors among the '*ulama*', and within each group also there were shades of opinion ranging from moderate on certain matters to extreme on others. Each faction could take comfort in a saying attributed to the Prophet that his community would never agree upon an error, believing it applied exclusively to its own party. The Sunni majority of the community, however, found the correctness of its course sanctioned in another Tradition attributed to the Prophet in which he foresaw his people becoming divided into seventy-two sects, only one of which, implicitly themselves, would achieve salvation.

Sunni '*ulama*', therefore, who required and welcomed the political protection of the Caliphs while at the same time resisting any attempt by them at overt control or manipulation were engaged, in the decades following the *fitnah* of 40/661, in defining community membership and how its members should conduct themselves, including the Caliphs themselves.

PROPHETIC PARADIGM AND THE INNOVATOR

A concept employed in this exercise of self-definition was the *sunnah*, from which the label "Sunni" is derived. Literally the word means "path" or "beaten track," and in pre-Islamic times referred to the ways of the ancestors which formed the basis of each tribe's identity and pride. As a term for tribal custom it bore a normative force, that is, the path which the tribe *ought* to follow to preserve its honor and pride intact.

In the Qur'an the word occurs in the sense of established practice or a course of conduct (15:13), although in the context of scripture *sunnah* takes on a religious coloring which is absent within the homocentric world view of the pre-Islamic Arab (33:38, 62). In the Islamic Tradition literature, the term *sunnah* appears in reference to the Prophet. One famous *hadith* relates that when Muhammad sent his companion, Mu'adh b. Jabal, as a judge to the Yemen, he asked Mu'adh how he would arrive at his decisions. Mu'adh replied that he would first consult the "Book of Allah" and if he found no solution there, he would refer to the *sunnah* of the Prophet, and finally, if that too failed, he would use his own judgment (*ra'y*).¹³

On the face of it, this *hadith* appears anachronistic. For one thing, the Qur'an was not complete until Muhammad's death and was only collected together a generation later; moreover, the term *sunnah* was initially used to apply to the precedent of the Companions as well as that of the Prophet; and finally, the use of *ra'y* seems to have become widespread among Muslim judges at the beginning. *Ra'y* was the personal discretion or sound opinion of a judge (*qadi*) who, while taking scripture, *sunnah*, and local practice into account, did not feel compelled to cite these explicitly in his decision. None of this is particularly surprising. On the other hand, the concept of the *sunnah* referring specifically to the Prophet and the *sunnah* or acknowledged practice of his Companions were probably taken together in a general and abstract sense to mean the path the community as a whole was following under the Prophet's leadership. This in turn was understood to refer to direct guidance during his lifetime and to the community's memory of it after his death. It was the labors of the early generations of '*ulama*' which slowly supplied the content of this general notion as the tradition was taking shape.

However, it was perhaps not until near the end of the first century that judges began to introduce into their decisions, in addition to the

continued use of *ra'y*, *sunnah* of the Prophet supported now by some of the available *hadith* from which a point of law could be deduced. Within another generation, or two at the most, the '*ulama*' had more or less succeeded in restricting the meaning of *sunnah* to the normative conduct of the Prophet alone. In reality, of course, the Prophetic *sunnah* as latterly defined contained data from the period of his Companions and Successors. By this time the *hadith* and *sunnah* had become, as technical terms, practically synonymous, the former being the vehicle or carrier of an example of the Prophet's conduct. Nevertheless, Traditions from the Companions and Successors (*athar*) continued to play an important role, but secondary to those accepted as genuine prophetic *hadith*. The detailed picture of this overall development, however, is still the subject of much debate.

Adherence to the *sunnah*, in the sense of prophetic precedent, defined one's full membership of the majority Sunni community. The ordinary believer was able to conduct his or her day-to-day activities observing the required rituals of faith but without the need to be acquainted with the minutiae of the *sunnah*'s content. Few paid heed to occasional lapses. Realistically, only the '*ulama*' as a body had access to the full content of the *sunnah*. A Muslim's standing could be severely tested, however, if some felt that his or her *public* bearing in matters of ritual, belief, or accepted custom lacked the approved prophetic precedent. In this event, such behavior was judged an innovation or *bid'ah*.

Books on *bid'ah* began to appear. The earliest extant example of this genre was compiled by one Muhammad b. Waddah al-Qurtubi (d. 287/900), descendant of a non-Arab who had been purchased and then freed as a convert to Islam by his master.¹⁴ Born in the city of Cordoba in al-Andalus, Ibn Waddah journeyed to the East on two occasions, visiting Mecca and Medina as well as the major cities of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq. His lifetime coincided with the period in which the prophetic Traditions were being scrutinized for their authenticity and gathered into enormous collections which eventually would be acknowledged as the canonical works of sound *hadith*. Ibn Waddah's short treatise on innovations, therefore, ranks among the efforts of the '*ulama*' to reach some consensus on the community's beliefs and practices and thereby protect it from internal corruption.

One theme of Ibn Waddah's work is the lament that the community had fallen upon corrupt times. It was a cry heard before and often to

be repeated throughout the centuries. He quotes two earlier masters to the same effect. Asad b. Musa (d. 212/827), whose defence of the faith earned him the epithet of "lion of the *sunnah*," claimed that fighting innovation was more important than performing the obligatory rituals of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage. Then, Sahnun b. Sa'id al-Tanukhi (d. 240/854), from Qayrawan in present-day Tunisia, described the followers of the *sunnah* in his own day as but "a single shining star in a night of deepest darkness." The cause was simple: innovations creeping into the beliefs and practices of the faithful. The Prophet is said to have warned his people of the moment when they would be overcome by "an intoxication of ignorance and a love of the present life such as would distract you from contemplation of the next."

Ibn Waddah nowhere defines *bid'ah* and one is left to deduce its meaning from the contexts of the Traditions he cites. An innovator is one tempted by the devil, who allows his passions to rule his life, who searches for fame and fortune and performs his devotional acts with an exaggerated display of humility. Certain specific rituals are reviled as innovations, many of which are related to prayer: the use of the rosary, raising the voice and hands during prayer, alterations in the accepted formula summoning the faithful to prayer, transforming places visited by the Prophet into sanctuaries for worship, and celebrating non-Islamic festivals like the Persian New Year (*nawruz*). Groups which held certain "false" ideas according to the "people of the *sunnah*" were to be shunned, especially those with notions affecting what may be broadly called political theology. Ibn Waddah only mentions certain groups by name, such as the Murji'ites, the Qadarites, and the Mu'tazilites, it being assumed that the particular beliefs he was condemning were too well known to require discussion. They will be treated in a later chapter.

Despite drawing the line between the good Muslim and the innovator in this manner, the concept of innovation was cloaked in ambiguity. Its application, therefore, was necessarily inconsistent or arbitrary, and it was this characteristic which gave ample scope for polemical debate. On the other hand, an innovator was condemned neither as an unbeliever (*kafir*) nor as an apostate (*murtadd*). He remained among the believers so long as he continued to pray in the direction of Mecca. No specific punishment for the innovator in this world is recommended, although torment in the next is deemed inevitable according to the warning that Allah does not accept an innovator's repentance. In the here and now, the good Muslim best

avoids the innovator's company. Walking with a Christian, it was said, was better than being seen in the company of a corruptor of the faith. This attitude reflects the absence of (in addition to a priestly hierarchy, already mentioned) a central ecclesiastical body with the powers to debate and legislate on matters of faith and to judge and execute in matters heretical. The ordinary person charged with innovation in the Islamic context was best dealt with by pressure applied within his or her local community acting under the general injunction to "command the good and prohibit the reprehensible." Cases brought to the attention of the court almost invariably involved persons of social standing and often mirrored political intrigues of the moment. Charges of "free-thinking" (*zandaqah*) and of atheism, or public vilification of the Qur'an and the Prophet, were uncommon but treated more harshly.

The Muslim attitude to *bid'ah* in Ibn Waddah's day may best be summed up in the tradition he cites attributed to the Prophet that "a person does not create a *bid'ah* in Islam without abandoning a *sunnah* which was better than it." The tone is factual but realistic. The community was warned against the danger of innovation. Nevertheless, some innovations were accepted and absorbed into the community's practice. The most famous example, perhaps, is the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*), introduced in Egypt during the fifth/eleventh century.¹⁵ Originally a Shi'ah festival, Sunni celebrations were held in Syria and Iraq in the following century. The famous Egyptian scholar Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) wrote a lengthy defense of the practice in which he cites the opinion of an earlier chief justice who said that

The legal status on the observance of the *mawlid* is that it is an innovation which has not been transmitted on the authority of one of the pious ancestors from the first three centuries. Despite this, it comprises both good things as well as the reverse. If one strives for good things in the practice thereof and the opposite is avoided, it is a good innovation (*bid'ah hasanah*).¹⁶

Opponents were concerned about people's possible lewd behavior expressed in overeating, dancing, and singing during the celebrations. From a certain "official" viewpoint, this and other manifestations of "popular" piety were judged regrettable. The community, nevertheless, never ceased to persevere in its quest to recapture the spirit of the prophetic golden age. At the same time, scholars conceded that only the Prophet's intercession with Allah on the Day of Judgment could

restore the purity of the early days. Later authors on innovation continued to condemn "aberrations" from the *sunnah* in their own day. At the same time, they often remained silent about innovations from previous periods, such as the use of the rosary or "worry beads," which meanwhile had become widespread practice.

CONVERTS AND "DHIMMIS"

While the '*ulama*' fashioned the shield of the *sunnah*, and forged the sword of *bid'ah*, the community of Muslims was steadily growing in number in almost every region where the first Arab armies had secured their conquests. Natural growth among the conquerors would account for a portion of this increase, but most important was the increase in the rate of conversion to Islam from among the subject peoples. The '*ulama*' themselves were well represented by non-Arab converts. The rate was not uniform across the different Muslim regions. Over many generations Muslims remained a minority in some or at best a bare majority in other areas they governed, and it is not possible to speak of a "mass Islamic society" until some four hundred years after the Prophet's death.

As rulers of others Muslims had to define the relationship of their community to those non-Muslim peoples under their control. The general principle underlying these relations was that since Muslims alone had accepted the obligations of living the Muslim way, they had, therefore, to shoulder responsibility for the whole of society. For this purpose the religious law, elaborated by the '*ulama*', defined members of the minority religious communities as having the status of *dhimmi*, or protected person. This term embraced most importantly Jews, Christians, and Magians (or Zoroastrians), but also applied to Samaritans and even idolaters and fire-worshippers (and much later, Hindus as well), who were included as a matter of expediency so long as they were not resident in the Arabian peninsula, the birthplace of the community in Mecca and Medina.

The status of *dhimmi* guaranteed a person's life, property, and religious practices, under the supervision of their own religious leadership, in return for payment by every male adult of a poll-tax or *jizyah*, which was lifted in the event of his conversion to Islam. This tax was the real mark of subjugation, a common medieval practice toward minority religious communities, and may have acted as a stimulus to conversion in order to avoid its social stigma, even though

the financial burden was not great. Indeed, the preservation or improvement of one's social status or prestige was probably the single most important cause of conversion during the first centuries of Islam. For example, members of the defeated Iranian army and landed aristocracy retained their prestigious roles in the new order by conversion, while many from the lowest ranks in society found themselves socially and perhaps economically better off than before. We have already encountered individuals who, through their own or a forefather's conversion, entered the community and succeeded in achieving a reputable role for themselves among the *'ulama'*. Examples of forced conversion exist, despite the clearest scriptural prohibition (2:256) against such practice, but in any case appear to have been rare. The incidence of persecution of non-Muslim religious minorities was largely the result of the arbitrary policies of rulers and/or rapid deterioration of the economy, factors which just as often created harsh conditions also for the ruler's own Muslim enemies.

The conversion process finally reached the point when it was possible to speak of a *Muslim* society, and the conversion curve began to level off. Even then significant communities of Jews and Christians, in particular, remained in parts of the Muslim domains like Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, which at one time or another had been former provinces of the diminished Byzantine state and the defunct Sassanian Empire of the Persians. We know little of the nature of daily contacts between Muslims, Jews, and Christians through this long period of transition down to the turn of the fifth/eleventh century.

APOLOGISTS AND POLEMICISTS

There is, however, evidence of contact of another kind, namely one community's perception of another preserved in contemporary religious apologetics and polemics. These reflect the views of literate defenders of their respective faiths rather than idle gossip in the market place. For all that, they resonate with the passionate convictions of committed persons living in a period when the promise of salvation or fear of its loss bore an urgency which modern civilization has obliterated from its memory.

The monk John of Damascus (d. 136/753) had prior to his church calling worked in the bureaucracy of the Umayyad Caliphs. He later wrote an apologetic work for Christians, to help strengthen and preserve their faith under the experience of Muslim rule. As a means

to that end, he dealt with some aspects of Islam, providing answers for Christians to questions of faith which seem to have arisen from actual encounters with Muslims. Muhammad, he believed, had derived his ideas from a Christian heretic. Then, pretending to be God-fearing, Muhammad "spread rumours that a scripture was brought down to him from heaven. Thus having drafted some pronouncements in his book, worthy only of laughter, he handed it down to his people in order that they may comply with it." John perceived weaknesses in the Muslim's faith compared with his own. Unlike Christ's mission, the coming of Muhammad had neither been foretold nor testified to in scripture by the earlier prophets. Muslims call Christians polytheists (*mushrikun*), as they believe Christ to be both the Son of God and God. The appropriate response, says John, is that in the Qur'an Christ is referred to as both Word and Spirit, and hence Muslims should not scold Christians alone for associating another deity with God! He concludes that the Qur'an in fact confirms the divinity of Christ, for "if the Word is in God, then it is obvious that he is God as well."

John's familiarity with parts, if not all of the Qur'an, despite his faulty understanding of it from a Muslim perspective, nevertheless provided a more sophisticated argument by comparison with certain Christian polemics expressed in the next century from beyond the Byzantine frontier in the capital, Constantinople. Here the language employed was cruder and the tone more violent. The objective, too, was entirely different: first, to answer for the humiliating defeat of Byzantine's forces and seizure of its former provinces by Muslims, and second, to touch the hearts of Christian converts to Islam and bring them back into the fold.

Nicetas (d. ca. 300/912), a teacher at the court in Constantinople, composed a refutation of the Qur'an, destined to become an enduring classic in the Christian controversy against Islam. Of the Qur'an he asserted "there is one thing that must be stressed about this coarse booklet, and it is this: its author knew, in his raving, that this mythical and barbarous belief that he had fabricated could never be accepted by Christians and Jews: consequently he plundered the divine prophecies found in the Divine Scriptures." Of Muhammad, Nicetas had little better to say than that "he was by nature perverse and talkative, or rather stupid and bestial, a coward too, quick to anger, distrustful and arrogant . . . as to right judgement and clear thought, his speech is entirely lacking of them."¹⁷

It was not, however, this kind of polemic with which Muslim

scholars had to contend within the boundaries of their own community. Increasingly in their day-to-day contact with Christians and Jews, Muslims were obliged to supply solutions to theological questions which, in the immediate aftermath of the conquests, they had not needed to confront. John's defence of Christ's divinity, *based upon the Qur'an*, could not go unchallenged. Muslims had acknowledged Jesus as a prophet of Allah and conceded, too, his virgin birth. But Jesus himself, they said, had been neither slain nor crucified (2:157-158) but rather had been elevated by Allah into the realm of his special grace, a position that (from his writings) John was well aware of. From the Muslim point of view, they had generously met the Christian more than half way, and felt they did not deserve the dismissal of their Prophet as a heretic and their scripture as a collection of "idle tales," to quote John once again.

Thus, one aspect of the development of the Muslim community as a community of faith (as distinct from a conquering elite) was the role played by the convert in his new faith. A consequence, for example, of the growing numbers of Christian converts was perhaps linked to the growing veneration of the Prophet. The portrait of him as a mere human, alluded to in scripture and confirmed by many *hadiths* on his earthly affairs, gave way to the glorious Tradition in Ibn Ishaq's biography, cited in the previous chapter, of Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem, where he prayed in the company of the prophets, and his ascension into heaven and the presence of Allah. This Tradition seems to have fulfilled a spiritual need. Ibn Ishaq's Sunni version was later retold by the Shi'ah, where 'Ali played a part in the drama along with the Prophet; poetic versions cast in terms of Sufi mystical spirituality also became renowned. The parallel with the Resurrection of Jesus notwithstanding, Muslims were able to maintain correctly their denial of Jesus' divinity, while not committing the equal blasphemy of raising the Prophet to the rank of a deity.

During the formative period of four to five centuries following the death of the Prophet, Muslim sources record debates between the 'ulama' and Christians and Jews. The authenticity of the debates may be doubted, but not their purpose. A central concern was to establish proofs of Muhammad's mission by appealing to the scriptures of "the Peoples of the Book," where his coming was alleged to have been foretold.

In one such encounter, the Shi'ah leader (*Imam*) 'Ali al-Rida (d. 203/815) questioned the Jewish exilarch and the Christian patriarch

in Baghdad concerning references in the Torah and the Gospels which, he claimed, foretold the Prophet's coming. 'Ali asked both to confirm the presence of a passage in Isaiah which said, "O people, I see the form of a rider on the ass clothed in a raiment of light, and I see the rider on a camel with a brightness like that of the moon." The two men agreed it was so said. Then 'Ali asked the patriarch whether the following prophecy appeared in the Gospel of John when Jesus spoke, saying, "I am going to my Lord and your Lord, and the Paraclete will come. He it is who will witness to me about the truth as I have witnessed to him . . . and he it is who will expose the evil deeds of the peoples and who will shatter the designs of the unbelievers." The patriarch agreed it was so said. The conclusion was, therefore, that Isaiah had prophesied Jesus' riding upon an ass and Muhammad upon a camel, while mention of the Paraclete by Jesus was construed as a reference to the Prophet as well. The method of searching for biblical quotations, whether real or spurious, was a common means of validating the beliefs of any particular faction.

Beside the main point of the debate, establishing the scriptures' forecast of the Prophet's coming, it may have had an underlying purpose in inter-Muslim polemics. That is, it would illustrate the *Imam's* formidable knowledge of and special insight into the scriptures of the "Peoples of the Book." It would thereby have supported the Shi'ah view of the unique spiritual nature of their *Imams* as against the more worldly figures of the Sunni Caliphs. Moreover, if the debate itself is imaginary rather than real, it is possible that the ideas it contained were circulated by persons unknown who possessed a close knowledge of the Torah or the Gospels, that is, converts from Judaism and Christianity employing their own scriptural knowledge in the service of their new faith.¹⁸

On a more mundane level, however, Christians and, to a lesser extent, Jews and other sects did present a challenge to Muslims in their evolution toward establishing a dominant religious culture. This was another side of the problem seen by the '*ulama*', who urged upon the faithful a proper observance of the *sunnah* and decried the introduction of innovation. The brilliant essayist al-Jahiz (d. 256/869) penned a polemic on how to refute the Christians, particularly those of Iraq, among whom he lived, in response to official alarm at their influence upon the vulnerable Muslim masses. The epistle was intended to provide Muslims with answers to Christian objections to Islam. Al-Jahiz also conveyed the impression that the '*ulama*'s

worries about the community's spiritual health were justified. He wrote, "a cause for the admiration accorded by the masses to the Christians is the fact that they are [government] secretaries and servants to kings, physicians to nobles, perfumers, and money changers." The Christians' high standing in Muslim society, on the other hand, was unfortunate for other reasons as well. Al-Jahiz notes their filthy habits: they were uncircumcised, did not purify themselves after sexual intercourse, and ate pork. Coupled with this was their pursuit of arguments with Muslims pointing out contradictory statements in the *hadith*, their weak chains of authority, and the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an. These questions they would take up with weak-minded persons or those without staunch faith, causing in them perplexity and confusion. And worse, says al-Jahiz acidly, it was a tragedy that every Muslim regarded himself as a master dialectical theologian (*mutakallim*), worthy and capable of debating with an atheist!¹⁹ Al-Jahiz concludes his essay stating that Christian doctrines were themselves impossible to comprehend, especially the concept of divinity, inasmuch as no two Christians, whether Nestorian, Melchite, or Jacobite, could agree on what it meant. From his point of view, though, the appeal of Christian doctrine was not a threat to Islam so much as the corrupting influence of individual Christians upon impressionable Muslims of half-hearted faith, the very problem which concerned the '*ulama*'.

A second "refutation" of the same period was written by the famous physician and man of culture 'Ali b. Sahl b. Rabban al-Tabari (d. 241/855). Al-Tabari was a Nestorian Christian who, at the age of seventy, converted to Islam. The main theme of his refutation of Christianity was that it could not be true since Jesus is in one and the same aspect both creator and created. This position could not be sustained within a genuine monotheistic faith since confusion arises as to whether Jesus is God or a second God; moreover, Jesus seems to contradict himself, claiming both that he is God and that he was sent by God; and how could God the Father be creator of all and Jesus uncreated? Al-Tabari's argument, doubtless written with sincerity, may help explain his conversion. As a Nestorian, he possibly saw Christ very much as Muslims perceived him, as a man used or sent by God, that is, a prophet. In any event, the line of thought pursued by al-Tabari was followed up by later Muslim writers. It contributed to drawing the line between Muslim and Christian belief with greater clarity, by focusing upon the crucial question of the

nature of God/Allah while underwriting Muslims' own belief, supported by their scripture, that Jesus was a prophet in the same cosmic chain culminating in and completed by Muhammad.

Despite polemical outbursts in the relationship between Muslims and their Christian subjects, there are examples of acceptance as well. In a Tradition from the Prophet he is given to say that

If anyone testifies that there is no God but Allah alone, who has no partner, that Muhammad is His servant and messenger, that Jesus is Allah's servant and messenger, the son of His handmaid, His word which he cast into Mary and a spirit from Him, and that paradise and hell are real, Allah will cause him to enter paradise no matter what he has done.²⁰

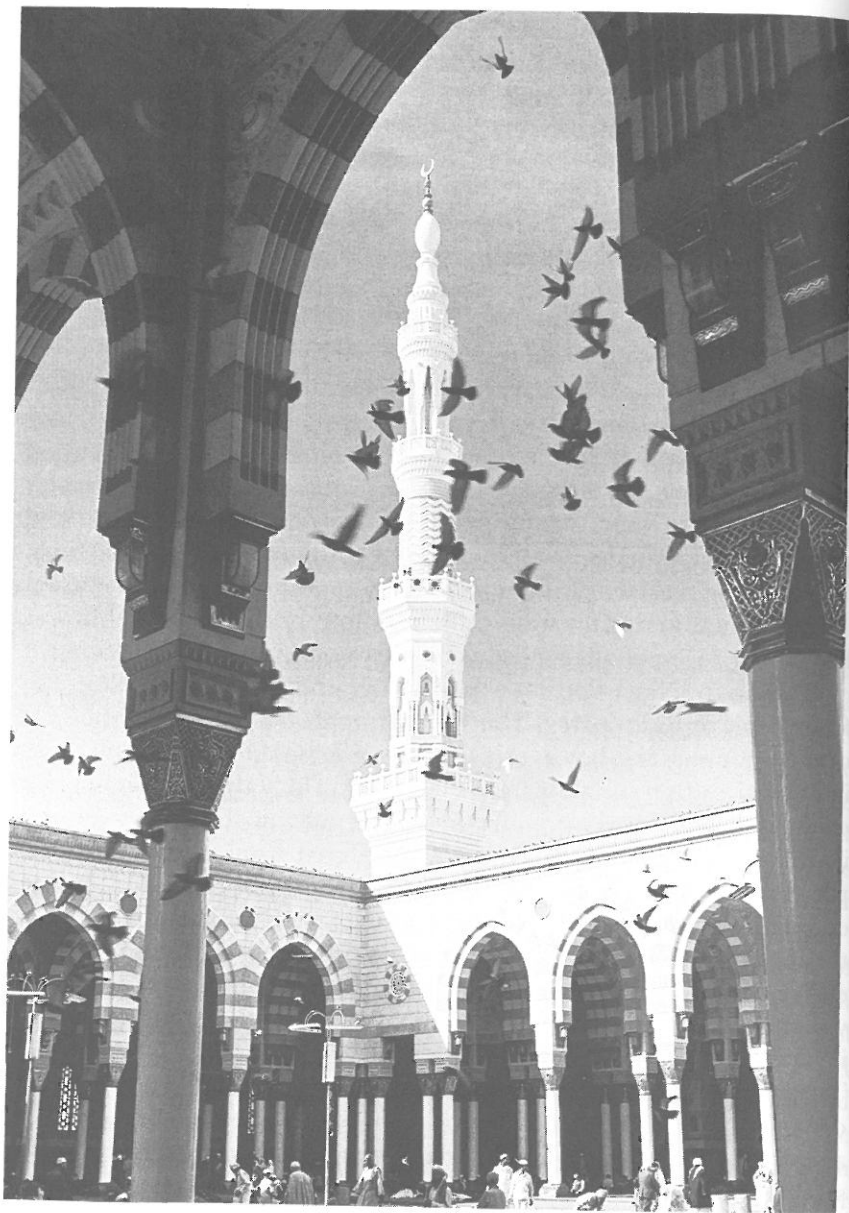
In another Tradition a Companion, Abu Hurayrah, reported that the Prophet said, "Except Mary and her son, no human being is born without the devil touching him, so that he cries out because of the devil's touch."²¹ Such Traditions may have helped ease the entry of ordinary Christians into the Muslim fold, but to churchmen they were danger signals of potential defeat.

The Muslim community, through triumph and failure, was coming of age. The conquests had altered the political, linguistic, and religious map of the Middle East and beyond. Arabization and Islamization went hand in hand as the new culture took shape. The *'ulama'* played out their roles as the chief agents and architects of the transformation within the burgeoning urban centers where the new religious sciences and learning flourished. Islam had displaced the paganism of its birthplace and now rivaled and surpassed the older scriptural faiths in their own places of birth.

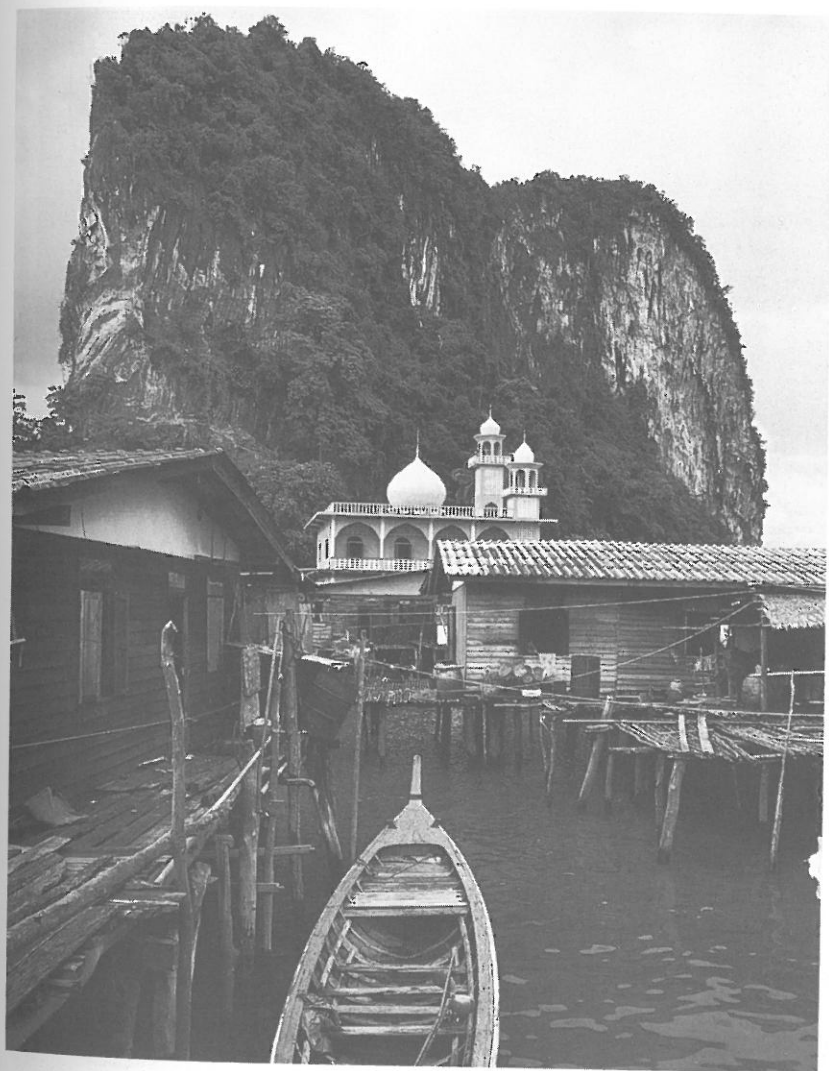
But triumph was purchased at a price. The pristine community of Medina and Mecca suffered division in the great *fitnah* between 'Ali and Mu'awiyah. The first century was peppered with revolts of disgruntled Shi'ah and Khawarij. The early second century witnessed a major convulsion as the Umayyad Caliphs were all but annihilated by the family of Abbasids claiming legitimacy to the Caliphate on the basis of kinship with the Prophet. The center of power shifted with them, from Damascus to Baghdad in Iraq, but any real unity under the Caliphate was soon challenged. An Umayyad refugee restored the family's political fortunes by founding a dynasty in al-Andalus (300-418/912-1027). The province of Egypt secured a strong measure of autonomy under the Ikhshidid dynasty (324-359/935-969) before

falling in the mid fourth/tenth century to the Shi'ah dynasty of the Fatimids (359-567/969-1171). By establishing a rival Caliphate, it posed the greatest threat to the Sunni authorities in Baghdad. However, even in the heartland of the Abbasid domains, Baghdad and Iraq had fallen under the effective control of the Buyid family (334-373/945-983) of Shi'ah mercenaries who also controlled large areas of western Persia. Further east, many of the Persian districts supported lines of native hereditary governors. Unlike the Fatimids of Egypt, however, these dynasties, including the Buyids, were content to wield power as vassals of the Abbasid Caliphs, despite their decline from the earlier days of glory.

Amidst the political upheavals, Islamic culture nevertheless sustained its growth toward maturity. Rival positions on a myriad of religious matters still existed. At the same time a coherently rich and varied religious culture was coming into being and signs of future growth were already at hand. Arabic, the language of revelation, continued to hold the dominant position as the medium of religious learning. Yet on the eastern fringes of Islamic domains, in Khurasan, Transoxania, and Khwarazm, the absolute primacy of Arabic was beginning to be challenged during this same period. Here literary expression in (New) Persian was asserting itself, almost exclusively at first in epic or lyric poetry. There were important prose contributions of a religious nature, however, such as an original Qur'an commentary in Persian and a translation from the Arabic of al-Tabari's monumental exegesis. Theological works in Persian of a polemical nature appeared in this period as well. The Persians differed from other Islamized peoples, like the Berbers of North Africa, in possessing a culture strong enough to adopt the new faith yet retain its own distinctiveness. Even the Turkish dynasty of the Ghaznavids (384-432/994-1040), whose eastern dominions stretched from modern-day Tehran to the Ganges valley in India, became thoroughly Persianized in their cultural interests, although it would not be long before the first works in the Turkish language would also appear. Islamic culture's remarkable capacity was being and would continue to be demonstrated – absorption and adaptation – while remaining true to a vision of salvation focused upon the submission to the will of a One, Unique, and Omnipotent deity, Allah.



8. The Prophet's Mosque, Medina



9. The Koh Pan Yi Mosque, Thailand