Post-Colonialism in Tenth-Century Islam*

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Carl-Heinrich Becker, the scholar who is commemorated in these lectures, wrote about the Arabs as colonisers, comparing them with modern colonial powers such as the British, and he would probably have been interested in post-colonialism, too, if he had he lived to see it.¹ In a way you could say that he did live to see it, for the term “post-colonialism” is often taken to refer to the culture of peoples affected by colonial government from the very moment they were conquered, not simply from their recovery of independence.² But it was only after the collapse of the colonial empires, in the wake of the Second World War, that the concept of post-colonialism acquired prominence, and Becker died in 1935. Even if he had been familiar with the concept, moreover, the fact that he saw the parallel between the Arab and the modern European empires does not necessarily mean that he would have deemed it appropriate to analyse the result in terms of post-colonialism. The wisdom of applying a concept referring to a modern experience to the tenth-century Muslim world may well strike many readers of this paper as questionable, too.

¹) I should like to thank Prof. Lawrence Conrad for inviting me to deliver the Becker lecture. I am also indebted to audiences in Cambridge, Napoli, Berkeley, Paris and above all Hamburg for their responses to different versions of that lecture, and to Sarah Savant for most helpful comments on the penultimate draft.

²) C. H. BECKER, “Die Araber als Koloniatoren”, in his Islamstudien, II (Leipzig, 1932), esp. 2f. For a more recent invocation of the similarity between the Arab and the European conquests, see A. HANNOUN, Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories: the Legend of the Kahina, (Portsmouth, 2001), ch. 1, esp. 5, 9. Cf. also below, n. 31.

²) Thus for example B. ASHCROFT, G. GRIFFITHS and H. TIFFIN, The Empire Writes Back² (London, 2002), 2.
The Two Rāzīs

For the moment I shall leave such readers to their scepticism, for I should like to start by discussing something completely different, namely a public disputation which took place around 920 or 930 in Rayy, the medieval precursor of modern Tehran.\(^3\) The two participants in the debate were both called Rāzī. One was Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925 or 323/935), the famous physician and philosopher who was known in medieval Europe as Rhazes. The other was Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934), a missionary on behalf of Ismāʿīlism, the radical Shiʿī movement which had begun some 50 years before the disputation took place. We know about the disputation because the Ismāʿīlī missionary wrote a book refuting the philosopher’s claims, both as presented on that occasion\(^4\) and as recorded in a lost book (or books) of his.\(^5\)

The disputation was about revealed religion – religion in the sense of a message sent down by God to mankind through a specially selected human being, a prophet. Was there any such thing? The philosopher de-

\(^3\) The debate is said by al-Kirmānī (see the following note) to have taken place in Rayy in the presence of the amīr Mardwājī. Since Mardwājī only occupied Rayy in 318/930, this clashes with al-Birūnī’s information that Abū Bakr al-Rāzī died in 313/925. Maybe al-Rāzī only died in 323/935, as other authorities say, or maybe the amīr was Aḥmad b. Ṭali (d. 311/923f.) rather than Mardwājī, as suggested by S. M. Štern, “The Early Ismāʿīlī Missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurāsān and Transoxania”, in his Studies in Early Ismāʿīlism (Jerusalem and Leiden, 1982), 202, cf. also 196, 198.

\(^4\) Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, Aʿlām al-nubuwwa, ed. S. al-Ṣābi (Tehran, 1977), 3–28; I refer to the pages because the absence of the chapter, section, and paragraph numbers from the running heads makes it difficult to locate passages by means of them. The parts relating to Abū Bakr al-Rāzī were first edited by P. Kraus in “Raziana II”, Orientalia 5 (1936), 35–56, 358–78; it was re-edited, this time including al-Kirmānī’s account of the debate, by P. Kraus, al-Rasāʾīl al-falsafiyya li-Abi Bakr ... al-Rāzī, I (no sequel published) (Cairo, 1939). For an English translation of the first chapter of the Aʿlām, which contains the disputation, see L. E. Goodman, “Rāzī vs Rāzī – Philosophy in the Majlis”, in H. Lazarus-Yafeh, M. R. Cohen, S. Somekh and S. H. Griffith (ed.), The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam (Wiesbaden, 1999) (based on the text as given in Kraus, Rasāʾīl), 84–107.

nied it. More precisely, he said that there was no such thing as prophets. The idea was not compatible with divine wisdom and mercy in his view. If God wanted to communicate the truth to mankind, why should He only tell one single person? Why should He favour one man over all others? It was a well-known source of conflict and warfare, he said, stressing the role of religion as a provoker of bloodshed. Besides, it was not easy for a single man to persuade the rest of mankind that he, and he alone, possessed the truth. Why should God use so cumbersome a method? It struck the philosopher Rāzī as much more plausible that God in His wisdom and mercy should have given all humans equal access to the truth, by endowing them with innate knowledge of what was good and bad for them, in respect of this world and the next alike, just as he had given animals innate knowledge of what they needed to know. All humans should engage in critical investigation to the best of their ability, for it was only by philosophical study that one could reach salvation—which he envisaged as release from this world. His own philosophy was certainly a religion, but it was a religion based entirely on reason. As he saw it, the revealed variety only gave you lies and fairy tales (al-akādhīb wa-l-khurāfāt). All the different revelations claimed to be true with reference to the same arguments, and they all contradicted one another, and indeed themselves as well, as he demonstrated with merciless criticism of the scriptures. People only accepted them as true because they took things on trust from their leaders, from whom they had heard them for so long that these things had become second nature to them. The miracles supposedly performed by the would-be prophets were mere juggleries and sleights of hand, in so far as people had actually seen them. The so-called prophets were people

6) Abū Ḥātim, Alām, 3 (Goodman, 85). As noted by S. Stroumsa, Freethinkers of Medieval Islam (Leiden, 1999), 95n, he uses qawm to mean “certain individuals” rather than “some people” (cf. Abū Ḥātim’s response at 8.9).
7) Abū Ḥātim, Alām, 3f (Goodman, 85f), 181ff, 186; Nāṣir-i Khusraw citing Rāzī’s Theology in Kraus, Rasā’il, 177; in Stroumsa, Freethinkers, 106.
8) Alām, 181.
9) Ibid., 3f (Goodman, 86), 181, 183; cf. also 274.2.
10) Alām, 12f (Goodman, 91).
11) Alām, 13.5 (Goodman, 92, on the sharā‘i’ of the prophets), 32.7 (on the doctrines of religious scholars).
12) Alām, 69ff, 171.
13) Ibid., 31f, 171.
14) Ibid., 192. He wrote a book on this subject (Fīhiyāl al-mutanabīyyīn, also known as Makhāriq al-anbiyā‘īn, in Biruni, Fīhrīst, no. 174), and Abū Ḥātim could be drawing on it here. Conceivably, he had it as part of the book referred to above, n. 5.
who caused discord and bloodshed because demons had appeared to them in the guise of angels and persuaded them that God had chosen them, he said, presumably adopting mythological language for didactic purposes, but showing that he saw the prophets as deluded people rather than swindlers. As for the religious scholars, they were mere "goatbeards"—men who impressed uneducated people with their long beards and white clothes and who transmitted inconsistent material from past authorities, prohibiting critical investigation, and branding every opponent as an unbeliever who could be freely killed.

The Ismāʿilī Rāzī was horrified by all this. Prophets were real to him, and he vehemently refutes the philosopher's assertions. But one soon notices that there is something peculiar about his view of prophets, too. He sees them first and foremost as communal leaders. Moses and Jesus were the men best endowed in their time with the qualities that an imam needs to govern people in this world and the next, he says; of course this was even truer of Muḥammad, whose power and extensive conquests he vaunts.

Even those who deny their prophetic status and their miracles ought to accept that they were men of superior intelligence and ability, he says, sounding rather like a modern historian. Prophets discipline people and keep them in order with their wondrous governance (siyāsa 'ajība). They are needed because people are equal only in respect of the nutritional and reproductive needs they share with other animals, not in respect of the knowledge they require for moral and civilized lives in this world and salvation in the next. Their different endowments in this regard are plain for everyone to see: this is why some have to act as teachers and leaders to others. Abū Ḥātim clearly sees himself as having refuted his opponent with this statement, but the philosopher did not of course disagree: all he denied was that such teachers had superhuman knowl-

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15) Nāsir-i Khusraw citing Rāzī’s Theology in Kraus, Rasā'il falsafiyya, 177; Stroumsa, Freethinkers, 106.
16) Abū Ḥātim, A'lām, 31f.
17) Ibid., 89.
18) Ibid., 89.17, 90.10. A century later another missionary (al-Mu'ayyad) said much the same in response to Ibn al-Rawandi’s K. al-zumurrud: even if the deniers of prophethood were right, they ought to speak of the prophets with respect, given the latter's ability to govern people and keep order. See P. Kraus, “Beiträge zur islamischen Ketzergeschichte”, Rivista degli Studi Orientali 14 (1933), 109; Stroumsa, Freethinkers, 139.
19) Abū Ḥātim, A'lām, 8f (Goodman, 89f).
20) Abū Ḥātim, A'lām, 6f (Goodman, 88), 183ff.
edge. Like so many heirs to the ancient Near Eastern tradition, however, the Ismā'ili Rāzi found it impossible to think of religion, morality and culture as something that humans had evolved on their own: even medicine and other sciences owed their existence to revelation in his view, not to human use of innate gifts, as the philosopher claimed. Once the human need for teachers and leaders had been established, the need for prophets thus followed automatically as he saw it. He also argues on the basis of his own premises when he tacitly assumes leadership to rest on knowledge, so that the political and social hierarchy of a particular community reflects (or ought to reflect) the distribution among its members of knowledge originating from above. What prophets did in his view was to establish such a hierarchy. God was very wise to send the truth to just one man, so that people had to defer to others in order to get access to it: hierarchy and subordination were what the religious law was all about.

Religion and Political Organization

What is so striking about the debate is that both the Rāzīs associated prophets with power and war. Up to a point, of course, this is as might be expected, for Islam owed its existence to the fact that Muḥammad had established a polity in Medina. He had brought a law and united the Arabs in obedience to it, and this had indeed involved warfare, which had continued when the Arabs proceeded to conquer the world outside Arabia. Tenth-century Muslims generally assumed their own case to be paradigmatic: all prophets were founders of polities in their view, or rather this was true of all the prophets who brought laws. In explanation of this idea they said that human beings were social (madanī) animals who depended on one another for their many needs, meaning that they had to live together, but that they were also anti-social animals given to ruthless competition and fighting, meaning that they would perish if they were left unattended.

21) Abū Bakr al-Rāzi does come across as an “epistemological democrat”, as Goodman puts it (“Philosophy in the Majlis”, 104), but when he says that humans are equal, he means that they all have the same generic abilities, not that these abilities are evenly distributed among them or that humans do not learn from one another. Abū Ḥātim’s presentation does not allow for subtle distinctions, however.

22) For the Ismā'ili Rāzi's vehement denial that the philosophers have developed the sciences on their own, see Alām, 273ff.

alone: they needed a higher authority, a neutral outsider, to set the rules of the game for them, and to enforce them. God in His mercy set the rules for them in the form of a law; a prophet would transmit the law to human beings and found a polity in which it could be enforced; and after the death of the prophet, other rulers would take over the task of maintaining the polity and ensuring that the law was maintained. What God revealed, in short, was first and foremost a moral order, shaped as a law, and what the prophet created was a polity within which people could live together in safety and trust, by adhering to the shared rules.\(^{24}\)

This view of prophets was particularly popular with rationalizing theologians (mutakallims), philosophers, and Shi'is, but practically all educated Muslims knew that revealed religion was first and foremost a blueprint for communal organization and that man would go to rack and ruin without it, in this world and the next alike. It enabled them to think about the socio-political functions of religion in very sophisticated terms. What modern sociologists call the “latent functions” of religion was mostly perfectly manifest to them. Religion existed for the organization of collective affairs, they said; it created communities by enjoining obedience to higher powers, it enabled humans to internalize moral codes and thus to counteract the destructive effects of individual desire (hawā), keeping them on the straight and narrow by a combination of carrot and stick – the promise of Paradise and the threat of Hell. It stabilized government by legitimating rulers, increasing people’s respect for them, and so on.\(^{25}\) In short, revealed religion and societal organization were two sides of the same coin.

The two Rāzis took this view of prophethood for granted. But they went further than that, for they thought that the law brought by a prophet was only about communal order. This was where they took off into heresy. To the philosopher Rāzi, the so-called revelation was simply politics in disguise: the so-called prophets claimed that their warfare and (by implication) the political activities leading to it were ordered by God, but God had nothing to do with mundane affairs. As he saw it, the truth was elevated above such affairs, and accessible through the intellect which all humans shared, not through membership of this or that community, and it was not a prescription for order in this world at all, but on the contrary something that purified your soul of worldly concerns and


caused you to be released from this world. Genuine religion was spiritual. Had the philosopher Rāzī lived today, he would have been a secularist – an adherent of the view that religion is an individual matter and must be kept out of public affairs.

To the Ismā‘ili Rāzī, on the other hand, revealed religion was genuine enough, not a mere mask for political interests: organizing people was exactly what God meant His prophets to do.26 The law they brought just was not the highest form of religion. There was a spiritual realm above it. For religion had two levels, a higher and a lower or, as the Ismā‘iliis preferred to say, an inner and an external one. It was only the external, overt and literal meaning of the revelation that concerned communal order. At the level of the literal meaning of the revelation (or law: šarī‘), religion was indeed mundane, and also changeable: every scriptural prophet brought a new religion/law abrogating that of his predecessor, reflecting the new circumstances of his time. But the apparent contradictions between their messages to which this gave rise did not affect the inner meaning (al-bā‘īn) of the revelation, which was eternal, unchanging, the same for all human beings anywhere. At this level the revelation had nothing to do with communal organization. On the contrary, it was totally divorced from the particulars in which we live in the here and now, totally unmired by matter, wholly spiritual, just as the philosopher said. The philosopher’s mistake lay in his failure to understand that there were two sides to religion. If the revealed laws were not from God and the zhāhir were all there was to them, then he would be right, Abū Ḥātim says, but they were indeed from God, and there were spiritual meanings behind their literal wording.27 One found these meanings by treating the literal meaning of the revelation as parables, symbols and allegories pointing to higher things, relying for guidance here not on the prophets, but rather on the imams who followed them. You could not live properly in this world without the law and its socio-political prescriptions, but otherwordly salvation lay entirely in the inner spiritual message.28

26) Abū Ḥātim, A‘lām, e.g. 108.15.
27) Ibid., 114.11; similarly 104.7, 113.12, 115.3.
28) Modern Ismā‘iliis find it difficult to accept that their distant forebears denied the saving role of the law, but Abū Ḥātim makes a clear distinction between the zhāhir, which people must be forced to accept for reasons of social and political order, and the inner meanings which they are free to seek for themselves and in which their salvation lies (mā fihi najātuhum min al-ma‘āni allatī laḥta shara‘i′iḥim al-zhāhira) (A‘lām, 111; similarly 110.13). Compare also the account of the Ismā‘iliis in al-Nawbakhti and Qummi, composed in the 280s/890s, in which the Ismā‘iliis claim
There was a further twist to Ismā'ili doctrine. The Ismā'ulis were awaiting a mahdī, a messiah. He was due to come any moment, and he would be the last prophet. Like the earlier prophets, he would abrogate the law of his predecessor, but unlike them, he would not bring a new one. Mankind would live by the inner spiritual meaning alone, without all the limitations imposed on us by our incarceration in gross bodies. The sociopolitical and legal apparatus associated with the law would wither way. There would be no more organized religion, no more hierarchy, and also no more division of mankind into different polities. The inner spiritual meaning would be directly accessible to all of us. Then we would indeed have equal access to the truth. And then there would be no more communal divisions and war. Mankind would be united in what would amount to a return to Adam's Paradise. But the philosopher was mistaken in thinking that humans had been made that way.\(^{29}\)

In other words, both Rāzis denied that salvation lay in the revealed law: it lay in reason according to the one, in the inner allegorical meaning of the law according to the other. One Rāzi said that prophets could not save you, meaning that you had to seek the truth yourself; the other said that prophets could not save you on their own, meaning that you had to turn to the imams, the religious leaders from the Prophet's family, for elucidation of the inner meaning. One Rāzi said that prophets did not actually exist, the other said that they did, but that the era of prophets was about to come to an end: either way, they saw the highest truth as lying beyond prophethood. And the two Rāzis were not alone. Doubts about the existence of prophethood (and other aspects of revealed religion) are common in the tenth-century literature, and Ismā'ilism was spreading like wildfire.

Post-Colonialism

Why did people have such strange ideas? What was going on? This, at last, is where I get to the subject announced in the title: post-colonialism.

that "the whole of the Book and the Sunna which outwardly contain obligations imposed by God on men, are parables expressing inner meanings: it is these inner meanings which must one act upon in order to be saved. If one follows the outward meaning, which consists of prohibitions, one perishes" (W. Madelung, "The Account of the Ismā'ulis in Firaq al-Shīʿa", in Stern, Studies, 52).

\(^{29}\) For a concise account of Ismā'ili doctrine, see for example H. Halm, Die Schia (Darmstadt, 1987; tr. J. Watson, Shi'ism, Edinburgh 1991), ch. 4.
Like the author and the reader of this article, the two Rāzīs were living in a society dominated by the cultural after-effects of a great imperial expansion. In their case as in ours, the after-effects owed their character to a combination of three basic facts. First, the conquerors had passed on their key beliefs and values to the conquered peoples: just as the elites that took over government from the French and the British were westernized, so the elites that took over from the Arabs were islamized, and in both cases these new elites presided over further westernization/islamization of the people below them. Secondly, the conquered peoples nonetheless retained their own identity, invariably in the case of the European expansion, and sometimes in that of the Arabs: just as the Indians under British rule did not become Englishmen even when they were fully anglicized, so the Iranians under Arab rule did not become Arabs even when they were fully islamized (whereas converts in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent eventually did). Thirdly, the empire broke up without putting an end to the close relationship between the former rulers and subjects. Just as the West and their former colonies could not simply forget about each other when the Western powers withdrew, so the Arabs and the peoples they had conquered could not simply revert to the pre-conquest situation when the caliphate collapsed. In both cases there was a political divorce, but (for very different reasons) not a cultural one. In both cases the parties continued to live together, on new terms, with much recrimination and uncertainty and much effort to find new standards acceptable to both sides. It is this tense relationship that I like to call post-colonialism. The term seems more commonly to be used with reference to the culture and outlook of the conquered peoples during and after their political subjection, but the empire evidently affects both sides, and nobody would talk about post-colonialism today if it were not for the continuing relationship: the term was coined to articulate a grievance against the former bearers of empire by people writing in the latter's language and sharing their conceptual world. In short, post-colonialism as I see it refers to a situation in which the conquered peoples have adopted the key beliefs and values of their conquerors without having been being absorbed by them in ethnic terms, and also without being able to ignore the former conquerors when they cease to be ruled by them.

30) Usage varies enormously. Sometimes, colonialism and post-colonialism seem to mean little more than domination and exploitation of a capitalist type, making them terms of abuse rather than analytical tools (a fate suffered by all terms of great contemporary political relevance).
Now let me give you a bird's-eye view of how the Muslims got themselves into the post-colonial relationship.

The Arabs began their expansion in the 630s and had a major empire a mere 30 years later. This was a colonial empire of the classic type, with a separate metropole (Arabia) and periphery (Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Iran). But for all the well-known similarities between the ports of the British and the garrison cities of the Arabs, the Arab empire was terrestrial rather than maritime, so the distinction between metropole and periphery did not remain sharp for long; and since the metropole was also considerably less well developed than the conquered lands, it soon lost its politically dominant role. In 41/661 “Mu‘āwiya placed his throne in Damascus and refused to go to the seat of Muḥammad”, as a Christian observer put it. It was a fateful step — somewhat as if the capital of the British empire had been moved from London to Cairo.

The capital remained in Syria down to 132/750, when the Umayyad caliphate was toppled by revolutionaries from eastern Iran. Contrary to what many people expected, the revolutionaries did not chase out the Arabs or restore the Persian empire. On the contrary, they enthroned another Arab dynasty. But they moved the capital to Iraq, where the Persian emperors had also had their centre, so now it was somewhat as if the capital of the British empire was being moved to Delhi, where the Mughal emperors had resided (though Iraq was of course less alien to the Arabs than India to the British). The bureaucrats recruited in Iraq were all natives, usually from families who had served under the Persians; and

31) Both were located on the edge of the lands they controlled to facilitate easy retreat, via the desert in the case of the Arabs, via the sea in the case of the British, and both accommodated a population that had no desire to mix with the natives. The comparison is so old that I do not know who first came up with it. See also N. AlSayyad, “The Islamic City as a Colonial Enterprise”, in N. ALSAYYAD (ed.), Forms of Dominance: on the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise (Aldershot, 1992).


33) No Muslim comment comparable to that of the Maronite chronicler seems to survive, but the change of capital is clearly one factor behind the conviction that Mu‘āwiya’s accession marked the end of the rightly guided caliphate.


35) The closest to a prosopography is D. SOURDEL, Le Vizirat ’abbāside (Damascus, 1959–60).
the revolutionaries themselves were a mixed bunch of Arabs and Iranians, so the ruling elite was losing its Arab ethnicity. And Spain seceded in 756, so the empire was also beginning to break up. Most of it was kept together for another hundred years. But by the 860s it was fast disintegrating. There still was an Arab caliph. In fact, there continued to be one all the way down to 1258, but he was becoming ceremonial. Real power had passed to others, both at the centre and in the provinces. By the time of the disputation in Rayy the whole of Iran was ruled by Iranians again.

In short, the ninth century was a period of decolonization, and by the tenth century the process was complete. It has to be stressed that unlike the British and the French, or for that matter the Mongols in China, the Arabs were never forced to withdraw physically. On the contrary, they stayed on for long enough to arabize the indigenous peoples of Syria, Egypt and Iraq. This is important, for this was one way in which the relationship between the two parties continued: not by economic ties, globalization, or immigration by the conquered peoples to the old metropole, but rather by the conquerors’ bequeathing their identity to a substantial segment of the conquered population. As rulers the Arabs lost out, but as colonists they not only stayed on but hugely expanded their originally tiny ranks.

The other way in which the relationship continued was by the converts having adopted an Arab prophet and scripture, so that their relationship with their own ancestral tradition had permanently changed. This was the crucial factor. They could not get the conquerors out of their cultural system even when they resumed political control of themselves. Their inability to do so would probably have sufficed to produce a reaction among them even if the Arabs had reverted to their pre-conquest insignificance when the caliphate broke up. Perhaps it would have done so even if the Arabs had disappeared altogether, as the Romans so kindly did

38) Unlike Jesus, who lost his Jewish identity when he was adopted by the gentiles, Muḥammad remained an Arab, just as the Qur’ān remained in Arabic and the sanctuary remained in Arabia. The fact that the Arabs had arrived as conquerors had given them a control over their own religion vis-à-vis the non-Arab converts that the Jews who disseminated the Jesus-movement among the gentiles had not enjoyed over theirs.
after the collapse of their empire in the West. But disappearance was not on the cards, since the Arabs retained their homeland intact and stayed on for long enough outside the Arabian peninsula to generate a substantial population of neo-Arabs. It was the converts who had not (or not yet) been arabized, and above all the Iranians, who found themselves in a situation resembling that of the post-colonial world today.

The reader may object that it is absurd to speak about decolonization and post-colonialism in a situation in which the colonists stayed on, and so in a sense it is. In fact, there is something inept about the entire modern terminology. A colony properly speaking is a settlement on foreign soil of people who remain culturally or politically connected with their homeland, like the Greeks in Anatolia, the Romans in their newly conquered lands, the Arabs in their garrison cities, or the British in Rhodesia. Decolonization thus ought to mean the removal of the foreign settlers. There was no decolonization in that sense in the Muslim case, except much later, in the Iberian peninsula, where the Arabs had lived for so long by the time they were expelled that one can hardly call them colonists anymore. Nor was there any decolonization in that sense in British India, since there were hardly any colonists there. But nowadays a colony has come to mean a foreign dependency, with or without colonisation. A colony is distinguished from a protectorate or a sphere of influence: the words are about degrees of control, not about settlement, and the entity they designate is no longer the community planted on foreign soil but rather the much larger area it controls as the representative of an imperial power. So decolonization has come to mean the end of empire, and post-colonialism is a word for the cultural state of the indigenous peoples affected by this empire or, as I prefer to use the term, for the cultural relationship between the two parties brought together by an empire. It is in that sense there was both decolonisation and post-colonialism in the Muslim case.

The reader may also object that if the modern terminology is inept, there is no point in using it, and that on the contrary it might be better to apply terminology derived from the Arab caliphate (or some other imperial experience in the past) to our modern situation. So indeed it might.

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39) For a narrower definition, see M. I. Finley, "Colonies – an Attempt at a Typology", Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 26 (1976), according to whom the settlement is only a colony if the continuing relationship is political, and then only if it is one of dependence. This eliminates most of what is normally called colonies, including the Greek ones (stressed at 173f).
But the modern terminology has the advantage of being known to everyone and conjuring up a familiar world complete with a sense of the main actors, their ways of interaction, the feelings they voice and the sheer variety and complexity of the relationships, all of which tends to get lost when the fullness of experience possessed by the living is reduced to a couple of pages in a handful of ancient sources. The world encountered in the Muslim sources is not our own, but it has strong similarities with ours because in some crucial respects it was shaped by similar developments, and historians have a habit of focusing on what they recognize best in the past. In retrospect, it may look as if each generation is rewriting history in its own image, but what is actually happening is that the past and the present are allowed to illuminate each other, often in ways that permanently change our perceptions of historical events in question even when the next generation deems the recognition to have been exaggerated or debatable. It is in the hope of providing such illumination that the comparison of the Arab past and our own present is offered here.

Shu‘ubiyya

With this apologia let me return to the Arabs. The cultural effects of the development sketched above manifested themselves soon enough, in two separate stages, the Shu‘ubi movement before the break-up of the empire and what we may call the tenth-century crisis after it.

The Shu‘ubi movement was a literary attack on the Arabs and their heritage by assimilated natives who were heard with increasing frequency after the revolution of 750.40 The natives in question were mostly Iranian Muslims who had risen high in the conquerors’ society. Typically, they occupied high bureaucratic or academic positions in the capital, where, like many articulate descendants of the victims of colonialism today, they were active participants in what is nowadays called the production of hegemonic culture. They always wrote in Arabic, addressing themselves to the bearers of empire and assimilated natives, never to natives back in their original homes; and what they wrote often reflected the prejudice to which their fathers and grandfathers had been exposed under Arab rule: sheer anger is prominent in their statements, as are horror stories of the

40) In general, see I. Goldziher, Muhammedanische Studien, I (Halle, 1889), chs. 3–5; S. Enderwitz, Gesellschaftlicher Rang und ethnische Legitimation (Freiburg, 1979).
ways in which the Arabs had maltreated converts to their faith. For the Arab conquerors had regarded themselves as ethnically superior, much as did the Europeans. A native who adopted the culture of the British, including the scientific and other “progressive” beliefs which the British saw as their distinguishing feature and in terms of which explained their own success, did not thereby become a full member of British society (nor did a native convert to Christianity, whatever his degree of assimilation). Rather, he would be seen as a “westernized Oriental gentleman” (or “wog” for short). Similarly, a native who adopted the culture of the Arabs, including the monotheistic religion which the Arabs saw as their distinguishing feature and in terms of which they explained their own success, did not thereby become a full member of Arab society. Rather, he became a mawlā, “client”, a legal term which came to be widely used in the broad sense of “assimilated native”. To be a mawlā was to be someone who had lost his position in his native society without being fully accepted into the new one; it was to have one’s career circumscribed and to endure regular humiliation by people less able and intelligent than oneself, because of prejudice, not a legitimate hierarchy: this is what had made it unbearable.

By the ninth century, however, all this was in the past. All Muslims now said that prejudiced behaviour was wrong; Arab and non-Arab Muslims were all the same, or almost the same (the sense that the Arabs were a chosen people never entirely disappeared), and in terms of careers, non-Arab ethnicity was not the slightest impediment any more; on the contrary, non-Arabs now dominated at elite level. Yet Shu’ubism continued, or indeed intensified. For what was at stake was not just career prospects, but also self-respect and, above all, the character of the culture that converts were now sharing with the conquerors.

Converts to Islam were in the disagreeable position of owing their innermost convictions to people they disliked. The Arabs had dragged them

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42) The British expansion was not legitimated in religious terms, and it was only where the missionaries dominated that conversion to Christianity was seen as the key that unlocked the door to the conquest society.

to paradise in chains, as a famous saying had it.\textsuperscript{44} How were they supposed to react? By being grateful? Yes, many people said, on the grounds that the Arabs had brought the truth, whatever else they had done. All religious scholars seem to have taken this view regardless of their ethnic origins. In the caliphal army, too, allegiance to the Arabs was widely seen as essential even though the soldiers were more often than not assimilated Iranians: without the original bearers of the religion, they feared, Islam might drown in the sea of unconverted and/or unassimilated natives.\textsuperscript{45} But there were also people who, whatever gratitude they might feel to God for being Muslims, found it impossible to feel grateful to the Arabs for having conquered them. Typically, they were Iranians working in and around the court, as bureaucrats, translators, copyists and other purveyors of professional knowledge and skills.

What do you do if you owe your beliefs and values to people who have defeated your ancestors and treated them badly thereafter? If you cannot, or do not want to, become one of them, the only solution is to dissociate the beliefs that you want to retain from the carriers that you want to discard. Just as modern science and other aspects of secular modernity are coming to be seen not as something specifically Western, but rather as a human development which simply happens to have played out its most recent phase in the West, so Islam had to be seen as part of a divine process which simply happened to have culminated in Arabia. Both interpretations are eminently defensible in historical terms, yet neither made its appearance before the respective bearers of empire had lost their monopoly on power: it was the desire to have the belief system without indebtedness to the bearers of empire that caused people to rethink history, and it was the new distribution of power that caused the result to be heard on both sides.

The spirit in which the Shu'ūbī presented their rethinking was usually polemical rather than academic. They argued, quite correctly, that all the prophets before the rise of Islam had been non-Arabs, some minor exceptions apart, and inferred that it was really the non-Arabs who had discovered the truth, or most of it (the equivalent claims nowadays mostly refer to science); they added that various early converts to Islam had been non-Arabs, too, so that Islam could be said (with some exaggeration) to have been half non-Arab from the start. Besides, the Shu'ūbis intimated, the Arabs had shown themselves to be bad Muslims by their ter-


\textsuperscript{45} Cf. CRONE, “Abbasid Abnā‘ and Sasanid Cavalrymen”, 14 f.
rible treatment of non-Arab converts, whereas the latter had taken Islam to heart: assimilated natives were now better bearers of the belief system than the conquerors. Moreover, they said, with the partial exception of the belief system, the non-Arabs owed nothing to the Arabs, for all the kings before the rise of Islam had been non-Arab, as had all science, technology, art and literature, with the partial exception of poetry. Their tone was as shrill as that of their modern counterparts: we had civilization while you Arabs were still eating lizards in the desert, as they put it (while you Westerners were still swinging in the trees, as their modern counterparts say today). And just as their modern counterparts talk more about prejudice and colonial attitudes today than they did in the past when they were truly exposed to them, so the Shu'ubis harped on the prejudiced behaviour of the Arabs at the very time when it had ceased to affect them much. By constantly pouring abuse on the Arabs while stressing their own contribution to religion, government and culture before (and indeed after) the rise of Islam, the Shu'ubis informed the world that the Arabs did not deserve a special place in Islam, let alone in the high culture with which the belief system was associated.

Though the Shu'ubis disliked the Arabs, it was not their ambition to destroy the caliphate, in which they were doing very well, and with one famous exception, they expressed no hope for the return of the Persian empire. Rather, they took it for granted that all Muslims were now sharing the same political house: what they were debating was their own status within this house, and the character of the culture it was to accommodate. They did not resent using Arabic as the shared imperial language, either. But they did not want to think of the beliefs they had internalized as something they owed to conquerors, and what they wanted to read in Arabic, apart from the Qur'an, were islamized versions of their own cultural traditions, not traditions relating to Arabia. It is no accident that debates over the literary canon were raging at the same time as the Shu'ubi controversy, though it is unclear how far the poets pioneering "modern" (muḥdath) poetry were Shu'ubis themselves. People were

49) For the question whether Abū Nuwās was actually a Shu'ūbi, see E. Wagner, Abū Nuwās (Wiesbaden, 1965), 136 ff.
tired of reading the output of dead tribal males. They wanted poetry, Persian culture, Greek philosophy, Indian statecraft and anything else available in the Near East. In short, their outlook could be summarized as “Hey ho, Arab civ. has gotta go”, except that they denied that there was any such thing as Arab civilization.50

The Tenth-Century-Crisis

The “tenth-century crisis” is a shorthand for developments over the next three centuries, roughly 850–1150, for which no name seems to exist. Fazlur Rahman spoke of them as a crisis,51 and it peaked in the tenth and early eleventh centuries: hence the nomenclature adopted here.

There were still Shu‘ūbis in the tenth century, but the intellectual climate had changed and they no longer held the centre stage, for by now the caliphate had broken up and the differences between the conquerors and the conquered peoples had been even further effaced. In political terms, both Muslims and non-Muslims were now living under secular kings, usually of non-Arab origin: it was an upstart Iranian ruler who presided over the disputation between the two Rāzīs at Rayy.52 The new rulers were secular (or profane) in the sense of “not prescribed by the Shari‘a”, not in the sense that they kept religion out of the public sphere; on the contrary, they saw themselves as servants of Islam, or at least they were supposed to, so Islam retained its political dominance. But the sacred polit distinguishing Muslims from all others had disappeared, or rather turned into a purely notional religious community. Moreover, as the Iranians were returning to power inside the Muslim community, so the Byzantines were returning outside it, conquering northern Syria and broadcasting wild visions of reconquering Jerusalem, Egypt, and more besides.53

50) The Berkeley students who shouted this slogan in 1968 (in its original version, “hey ho, Western civ. has gotta go”) were mostly members of the empire-bearing people, however, or rather of their American successors, whereas Arabs never seem to have been Shu‘ūbis (Dirār b. ‘Amr, sometimes adduced as an exception, is not really one). The post-imperial bad conscience displayed by Westerners should presumably be related to the weakness of secularism as an imperial creed.


52) See above, n. 3.

Culturally, too, the pre-conquest Near East was resurfacing in a recognizable way. We are now in the period that some call the Iranian intermezzo and others the Renaissance of Islam, with reference to the return of the above-mentioned Iranian rulers plus Persian culture and the Persian language on the one hand and that of Greek science and philosophy (without the rulers) on the other. The debate between the two Rāzis is symptomatic in that respect, too, for both men were Iranians and most of what they said had long roots in Near Eastern culture. In cultural terms, Muslims and dhimmis, too, were converging, especially at the level of the elite. Educated Muslims and non-Muslims were now speaking and writing the same language (if not usually in the same scripts) and participating in the same high culture. As secretaries, astrologers and doctors, dhimmis often moved in courtly circles, enjoyed great wealth, and were hard to distinguish from the Muslims. At elite level, in other words, the natives had been largely assimilated now even though they had not all converted.

In short, the Muslims were no longer clearly marked off from their non-Muslim subjects by ethnicity, culture or worldly success. Of course, Islam was still politically dominant, but things did not look good on the ground. When Daylamite mercenaries established a protectorate over the caliph in Baghdad, adopting the Persian imperial title of shāhanshāh (“King of Kings”) and ordering their protégé to treat them with proper honours, it was somewhat as if a Gurkha mercenary had taken power in London after the dissolution of the British empire, calling himself Maharaja and telling members of Parliament to get down on their knees before him.54 Symbolically, the conquerors had been forced to withdraw. As the poet al-Ma’arri put it, if al-Manṣūr had risen from the grave, his reaction would have been to regret having killed Abū Muslim on the grounds that “the sons of Hāshim dwell in the desert, and their empire has passed to the Daylamites”.55 Moreover, the transfer of power from the conquerors


to the conquered peoples had involved extreme political fragmentation: there no longer was a unitary Muslim state to counter the Byzantine empire, and the political control of the new rulers was limited. Al-Mas'üdi shuddered at the thought of invasions by Turks, Allans, Khazars and others "with the weakness and evanescence of Islam at this time, the victory of the Byzantines over the Muslims, the ruination of the pilgrimage, the absence of jihād, the unsafe and dangerous nature of the roads, and what with people setting themselves up as independent rulers in any locality they inhabit after the fashion of the 'party kings' after the death of Alexander up to the reign of Ardashir". Above all, the cultural fusion, though deeply exciting to a modern scholar, was painful to live through. It is no secret that multi-culturalism and the incipient fusion of traditions observable in the West today looks to many as the beginning of the end of Western civilization even though Western science and technology, political models, gender roles, clothing, eating patterns, and many other things are spreading throughout the world (where they are perceived as threats to the prevailing cultures in their turn). In the same way, the resurfacing of pre-conquest culture in the Near East struck many Muslims as heralding the end of what they took to be Islam, even though the religion was constantly recruiting new adherents both within and beyond its political borders while at the same time Arabic and New Persian, as well as the high culture associated with them, were spreading among the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians (generating fears for the survival of their traditions in turn). As far back as the eighth century there were Arabs who grumpily blamed all ills on non-Arab Muslims, whom they saw as an unwelcome presence in their society, much as many people in Britain see Asian immigrants today; and Ismāʿilism was commonly identified as a conspiracy by the conquered peoples to subvert Islam from within by

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56) al-Masʿūdi, Murūj al-dhahab, ed. C. PELLAT (Beirut, 1966–79), i, § 504.
57) 'Uthmān supposedly predicted that things would go wrong with the coming of prosperity, the achievement of adulthood by the children of captive women, and both Arabs and non-Arabs reciting the Qurʾān (al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrikh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk, ed. M. J. DE GOEJE et al. (Leiden, 1879–1901), i, 2803 f); 'Umar predicted that the Arabs would perish when the children of Persian women grew up and said that the Israelites had done well until the muwalladūn abnāʾ al-sabāḥā led them astray. See Ibn Abī Shayba, al-Muṣannaf, ed. M. A. al-Nadwi (Bombay, 1979–83), XII, no. 12518; Sayf b. 'Umar al-Ṭanīmī, Kitāb al-ridda wa-l-futūḥ, ed. Q. Al-Samarrāʾī (Leiden, 1905), 18, no. 21. Abū Ḥanīfa and others said the same of the Muslims; Abū Zūrāʾ, Taʾrikh, ed. Sh. Al-Qawānī (Damascus, 1980), no. 1339.
means of a fatal mixture of Zoroastrian, Manichaean and Greek philosophical ideas. Then as now, too, the fusion generated the phenomenon of *trahison des clercs*: Western intellectuals denouncing their forebears for their colonial sins and attacking their own cultural tradition; Muslim intellectuals embracing Greek and/or Iranian ideas in order, as it seemed, to subvert their own religion. To 'Abd al-Jabbār there were enemies of Islam everywhere, but above all in the Muslim community itself: translators of Greek, Persian and Indian books into Arabic, physicians, philosophers, crypto-Manichaens, Ismā‘ilis and other Shi‘is, all came across to him as so many auto-immune diseases.

The fact was that at elite level all the confessional communities of the Middle East were coming together in a single cultural world, all of them were finding that their cherished beliefs were being transformed and relativized by the encounter. Back in the seventh and eighth centuries, the absolute truth of Islam had seemed self-evident to its adherents: nothing else in the world was the source of so much dazzling power and success; God was clearly siding with the Arabs. Even those who refused to convert found it impossible to resist the pull of the new religion, borrowing this or that key idea in the hope of deceiving its bearers with their own arms, and imitating them in other ways, too, because the ways of the powerful are attractive. (These factors are conspicuous in the spread of Western ideas, too.) But the very power which makes a belief system seem self-evidently true while its bearers are on top of the world has a way of placing a question mark over its validity when they lose their dominant position. Just as the collapse of the European empires has been followed by doubt about the validity of Western institutions (even as they are spreading), so the collapse of the Arab caliphate was followed by doubts about the beliefs it left behind (even as they were spreading, too). Now that Islam had lost its epistemological privilege, it was no longer self-evident what it had over other systems of belief.

In the Muslim case, 300 years of Islamic dominance had endowed all the competing systems (Zoroastrianism included) with the same basic structure: all operated with a single (good) God, saw Him as having com-

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communicated with mankind through prophets, preserved the communication in a scripture, and authenticated the scripture with reference to a tradition which was deeply meaningful to insiders but had no probative value to outsiders. Which one of them was true? The only way of judging between them was by reason, but reason proved incapable of delivering a verdict, for rational arguments in favour of one tenet could always be countered by others of equal weight against it, as the mutakallims soon found out thanks to disputations in which the rival religions or sects were defended on the basis of rational arguments alone. The superiority of Islam could not be proved, except to the converted; nor could that of any other religion, or of any subdivisions within them. To those in search of proof, the increasingly even positioning of the various systems in the socio-political hierarchy made all of them look much the same in epistemological terms as well, generating the feelings of relativism and doubt that so often appear where rival belief systems compete on an equal footing, and causing Muslims and dhimmīs alike to go on real or imagined journeys in quest of wisdom. By the later ninth century, religious scepticism with reference to the equipollence of proofs (takāfu’ al-adilla) is well-attested. There were also philosophers who denied that humans could know anything for certain at all, claiming that all truth was relative so that everything was both true and false at the same time, or even that life itself was an illusion. And then as today, the suspicion arose that all that the privileged system had ever had over the others was power, or at the very least that it was badly contaminated by power.

In the Muslim case the problem posed by power owed its formulation to the fact that back in the days when the natives were Christians, Zoroastrians, and Gnostics, they had often claimed that Islam was false because it was spread by the sword (debiting its invincibility to their own sins rather than to God’s agreement with it). Initially they said it in Greek, Syriac and other local languages, then they said it in Arabic, and from the tenth century onwards one finds it in Muslim writings as an embarrassing charge that had to be refuted. By then, the charge was also being made by Muslims. There were Shi‘is, for example, who used it to discredit the Companions, claiming that they had only followed Muhammad for the sake of plunder and power, not because they knew him to be a true

62) Crone, Medieval Islamic Political Thought, 375f.
prophet (which 'Abd al-Jabbār took to mean that the Shi'īs in question denied Muḥammad's prophethood as well), and the issue also came up between the two Rāzīs, for it was above all with warfare that the philosopher associated prophets, requiring the Ismā'īlī Rāzī to explain why the fact that Muḥammad used the sword did not invalidate his message. In sum, what worried people now was not the role of Arabs in the rise and spread of Islam, but rather that of power.

Accordingly, the tenth and eleventh centuries are dominated by attempts to dissociate the ultimate truth from the political and military concerns with which the Prophet had fused it. People were looking for a single absolute truth which had nothing to do with power, which all humans could accept regardless of the perspective from which they saw it, and which spoke to them as individuals rather than members of this or that confessional community. Unlike the philosopher Rāzī, who simply discarded the confessional boundaries as the creations of deluded men, most people wished to combine belief in this absolute truth with continued membership of the communities into which they had been born, remaining loyal to their prophet and the tradition of which he was seen as the founder. But one way or the other, the universalism that the Shū'ūbis had fought for within Islam now had to embrace all human beings. It was a disturbing development to the religious scholars, whether mutakallims or traditionalists, Sunnis or Imāmis, given that it threatened to reduce the truths they worked with to parochial formulations of something higher shared by all mankind. But though they wrote against the new trends, they do not seem to have had any answers to the questions they posed. It was the philosophers and the Ismā'īlis who embraced the new developments and who knew how to handle them.

The New Leaders

Post-colonialism was not the only factor at work: another was the rise to prominence of educated laymen. Secretaries, administrators, doctors, astrologers, copyists, and other professionals (and to some extent also poets) all owed their wealth and status to secular know-how rather than mastery of the religious tradition (though they were usually well schooled in that tradition too). Highly educated and trained to think on the basis of human rather than revealed information, they were often disinclined to

63) 'Abd al-Jabbār, Tathbit, 35.
64) Abū Ḥātim, A'lām, 3f, 181ff, 186ff.
defer to religious scholars, whom they frequently rivalled in terms of wealth and influence as well. They rose to prominence after the revolution in 132/750, when they benefitted from the 'Abbāsid expansion of the bureaucracy, and they benefitted again from the political break-up of the caliphate from the ninth century onwards because the new rulers usually modelled their courts on that of Baghdad and so felt obliged to patronize whole bevy of such men. In the ninth century the professionals tended to be rationalizing theologians (mutakallims) rather than traditionalists, and it was also from their ranks that the Shuʿūbis were recruited; but in the tenth century they tended to be philosophers. As philosophers, they were rivals of the mutakallims (and had no time for traditionalists at all), so there is sometimes an element of anti-clericalism in their thinking, most obviously in that of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī. This gives them a similarity with the philosophes of enlightenment in Europe, with whom they have much in common in terms of their actual ideas as well. But unlike the philosophes, they were also heirs to an empire that had united different ethnic and religious communities, and anti-clericalism is less pronounced in their thinking than a desire simply to rise above the clerics. Jewish, Christian and Muslim members of the professional elite often had more in common with each other than with their own coreligionists: in such circles the idea of single truth above the many had strong appeal.

Ismāʿīlis were sometimes secretaries, too, but their first leaders seem to have been villagers and petty townsmen engaged in local transport, trade or crafts, in keeping with the humble milieux in which Gnosticism appears to have flourished in the first centuries of Islam. At least some of them were literate and wrote books, but they were not truly educated, and they had no links with the political and cultural establishments. Why such people should have felt the need to project themselves onto the public scene is hard to say, though the fact that agrarian economy seems to have undergone a fair degree of commercialization in (or by) the tenth century may come into it. The Ismāʿīlis moved closer to elite level in both social and intellectual terms in the course of the tenth century, when they overlaid their Gnosticism with Neoplatonist philosophy (especially in Iran) and rose to political power in Fātimid North Africa and Egypt. But their leaders (known as missionaries, though they soon became the

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equivalent of bishops) were primarily suppliers of pastoral care to local communities, and they were less willing and/or able to transcend their own familiar world than the philosophers. All prophets, according to Abū Ḥātim, had preached the same inner message which was soon to become the creed for all mankind, but when he set out to explain this thesis, the inner message he discerned in all the revelations was in effect Islam.  

The Symptoms

It was among the rationalizing theologians (mutakallims) of the ninth century that the doubts about the absolute truth of traditional religion began. Its earliest manifestation was scepticism (hayra, also translated “perplexity”) about the truth of any one religion. Asked why he followed his particular religion, one such scepic in Sīstān replied that he did not know it to be truer than any other (he accepted the principle of takāfu’ al-adilla), that he had simply been brought into it by his parents, but that long familiarity had made it dear to him: he was like a traveller in a caravan, he said; the manager had showed him into a room without consulting him, and when it began to rain, the ceiling proved to be leaking; so he had wondered whether to get himself another room, but then he saw that the courtyard was muddy and that the ceiling was leaking in the other rooms too, so he decided to stay where he was.  

Rationalizing theologians were also the first to have doubts about the existence of prophethood. Such doubts were not in fact the only way in which the dwindling of confidence in conventional religion displayed itself: loss of faith in bodily resurrection, or in any kind of afterlife at all, was also prominent, as was the problem of reconciling a single omnipotent God with the existence of evil. But prophets were at the centre of

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66) When other religions differ from Islam, their tenets are declared not to come from the prophets, but rather from later innovators who corrupted their faith in a bid for power (Abū Ḥātim, Aḥlām, 160, 171ff). The once common view that the Ismā‘īlis were particularly inclined to supra-confessionalism rests on the K. al-balāgh, a forgery in which the (grossly distorted) ideas often seem to be rooted in philosophy rather than Ismā‘īlism. (See Stern, Studies, ch. 4; cf. Croné, “Farabi’s Imperfect Constitutions”, note 69, on grades of initiation; below, notes 93–94, on the prophets as impostors.


68) I hope to deal with this in a longer work on the subject.
the debate because it was in them that the confessional communities originated: remove them and you had what the European Enlightenment thinkers called natural religion; that is, a religion in which the relationship between God and the individual was based directly on human nature, without the intermediary of institutions posited by prophets and maintained by others claiming to have special knowledge about God, such as priests, imams or religious scholars. Medieval Muslims did not use the expression natural religion, though they came close at times; rather, they spoke about rational religion. But what they meant was the same: a religion which freed the thinking individual from dependence on the institutions and conventions of the community in his relationship with God, allowing him instead to approach God directly, as a single soul on his own.

Among the mutakallims the first to attack communal religion were Abū Ḥalāl ibn al-Warrāq (d. 247/861 or later) and Ibn al-Rāwandi (d. between 240s/860s and 298/912). One or the other, or both, famously declared that either the prophets said things in conformity with reason, in which case they were superfluous, or else they said things contrary to reason, in which case they were wrong; and Ibn al-Rāwandi apparently added that prophets were magicians and tricksters.60 We also hear of a tenth-century mutakallim, Abū Ḥaṣāq al-Nasībi (fl. around 370/980), who had his doubts about prophetic missions.61 By his time the initiative had passed to the philosophers. Thus al-Sarakhsi (d. 286/899) is credited with a book dismissing the prophets as tricksters;62 the tenth-century philosopher Abū l-Abbās al-Īrānshahri is said not to have believed in any existing religion, only in one which he had devised for himself.63 Abū Bakr al-Rāzī allegedly plagiarized his scientific ideas.64 After al-Rāzī we find

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60) STROUMSA, Freethinkers, ch. 2.
63) Al-Birūnī, Tahqīq mā li-l-Hind, ed. E. SACHAU (London, 1887), 4. According to Abū l-Ma‘āli, Bayān al-adāyīn, ed. H. RĪDĪ (Tehran, 1342), 67, Šīrāzī claimed to be a prophet sent to the ‘ajam and wrote a book in Persian which he claimed to have from an angel; i.e. he is here a nativist prophet rather than a rationalist freethinker. But his scientific views as recorded by Biruni in a variety of works rule out this interpretation, cf. S. PINES, Studies in Islamic Atomism (Jerusalem, 1997), 41 f., 48, 54, 65–7.
64) Nāṣir-i Khusraw, Zād al-musāfīrīn, in KRAUS, Rasā'il, 255 f., 259.
al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) writing against people who dismissed the prophets (or “lawgivers”, as he called them) as jugglers and tricksters, al-Rāzī presumably among them.74 But there were others of the same kind. According to the Brethren of Purity (wrote 360s/970s?), there were intelligent people who would engage in philosophy and reject the stories of Adam, Eve, the angels and the like because they took them literally instead of following their spiritual meaning, so that they would fall into scepticism and doubt, though they might hide it for fear of the sword, and that sometimes they would reject the prophetic books on the grounds that reason made revelation unnecessary.75 According to al-ʿĀmīrī (d. 381/996) there were “pretentious people” (mutaẓarrīfā), probably in Iran, who dismissed all religions as conventional institutions designed to facilitate social life, arguing that they would not have been based on reason rather than revelation (tawqīf) if there had been any truth to them, and that there would not have been so many of them either.76 Rāghib al-İsfahānī (fl. early 5th/11th C) also knew of people who rejected positive religion, some of them on the grounds that there were too many rival forms of it,77 while a friend of Ibn Sinā (d. 428/1037) had trouble believing in prophethood, causing Ibn Sinā to write an epistle affirming it.78 The poet al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058) repeatedly voiced views strikingly similar to al-Rāzī’s: prophets were tricksters in search of a livelihood, all positive religion was instituted by humans, he said (or presented others as claiming): “They all err, Muslims, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians; two make humanity’s universal sect: one man intelligent without religion, and one religious without intellect”, as he put it in what must be his most famous line on the subject.79 Both al-Māwardi (d. 450/1058) and al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) wrote against the belief that reason made revelation unnecessary, that prophetic miracles were mere sleights of hand, and that the prophets were liars whose untruths were meant to deceive the world.

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75) Rasāʾil lkhwān al-ṣafā (Beirut, 1957), IV, 10, 100.
79) NICHOLSON, “Meditations of al-Maʿarrī”, no. 239, with discussion at pp. 164 ff.
according to some, to benefit it according to others;\textsuperscript{80} and al-Ghazālī reported that loss of faith in prophethood was widespread.\textsuperscript{81} The real or pseudonymous ‘Umar Khayyām (d. c. 517/1123) provides us with yet another example: "will no one ever tell us truthfully whence we have come and whither we go?", as one of the quatrains circulating under his name exclaims.\textsuperscript{82} This takes us into the twelfth century, but thereafter the attestations peter out.

The Remedies

What kind of truth did reason supply? To al-MA’arri and others, the answer seems to have been, not much of one, in the sense that he and others lived with uncertainty about the metaphysical realm and based their moral decisions on rational considerations as best they could. Al-‘Āmiri’s "pretentious people" recommended following the injunctions shared by all religions and leaving off the rest; Rāghib’s sceptics held it best to stop thinking about religious divisions and to work in fields known to be good for mankind, such as medicine and agriculture, a solution also recommended (as Rāghib notes) by Burzōe in his introduction to Kalīla wa-Dimna.\textsuperscript{83} It is about as far as many people get today. But to others, reason meant philosophy in the technical sense, and that in its turn meant a two-tiered concept of religion similar to that adopted by the Ismā‘īlīs. The upper level was occupied by Aristotelian and/or Neoplatonist philosophy, which gave you eternal verities for all mankind; the lower level was occupied by positive religion, which gave you approximations of the highest truth expressed in mythical and allegorical form for the many who could not understand philosophy. The revealed religions differed from one community to the next, but there was no need to be worried by this, for the differences were required for socio-political functions they served, and the eternal verities they reflected were the same. Unlike the Ismā‘īlīs, however, the philosophers had no intention of ever abolishing the lower


\textsuperscript{81} al-Ghazālī, al-Munqidd min al-da‘lāl, ed. and tr. F. JABRE (Beirut 1959), 46 = 110.

\textsuperscript{82} A. DASHTI, In Search of Omar Khayyam (London, 1971), 117.

\textsuperscript{83} Above, nn. 77f, 79.
level. They mostly accepted it in its Sunni form, and though they did not usually display enough of an interest in this level to be associated with a particular legal school (Ibn Rushd is the great exception), they held communal life to be impossible without the law. They did not believe in the spiritual perfectibility of man and had no hopes for a world without religious or political divisions. At the most they held that individual philosophers could perfect themselves to the point of dispensing with the Prophet's injunctions, but this was not something they would broadcast.

The Isma'ilis had higher hopes because they expected the final unification of mankind to be effected by God, that is they awaited a new revelation. They were not alone in this; and unlike the philosophers and others who placed their faith in reason, those who expected Muhammad's law to be abrogated often seem to have expressed themselves in anti-Arab terms reminiscent of Persian restorationism. Back in the ninth century, for example, a certain 'Abdallāh al-'Ādi or 'Abdī had written an astrological work predicting the coming of a man who would unite all of mankind in a single community and put an end to evil: he would do this by restoring Zoroastrianism and eliminating the power of the Arabs (mulk al-'arab).\(^{84}\) An Ibāḍī by the name of Yazid b. Unaysa, perhaps also active about this time, predicted that God would raise up a non-Arab/Iranian prophet who would bring a new book and follow the religion of the Sabians mentioned in the Qur'ān, i.e. he would bring a religion foretold in the scripture which would both fulfil and abrogate that scripture as a more universal form of its predecessor.\(^{85}\) In a more violent vein a number of apocalyptic traditions preserved in a tenth-century Imāmī Shi'i book predict the coming of a messiah who would conquer the Chinese, the Turks, the Indians and others, bring a new law, and slaughter the Arabs.\(^{86}\) When the tenth-century Isma'ilis took political action in the belief that the coming of this messiah was imminent, they found him in an Iranian captive of whom it was said that he descended from the kings of Persia and hailed from

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Isfahan, a city from which astrologers other than (or perhaps including) 'Abdallāh al-'Ādī had predicted the rise of a new religion,\textsuperscript{87} and there was an obvious Zoroastrian element in some of the outrageous measures with which this messiah, inaugurated in Bahrāyn in 319/931, tried to show that Muhammad's law had been abrogated.\textsuperscript{88}

At first sight, this anti-Arab streak is surprising, especially in Shi'ism, for neither Imāmīsm nor Ismā'īlism was a movement to restore the Persian empire or rehabilitate the Iranians at the cost of the Arabs. On the contrary, Ismā'īlism was a movement to overcome all such earthly divisions so as to unite mankind in a single spiritual religion. But Islam was still felt to be too closely tied to the Arabs to allow for ethnic divisions to be completely transcended within it, just as its law was felt to be too externalist to allow for the religious unification of mankind. Complete universalism could only be achieved at the cost of both. Ismā'īlī (or more precisely Qarmaṭī) missionaries in Bahrāyn expressed this by preaching that it was the Arabs who had killed Ḥusayn.\textsuperscript{89} What they were articulating was the Shi'i equivalent of the Christian charge that the Jews had killed Christ: just as one could not be both a Jew (a Christ-killer) and true Israel (i.e. a Christian), so one could not be both an Arab (a Ḥusayn-killer) and a true Muslim (i.e. an Ismā'īlī Shi'i). Most Ismā'īlīs in Bahrāyn were ethnic Arabs, just as most early Christians were ethnic Jews, but the issue was not ethnicity on its own. Just as a “Jew” was an ethnic Jew who clung to the old dispensation instead of following Christ, so an “Arab” was an ethnic Arab who clung to the externalist features that the Ismā'īlīs were abolishing instead of following the Mahdi: all those who adopted the right belief were ipso facto gentiles. In both, ethnicity rested on a combination of descent and belief.\textsuperscript{90} By refusing to be Jews, the Christians broke with


\textsuperscript{90} Compare the participants in the 'Abbāsid revolution, who also saw Arab identity as resting on a combination of descent (or naturalisation) and a belief they rejected: they too saw themselves as gentiles whether they were Arab by ancestry or not. See P. CRONE, “The Significance of Wooden Weapons in al-Mukhtār's
the community in which they originated to form a separate religion of their own.\(^1\) By rejecting Arab ethnicity the Qarāmiṭa did the same.

The fact that the Qarāmiṭa chose a Persian prophet to preside over their break with old Islam does not mean that they had a particular attachment to things Persian, but rather that they envisaged their messiah as everything that Muḥammad was not: the man who abrogated the old community was simply an inversion of the man who had founded it. His various Persian qualifications served to identify him as anti-matter to Islam, so to speak, not to mark him out as the representative of a highly valued political, religious or cultural past. The Qarāmiṭa would not of course have needed such anti-matter if they had broken with old Islam gradually rather than in one single radical operation, but unlike the Christians, they were political no less than religious revolutionaries; the severance had to be total, public, and enacted with dramatic, preferably deeply shocking, rituals which brought it home to the participants that the old world had been destroyed, that they were on the threshold to a new world, and that they were on their own.

Among the deeply shocking rituals that served this purpose was ceremonial cursing of the prophets, including the founder of Islam. Unlike the Christians, the Qarāmiṭa could not retain the founder of the parent religion among their sacred figures. It had not in fact been easy for the Christians to do so either: Marcion had rejected Moses as representing the God of law overcome by Christianity, Gnostics of various kinds had rejected the Old Testament God as downright evil, deriding his law as shackles that had to be cast off for the sake of spiritual perfection. Since the Qarāmiṭa were Gnostics by origin and moreover revolutionaries, they too saw the law as shackles and their messiah now told them to cast it off, instituting ritual cursing of the lawgiver prophets, Moses, Jesus as Muḥammad, or perhaps of all prophets, as mere tricksters in search of power.\(^2\) Das war also des Pudels Kern, his enemies responded. But the thesis of the three impostors (which the Sunnis also credit to the Ismā'īlīs

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91) More precisely, that is how they talked, but reality was a good deal more complicated, cf. A. H. Becker and A. Y. Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen, 2003).

in other contexts
d actually reflects the sentiments of Ibn al-Rāwandi,
al-Sarakhšī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and other radical philosophers better
than those of the Iṣmā‘īlis, who must have borrowed it from such philoso-
phers, wittingly or unwittingly," not because they hated the prophets,
but on the contrary because they loved them too much: they had to vilify
and throw dirt at them in order to enable themselves to part with them
for the sake of the new world, and what the radical philosophers offered
was a ready-made language with which to do it. (One wonders whether it
was really via the Iṣmā‘īlis rather than the philosophers themselves that
the theme of the three impostors passed to Europe, where it was to serve
as dynamite against established religion in the Enlightenment.)

As it turned out, the Persian messiah did not prove equal to the task,
but rather lost control of his community, to be killed by his own adher-
ents. The transition to the new post-Prophetic order had failed. The
coming of a new religion continued to be predicted, and the Bahrayn
Iṣmā‘īlis did eventually succeed in abolishing the law in circumstances
unknown, but by then they were too peripheral to count. Meanwhile,
another branch of Iṣmā‘īlis had decided to postpone the coming of utopia.
This second and, as it turned out, much more important branch consisted
of the followers of the Fāṭimids, who established themselves in North

93) K. al-balāgh in al-Baghdādī, al-Farq bayna l-firaq, ed. M. BADR (Cairo,
1910), 278 ff; cf. L. MASSIGNON, "La legende 'De tribus impostoribus' et ses ori-
gines islamiques", in his Opera Minora, ed. Y. MOUBARAC (Beirut, 1963), 1, 83 ff.
See also Mahmūd of Ghazna to the caliph in 420/1029 in Ibn al-Jawzi, al-Munta-
ẓam, VIII (Hyderabad, AH 1359), 39, where the Iṣmā‘īlis are said to regard
all religions as made up by sages; Ghazālī, Bāṭiniyya, 24 (ch. 3, ii), where godless phil-
osophers, dualists and skeptics concoct such beliefs for Shi‘ī consumption. Both
Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī and Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sījistānī wrote books affirming their belief
in prophethood in no uncertain terms, but to no avail.

94) Cf. EI, s. v. “al-Rāzī” (KRAUS and PINES), where it is suggested that the
Qarāmiṭa studied Abū Bakr al-Rāzī’s books, on the basis of questionable evidence.
It seems more likely that the Qarāmiṭa had simply picked up this language, which
was widely diffused at the time.

95) It is first attested in Frederick II’s Sicily around 1239 and reappears in Lis-
bon in the 1340s; M. ESPOSITO, "Les hérésies de Thomas Scotus", Revue d’Histoire
Ecclesiastique 33 (1937), 59, 65, 69. See further F. NIEWÖHNER, Veritas vise Varie-
tas (Heidelberg, 1988); S. BERTI, F. CHARLES-DAUBERT and R. H. POPKIN (eds.),
Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century

96) Nicholson, "Meditations of Mā’arri”, no 263:4 (wa-qīla yajūʾu dinun ghayru
hādha).
Africa in 297/909 and moving on from there to Egypt in 358/969; and having acquired real power, the Fatimids unsurprisingly did their best to suppress messianic expectations. The prophets were not cursed, but on the contrary venerated as indispensable for salvation in North Africa and Cairo. Individual Isma'ilians seem to have thought, much like the philosophers, that they could rise above the rules laid down by the Prophet, but the era of collective liberation from externality ceased to be just around the corner. Isma'ilism thus lost the ability to conjure up a new world on which its early magnetism had rested. When it reappeared as a major attraction in the sixth/twelfth century, it was as a very different creed.97

The Seljuqs

A new era did none the less come, just not as people had imagined it. In 431/1040 the eastern frontier broke, and Turkish tribes poured into Iran, Iraq and Syria. They reached Baghdad in 447/1055 under the leadership of the Seljuq family. More Turks were to follow a century later, and still more in the 650s/1250s, when they came as participants in the Mongol invasions. It was the end of both Arab and Iranian power: from 1055 down to 1918 practically all rulers in the Muslim Middle East were Turks.

Here the parallel with our own post-colonial world comes to a drastic end. Nothing comparable has happened to us and nothing comparable probably will, given that there are no outsiders left to play the Turks any more. It was also the beginning of the end of the post-colonial malaise in the Muslim world itself. After the Turkish invasions, the religious scholars return to the driving seat, the confessional borders reassert themselves, and by the twelfth century the evidence for scepticism, relativism, and unbelief begin to peter out along with that for Shu'ubism. Exactly how all this happened remains unknown. The question has traditionally been discussed under the name of “the Sunni revival”, an unfortunate label which is now so heavily associated with the religious activities of the last caliphs of pre-Seljuq Baghdad on the one hand98 and with conscious policies rather than the inadvertent effects of a barbarian in-

97) Cf. CRONE, Medieval Islamic Political Thought, 205–208, 325f.
vasion on the other,99 that it seems best to do without it. But pursuing the question is in any case impossible here. I shall confine myself to some comments on the solution that won the day.

Sufism and al-Ghazālī

Tenth-century Sufism could not be said to provide a two-tiered religion. In its pietist form of renunciation, asceticism and observance of the law for love of God rather than fear of Him, it represented an interiorized form of conventional religion rather than an upper-level form shorn of ties with this world. As a spiritual search for direct experience of God, it left the status of conventional religion undefined. Its attractions were limited, too, or so at least to the educated elite in Iraq: Sufis were there seen as people who moved in humble circles, mixed with low life, had questionable morals, knew how to milk people for money, and spoke nonsense in grandiloquent and abstract terms.100 A friend of al-Tanūkhī even tried the equivalent of a Sokal spoof on them.101 One would not have guessed that it was with them that the future lay.

As spiritually centred on direct experience of God, Sufism shared with Ismā‘ilism and philosophy the feature of addressing the believer as a naked soul, shorn of worldly attachments, and of handing the key to salvation to the individual rather than his community: one could not be born as a Sufi, a philosopher or an initiate into the bāṭin that constituted the upper level in Ismā‘ilism; one had to choose one's own path, to take one's salvation into one's own hands. In all three cases this involved relativization of the law and society into which one was born, but Sufism was by far the most otherworldly persuasion of the three: all institutions in this world were deemed to be impediments to the quest for God; all had to be abandoned in the course of the journey to Him. At best, this reduced

101) Al-Tanūkhī, Nishwār al-muhādara, ed. A. Shālījī (Beirut, 1971–72), 1, 99; tr. D. S. Margoliouth, The Table-talk of a Mesopotamian Judge (London, 1922), 58 f (like the editors of Social Texts, the members of the circle accepted it, but the shaykh saw through it).
the law and the society based on it to secondary importance; at worst, it completely drained them of religious significance, or even deprived them of regulatory force, given the tendency for antinomian behaviour to blend into immoral or criminal behaviour of the normal type. This has to be borne in mind when it comes to explaining why there was so much hostility to Sufism of the type centred on direct experience of God in the early days. The fact that most Sufis probably lived by the law did not answer the question how they expected their coreligionists to accommodate a spirituality that placed a question mark over the value of marriage, homes, gainful employment, wealth, power, book-learning, cleanliness or even clothes. When al-Ghazālī became a Sufi, he resigned from his job and abandoned his wife and small children to save his soul.102 As it happens, the outcome was books that seemed to save the soul of the Muslims at large, so that in retrospect his behaviour looks noble; but this may not have been how his family and pupils saw it, and in any case one could not maintain a society by indiscriminate encouragement of this kind of behaviour, as al-Ghazālī himself was well aware. It was up to the Sufis, then, to demonstrate not only that they accepted both levels of religion, but also that they knew how to fit the two together. Al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) made a contribution to this with his Risāla, in which he denounced antinomianism (ibāḥa) as a corruption of the original movement, but it was al-Ghazālī himself who answered the question by providing a complete guide to observance of the law as part of a spiritual life. He too wrote against antinomianism (in Persian, suggestive of where he saw it as prevalent),103 but his key contribution was his Ikhyā‘, in which to be a Muslim is to be a Sufi.

It should be noted that al-Ghazālī was fighting on two fronts, for he also had to argue against those who held the law to be so important that the whole of Muslim society was vitiated by its failure to live in accordance with it. Both attitudes led people to reject normal society; both resulted in a view of Muslim society as standing in the way of salvation. The obverse of ibāḥa was refusal to handle money, earn a living or live in the Muslim community in anything but a geographical sense, claiming

102) Ghazālī, Munqidh, 38 = 99. That his children were small is clear from the fact that had still been unmarried when he arrived in Baghdad four years earlier; D. Krawulsky (tr.), Briefe und Reden des Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Gazzālī (Freiburg, 1971), 135.

that it had no caliph and that the whole umma had merged with the abode of kufr. Al-Ghazālī did his best to get both groups back into the community, assuring them that it was still a legitimate version of the community founded by the Prophet, that it still had a legitimate caliph, and that it was with God’s blessing that power had passed to the Turks; and he wrote in great detail on precisely what kind of dealings one could and could not have with rulers without violating the law, what kind of money one could take from them and what not. Throughout, his aim is to impress on people is that the Muslim community was still the saving vehicle, that it had not been corrupted to the point disappearing, and that people should concentrate on getting their social life onto a moral footing again.

In the fourth/tenth century, all the greatest minds had been trying to transcend the Muslim community, to seek some unification of thinking men above it. This is what is reversed with al-Ghazālī in the fifth/eleventh. Like his predecessors, he had a strong sense of the difference between the conventional religion and the natural (God-given) capacity of the human mind to know the ultimate truth, and he seems to have been more of a Neoplatonist philosopher in private than one would guess from his pastoral works. But at the same time he had a genuine sympathy and respect for traditional believers and common people, and also an intense sense of the importance of keeping the Muslim community together. Accordingly, he refused to cast positive religion as mere parables or fairy tales for the masses designed to keep them in order while the elite pursued the highest truth. He insisted that the Prophet’s revelation, the law on which Muslim society was based, was meant for all members of this society: the revelation was the starting point for the exploration of higher spirituality, not a substitute for it. Conversely, all members of Muslim society were free to participate in the pursuit of the highest truth, that is to say as Sufis: spiritual gifts were randomly distributed, did not require expensive education, and did not have to be licensed by an imam. But however high the Sufis soared, they had to respect the confessional boundaries on the ground. In effect, al-Ghazālī was herding his coreligionists

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104 Al-Ghazālī, Fātihat al-‘ulūm (Damascus, n.d.), 139ff; id., Ḥiyā‘ ʿulūm al-dīn (Cairo, AH 1282), II, 110ff (K. al-kalāl wa-l-ḥarām, ch. 5); CRONE, Medieval Islamic Political Thought, 237 ff. 305. 348.


106 Cf. LANDOLT on his Mishkāt al-anwār (in the article in the preceding note).
back into the community and providing them with their lower and higher forms of religion alike within it.

From Scepticism to Sufism

It was as a person who had experienced the post-colonial malaise in person that al-Ghazālī found Sufism to be the remedy, and set about pairing it with conventional religion: he had suffered deeply from scepticism in his youth. Where Sufism came to the rescue was in its epistemology. Like so many others, al-Ghazālī had reasoned his way to the limits of reason: where was he to go from there? One option was to live with uncertainty: many clearly did. But this he found impossible. The only alternative was to postulate that some humans in the here and now possessed a faculty higher than reason through which such knowledge could be obtained. This he fully accepted. The question was what humans? According to the Ismā‘ilīs, the higher faculty was possessed by the Imām, in whose instruction (ta‘līm) the believer could find the escape from perplexity: it was ta‘līm, not messianism, that was the great attraction of Ismā‘ilism when it reappeared as a major challenge. But to al-Ghazālī, the only bearer of instruction so authoritative was the Prophet, who was dead and gone. What he accepted instead was that there were ordinary people in the present who had similar gifts in the form of dhawq, the lived, intuitive and entirely subjective experience of divine realities by direct vision (mushāhada) and “unveiling” (mukāshafa) that the Sufis cultivated.107 It was by seeking such subjective experience, or by recognizing that others had it, that one prevented reason from running wild in scepticism and kept it working instead for the belief system that one knew to be true.

Many were to the same way out. It was in Sufism that ʿUmar Khayyām tried to find certainty, inspired by al-Ghazālī,108 but apparently with considerable less success: he was deemed to have remained in perplexity on the basis of his quatrains.109 It was on “unveiling” and direct experience (al-kashf wa-l-dhawq) that Yaḥhāʾ al-Suhrawardī, a former Peripa-

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107) Cf. Ghazālī, Munqidh, 15 = 67 f, on the four groups in which the truth had to be found, each representing an epistemological route to the ultimate truth.

108) He reproduces Ghazālī’s four groups in his Risālat al-wujūd; see the translation in S. H. NASR, Islamic Cosmological Doctrines, second ed. (Albany, 1993), 20, and the preceding note.

thetic, based his philosophy of illumination. One had to start by observing the spiritual realities, he said, then build up the divine sciences: whoever did it differently would remain a prey to doubt.\footnote{\cite{Suhrawardi2} Al-Suhrawardi, \textit{Hikmat al-ishrāq}, ed. and tr. J. Walbridge and H. Ziai (Utah, 1999), XVII, 4.} Reason produced a thousand explanations but ultimately it just produced doubt, Aṭṭār agreed: knowledge of God was better reached through the heart and the soul.\footnote{\cite{Ritter} H. Ritter, \textit{Das Meer der Seele} (Leiden, 1978), 79f.} In short, as a two-level religion, Sufism was increasingly to supplant and absorb the systems developed by the philosophers and the Ismāʿīlis.