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.

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[1] C. H. Becker, "Die Araber als Koloniatoren", in his *Islamstudien*, II (Leipzig, 1932), esp. 2 f. For a more recent invocation of the similarity between the Arab and the European conquests, see A. Hannoum, *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 Back*[2] (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 Shīʿī 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-

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[3] The debate is said by al-Kirmānī (see the following note) to have taken place in Rayy in the presence of the *amīr* Mardāwīj. Since Mardāwīj only occupied Rayy in 318/930, this clashes with al-Bīrūnī'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. ʿAlī (d. 311/923 f.) rather than Mardāwīj, as suggested by S. M. STERN, "The Early Ismāʿīlī Missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurāsān and Transoxania", in his *Studies in Early Ismāʿīlism* (Jerusalem and Leiden, 1983), 202, cf. also 196, 198.

[4] Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Aʿlām al-nubuwwa*, ed. Ṣ. AL-ṢĀWĪ (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-Rasāʾil al-falsafiyya li-Abī 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, *Rasāʾil*), 84–107.

[5] The title of the book (cf. *Aʿlām*, 28.1) is not given. Kraus and Pines identify it as *Fī l-nubuwwāt*, also known as *Naqḍ al-adyān*; *EI¹*, s. v. "al-Rāzī"; cf. al-Bīrūnī, *Risāla fī fihrist kutub Muḥammad b. Zakariyyāʾ al-Rāzī*, ed. P. Kraus (Paris, 1936), no. 173. For another possibility, see below, n. 14.

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?[6] It was a well-known source of conflict and warfare, he said, stressing the role of religion as a provoker of bloodshed.[7] 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?[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] 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-khur āfāt*).[11] 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 ciriticism of the scriptures.[12] 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.[13] 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.[14] The so-called prophets were people

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[6]) Abū Ḥātim, *A'lām*, 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, *A'lām*, 3f (Goodman, 85f), 181ff, 186; Nāṣir-i Khusraw citing Rāz ī's *Theology* in Kraus, *Rasā'il*, 177; in Stroumsa, *Freethinkers*, 106.

[8]) *A'lām*, 181.

[9]) *Ibid.*, 3f (Goodman, 86), 181, 183; cf. also 274.2.

[10]) *A'lām*, 12f (Goodman, 91).

[11]) *A'lām*, 13.5 (Goodman, 92, on the *sharā'i'* of the prophets), 32.7 (on the doctrines of religious scholars).

[12]) *A'lām*, 69ff, 171.

[13]) *Ibid.*, 31f, 171.

[14]) *Ibid.*, 192. He wrote a book on this subject (*Fī ḥiyal al-mutanabiyyīn*, also known as *Makhāriq al-anbiyā'*, in Bīrūnī, *Fihrist*, 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,[15] 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.[16]

The Ismāʿīlī 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.[17] 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.[18] Prophets discipline people and keep them in order with their wondrous governance (siyāsa ʿajība).[19] 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.[20] 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, *Rasāʾil falsafiyya*, 177; Stroumsa, *Freethinkers*, 106.

[16]) Abū Ḥātim, *Aʿlām*, 31 f.

[17]) *Ibid.*, 89.

[18]) *Ibid.*, 89.17, 90.10. A century later another missionary (al-Muʾayyad) said much the same in response to Ibn al-Rāwandī'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, *Aʿlām*, 8 f (Goodman, 89 f).

[20]) Abū Ḥātim, *Aʿlām*, 6 f (Goodman, 88), 183 ff.

edge.[21] Like so many heirs to the ancient Near Eastern tradition, how-
ever, the Isma'ili Razi 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.[22] 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.[23] 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 Razis 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 Muhammad had es-
tablished 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 con-
tinued when the Arabs proceeded to conquer the world outside Arabia.
Tenth-century Muslims generally assumed their own case to be paradig-
matic: 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 (*madani*) animals who depended
on one another for their many needs, meaning that they had to live to-
gether, but that they were also anti-social animals given to ruthless com-
petition and fighting, meaning that they would perish if they were left

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[21] Abū Bakr al-Razi 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 Hātim's presentation does not allow for subtle distinctions, however.

[22] For the Isma'ili Razi's vehement denial that the philosophers have devel-
oped the sciences on their own, see *A'lām*, 273 ff.

[23] Cf. Goodman, "Philosophy in the *Majlis*", 103.

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 Shīʿīs, 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 obedi-
ence 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 gov-
ernment 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 Rāzīs 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 Rāzī, 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 commu-
nity, 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

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[24]) Cf. P. Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh, 2004; Ameri-
can title *God's Rule: Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic
Political Thought*), ch. 17.

[25]) *Ibid.*, 265f, 285, 393.

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 Ismāʿīlī 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 Ismāʿīlīs 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: *sharʿ*), 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-bāṭin*) 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 *ẓāhir* 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]

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[26]) Abū Ḥātim, *Aʿlām*, e.g. 108.15.

[27]) *Ibid.*, 114.11; similarly 104.7, 113.12, 115.3.

[28]) Modern Ismāʿīlīs 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 *ẓāhir*, 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 fīhi najātuhum min al-maʿānī allatī taḥta sharāʾiʿihim al-ẓāhira*) (*Aʿlām*, 111 f; similarly 110.13). Compare also the account of the Ismāʿīlīs in al-Nawbakhtī and Qummī, composed in the 280s/890s, in which the Ismāʿīlīs claim

There was a further twist to Ismāʿīlī doctrine. The Ismāʿīlīs 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 socio-political 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* Rāzīs 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 Rāzī 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 Rāzī 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 Rāzīs were not alone. Doubts about the existence of prophethood (and other aspects of revealed religion) are common in the tenth-century literature, and Ismāʿīlism 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.

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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 Ismāʿīlīs in *Firaq al-Shīʿa*", in Stern, *Studies*, 52).

[29] For a concise account of Ismāʿīlī doctrine, see for example H. Halm, *Die Schia* (Darmstadt, 1987; tr. J. Watson, *Shīʿism*, 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,[30] 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.

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[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,[31] 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 "Muʿāwiya placed his throne in Damascus and refused to go to the seat of Muḥammad", as a Christian observer put it.[32] It was a fateful step – somewhat as if the capital of the British empire had been moved from London to Cairo.[33]

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.[34] 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;[35] and

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[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).

[32]) Maronite chronicler in R. G. HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it* (Princeton, 1997), 136.

[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 Muʿāwia's accession marked the end of the rightly guided caliphate.

[34]) For these expectations, see the references in P. CRONE, "The ʿAbbāsid Abnāʾ and Sāsānid Cavalrymen", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* Third Series, 8 (1998), 12, n. 101.

[35]) The closest to a prosopography is D. SOURDEL, *Le Vizirat ʿabbāside* (Damascus, 1959–60).

the revolutionaries themselves were a mixed bunch of Arabs and Iranians,[36] 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.[37] 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.[38] 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

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[36]) S. S. AGHA, *The Revolution which Toppled the Umayyads: Neither Arab nor ʿAbbāsid* (Leiden, 2003), part iii; cf. also CRONE, "Abbāsid Abnāʾ", 11 f.

[37]) On which, see H. KENNEDY, "The Decline and Fall of the First Muslim Empire", *Der Islam* 81 (2004) (the first Becker lecture).

[38]) Unlike Jesus, who lost his Jewish identity when he was adopted by the gentiles, Muḥammad remained an Arab, just as the Qurʾān 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 conauered lands, the Arabs in their garrison cities, or the British in Rhodesia.[39] 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 173 f).

But the modern terminology has the advantage of being known to every-
one 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 var-
iety 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 perma-
nently 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 com-
parison of the Arab past and our own present is offered here.

Shuʿūbiyya

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 Shuʿūbī movement before the break-up of the em-
pire and what we may call the tenth-century crisis after it.

The Shuʿūbī 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

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[40]) In general, see I. GOLDZIHER, *Muhammedanische Studien*, I (Halle, 1889),
chs. 3–5; S. ENDERWITZ, *Gesellschaftlicher Rang und ethnische Legitimation* (Frei-
burg, 1979).

ways in which the Arabs had maltreated converts to their faith.[41] 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).[42] 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.[43]

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 Shuʿūbism 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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[41]) See for example Rāghib al-Iṣbahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā'* (Beirut, 1961), I, 347; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, ed. A. AMĪN, A. AL-ZAYN and I. AL-ABYĀRĪ (Cairo, 1950–53), III, 413f = B. LEWIS (tr.), *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople* (Oxford, 1987), II, 204f.

[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.

[43]) Cf. P. Crone, *"Mawālī* and the Prophet's Family: a Shīʿite View", in M. Bernards and J. Nawas (eds), *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam* (Leiden, 2005), 184–85, where I first made this point.

to paradise in chains, as a famous saying had it.[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.[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 Shuʿūbī 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 Shuʿūbīs intimated, the Arabs had shown themselves to be bad Muslims by their ter-

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[44] Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. L. Krehl (Leiden, 1862–1908), II, 250; al-Haythamī, *Majmaʿ al-zawāʾid*, third printing (Beirut, 1982), V, 333; cited in Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *ʿIqd*, III, 412; tr. Lewis, II, 203.

[45] Cf. Crone, "ʿAbbāsid Abnāʾ and Sāsānid Cavalrymen", 14f.

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.[46] 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 Shuʿūbīs 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 Shuʿūbīs 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 Shuʿūbīs 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.[47] 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.[48] 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 Qurʾān, 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 Shuʿūbī controversy, though it is unclear how far the poets pioneering "modern" (*muḥdath*) poetry were Shuʿūbīs themselves.[49] People were

[46] Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *ʿIqd*, III, 404 ff; partial tr. LEWIS, *Islam*, II, 201 ff.

[47] S. M. STERN, "Yaʿqūb the Coppersmith and Persian National Sentiment", in C. E. BOSWORTH (ed.), *Iran and Islam* (Edinburgh, 1971).

[48] Thus H. A. R. GIBB, "The Social Significance of the Shuubiya", in his *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, ed. S. J. SHAW and W. R. POLK (Princeton, 1962).

[49] For the question whether Abū Nuwās was actually a Shuʿūbī, 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 Shuʿūbīs 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 Sharīʿa", 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 polity 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]

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[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 Shuʿūbīs (Ḍirār b. ʿAmr, 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.

[51]) F. RAHMAN, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (London, 1958), 63.

[52]) See above, n. 3.

[53]) A. A. VASILIEV, *History of the Byzantine Empire* (Madison and Milwaukee, 1964), I, 306–11; G. VON GRUNEBAUM, "Eine poetische Polemik zwischen Byzans

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 Rāzīs 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 *dhimmīs*, 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, *dhimmīs* 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 protegé 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'arrī 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

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und Bagdad im X. Jahrhundert", in *Analecta Orientalia* 14 (*Studia Arabica* I, Rome 1937).

[54]) Cf. 'Aḍud al-Dawla's message to the caliph in 370/980 in H. BUSSE, "The Revival of Persian Kingship under the Būyids", in D. S. RICHARDS (ed.), *Islamic Civilisation 950–1150* (Oxford, 1973), 62.

[55]) R. A. NICHOLSON (ed. and tr.), "The Meditations of al-Ma'arrī", in his *Studies in Islamic Poetry* (Cambridge, 1921), 237 = 100f (no. 106). Compare the poem put into the mouth of the Byzantine emperor: "You have accepted the Daylamite as caliph and become slaves of the Daylamite slaves. Return in ignominy to the land of the Ḥijāz and leave the land of the Byzantines, noble men" (VON GRUNEBAUM, "Poetische Polemik", verses 38f).

to the conquered peoples had involved extreme political fragmentation:
there no longer was a unitary Muslim state to counter the Byzantine em-
pire, and the political control of the new rulers was limited. Al-Mas'ūdī
shuddered at the thought of invasions by Turks, Allans, Khazars and
others "with the weakness and evanescence of Islam at this time, the vic-
tory 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 lo-
cality they inhabit after the fashion of the 'party kings' after the death of
Alexander up to the reign of Ardashīr".[56] 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 tradi-
tions 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 re-
surfacing 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 re-
ligion 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;[57] and Ismā'īlism was commonly identified
as a conspiracy by the conquered peoples to subvert Islam from within by

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[56]) al-Mas'ūdī, *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 Qur'ān (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-
rusul wa'l-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 abnā' al-sabāyā*
led them astray. See Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. M. A. al-Nadwī (Bombay,
1979–83), XII, no. 12516; Sayf b. 'Umar al-Tamīmī, *Kitāb al-ridda wa-l-futūḥ*, ed.
Q. AL-SAMARRAI (Leiden, 1995), 18, no. 21. Abū Ḥanīfa and others said the same
of the Muslims; Abū Zur'a, *Ta'īkh*, ed. Sh. AL-QAWJĀNĪ (Damascus, 1980), no.
1339.

means of a fatal mixture of Zoroastrian, Manichaean and Greek philo-
sophical ideas.[58] 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 ʿAbd al-Jabbār there were enemies of
Islam everywhere, but above all in the Muslim community itself: trans-
lators of Greek, Persian and Indian books into Arabic, physicians, philos-
ophers, crypto-Manichaeans, Ismāʿīlīs and other Shīʿīs, all came across to
him as so many auto-immune diseases.[59]

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 rela-
tivized 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 defeating its bearers with their own arms, and
imitating them in other ways, too, because the ways of the powerful are at-
tractive. (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 ques-
tion 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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[58] Thus, among many others, Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist*, ed. R. TAJAD-
DUD (Tehran, 1971), 239f; tr. B. Dodge (New York, 1970), I, 469; al-Ghazālī,
Faḍāʾiḥ al-bāṭiniyya (Amman 1993), 24 (ch. 3, ii).

[59] ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Tathbīt dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*, ed. ʿA.-K. ʿUTHMĀN (Beirut,
1966), 70ff (translators), 51, 128f (Abū ʿĪsā, Ibn al-Rawandī and other *mulḥids*
and *zindīqs*), 129f (Baḥrayn affair), 623ff (Rāzī), 626ff (physicians), 631 (Kindī),
etc.

municated 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 (*takāfuʾ al-adilla*) is well-attested.[60] 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.[61] 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.[62] By then, the charge was also being made by Muslims. There were Shiʿis, for example, who used it to discredit the Companions, claiming that they had only followed Muḥammad for the sake of plunder and power, not because they knew him to be a true

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[60]) J. VAN ESS, "Skepticism in Islamic Religious Thought", *al-Abḥāth* 21 (1968), 7.

[61]) VAN ESS, "Skepticism", 1f; P. CRONE, "al-Fārābī's Imperfect Constitutions", Mélanges de l'Université de Saint Joseph 57 (2004), notes 79–87.

[62]) CRONE, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 375f.

prophet (which ʿAbd al-Jabbār took to mean that the Shīʿīs in question denied Muḥammad's prophethood as well);[63] and the issue also came up between the two Rāzīs, for it was above all with warfare that the philosopher associated prophets, requiring the Ismāʿīlī Rāzī to explain why the fact that Muḥammad used the sword did not invalidate his message.[64] 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 Shuʿūbīs had fought for within Islam now had to embrace all human beings. It was a disturbing development to the religious scholars, whether *mutakallim*s or traditionalists, Sunnīs or Imāmīs, 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 Ismāʿīlīs 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

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[63]) ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Tathbīt*, 35.
[64]) Abū Ḥātim, *Aʿlām*, 3 f, 181 ff, 186 ff.

defer to religious scholars, whom they frequently rivalled in terms of
wealth and influence as well. They rose to prominence after the revolu-
tion in 132/750, when they benefitted from the ʿAbbāsid 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 bevies of such men. In the ninth century the professionals tended
to be rationalizing theologians (*mutakallim*s) rather than traditionalists,
and it was also from their ranks that the Shuʿūbīs were recruited; but
in the tenth century they tended to be philosophers. As philosophers,
they were rivals of the *mutakallim*s (and had no time for traditionalists
at all), so there is sometimes an element of anti-clericalism in their think-
ing, most obviously in that of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī. This gives them a simi-
larity 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 differ-
ent ethnic and religious communities, and anti-clericalism is less pro-
nounced 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.

Ismāʿīlīs 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 pub-
lic 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.[65] The Ismāʿīlīs 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 Fāṭimid North Africa and Egypt.
But their leaders (known as missionaries, though they soon became the

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[65] Cf. A. MEZ, *Die Renaissance des Islams* (Heidelberg, 1922), ch. 24 (still use-
ful); A. L. UDOVITCH, "International Commerce and Rural Society in Egypt of the
11th Century", in A. K. Bowman and E. Rogan (eds.), *Agriculture in Egypt from
Pharaonic to Modern Times* (London, 1999).

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.[66]

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 (*ḥayra*, also translated "perplexity") about the truth of any one religion. Asked why he followed his particular religion, one such sceptic 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 caravanserai, 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.[67]

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.[68] 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, *A'lām*, 160, 171 ff). The once common view that the Ismāʿīlīs 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 Ismāʿīlism. (See STERN, *Studies*, ch. 4; cf. CRONE, "Farabi's Imperfect Constitutions", note 69, on grades of initiation; below, notes 93–94, on the prophets as impostors.

[67]) al-Tawḥīdī, *K. al-Imtā'wa-l-mu'ānasa*, ed. A. AMĪN and A. AL-ZAYN (Cairo, 1939–44), III, 193 f.; cited in VAN ESS, "Skepticism", 6 f.

[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 orig-
inated: remove them and you had what the European Enlightenment
thinkers called natural religion; that is, a religion in which the relation-
ship between God and the individual was based directly on human nature,
without the intermediary of institutions posited by prophets and main-
tained 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 *mutakallim*s the first to attack communal religion were
Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq (d. 247/861 or later) and Ibn al-Rāwandī (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-Rāwandī apparently added that
prophets were magicians and tricksters.[69] We also hear of a tenth-cen-
tury *mutakallim*, Abū Isḥāq al-Naṣībī (fl. around 370/980), who had his
doubts about prophetic missions.[70] But by his time the initiative had
passed to the philosophers. Thus al-Sarakhsī (d. 286/899) is credited with
a book dismissing the prophets as tricksters;[71] the tenth-century philos-
opher Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Īrānshahrī is said not to have believed in any exist-
ing religion, only in one which he had devised for himself.[72] Abū Bakr
al-Rāzī allegedly plagiarized his scientific ideas.[73] After al-Rāzī we find

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[69] STROUMSA, *Freethinkers*, ch. 2.

[70] Tawḥīdī, *Imtāʿ*, I, 141 (*yashukku fī l-nubuwwāt kullihā*); cf. id., *Akhlāq al-*
wazīrayn, ed. M. AL-ṬANJĪ (Beirut, 1991), 202, 211 f, 297.

[71] Bīrūnī in F. ROSENTHAL, *Aḥmad b. aṭ-Ṭayyib al-Saraḥsī* (New Haven,
1943), 51.

[72] Al-Bīrūnī, *Taḥqīq mā li-l-Hind*, ed. E. SACHAU (London, 1887), 4. Accord-
ing to Abū l-Maʿālī, *Bayān al-adyān*, ed. H. RIḌĀ (Tehran, 1342), 67, Īrānshahrī
claimed to be a prophet sent to the ʿajam 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 by Bīrūnī in a var-
iety of works rule out this interpretation, cf. S. PINES, *Studies in Islamic Atomism*
(Jerusalem, 1997), 41 f, 48, 54, 65–7.

[73] Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Zād al-musāfirīn*, in KRAUS, *Rasāʾil*, 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 pre-
sumably among them.[74] But there were others of the same kind. Accord-
ing 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 some-
times they would reject the prophetic books on the grounds that reason
made revelation unnecessary.[75] According to al-ʿĀmirī (d. 381/996) there
were "pretentious people" (mutaẓarrifa), probably in Iran, who dis-
missed all religions as conventional institutions designed to facilitate so-
cial 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-Iṣfahānī
(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 Sīnā (d. 428/1037) had trouble believing in prophet-
hood, causing Ibn Sīnā 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 claim-
ing); "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-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) and al-Ghazālī
(d. 505/1111) wrote against the belief that reason made revelation un-
necessary, 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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[74] Al-Fārābī, K. ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila, ed. and tr. R. Walzer (Oxford,
1985), 17, § 6; cf. CRONE, "Al-Fārābī's Imperfect Constitutions".

[75] Rasāʾil lkhwān al-Ṣafā (Beirut, 1957), IV, 10, 100.

[76] al-ʿĀmirī, K. al-iʿlām fī manāqib al-Islām, ed. A. ʿA.-Ḥ. GHURĀB (Cairo,
1967), 101.

[77] Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, al-Iʿtiqādāt, ed. Sh. AL-ʿIJLĪ (Beirut, 1988), 109f.

[78] Ibn Sīnā, "Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt" in his Tisʿa rasāʾil, ed. H. ʿĀṣī [Beirut],
1986), 95.

[79] NICHOLSON, "Meditations of al-Maʿarrī", no. 239, with discussion at
pp. 164ff.

according to some, to benefit it according to others;[80] and al-Ghazālī
reported that loss of faith in prophethood was widespread.[81] The real or
pseudonymous ʿUmar Khayyām (d. c. 517/1123) provides us with yet an-
other 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.[82] This takes us into the twelfth century, but thereafter the at-
testations peter out.

The Remedies

What kind of truth *did* reason supply? To al-Maʿarrī 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-
ʿĀmirī'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*.[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 Ismāʿīlīs.
The upper level was occupied by Aristotelian and/or Neoplatonist philos-
ophy, which gave you eternal verities for all mankind; the lower level was
occupied by positive religion, which gave you approximations of the high-
est 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 Ismāʿīlīs,
however, the philosophers had no intention of ever abolishing the lower

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[80]) al-Māwardī, *Aʿlām al-nubuwwa*, ed. M. M. AL-BAGHDĀDĪ (Beirut, 1987),
50f; al-Ghazālī *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, ed. and tr. M. E. MARMURA (Utah, 1997),
muqad. 4; id., *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, ed. S. DUNYĀ (Cairo, 1961), 184; tr. S. A. JACKSON
(Oxford, 2002), 101; tr. F. GRIFFEL (Zürich, 1998, 67).

[81]) al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, ed. and tr. F. JABRE (Beirut 1959),
46 = 110.

[82]) A. DASHTI, *In Search of Omar Khayyam* (London, 1971), 117.

[83]) Above, nn. 77f, 79.

level. They mostly accepted it in its Sunnī 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 Ismāʿīlīs 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 Muḥammad'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 ʿAbdallāh al-ʿĀdī or ʿAbdī 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-ʿarab*).[84] An Ibāḍī by the name of Yazīd 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 Qurʾān, 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 Shīʿī 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 Ismāʿīlīs 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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[84] al-Bīrūnī, *al-Āthār al-bāqiya ʿan al-qurūn al-khāliya*, ed. C. E. SACHAU (Leipzig, 1923), 213 = *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, tr. C. E. SACHAU (London, 1879), 196f. His *nisba* is given as al-ʿAdī.

[85] J. VAN ESS, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* (Berlin 1991–97), II, 614–18, summarizing id., "Yazīd b. Unaisa und ʿĪsā al-Iṣfahānīø, in *Studi in onore di Frencesco Gabrieli* (Rome, 1984), places him in the first/seventh century. Unfortunately, there is no real evidence either way.

[86] Ibn Abī Zaynab al-Nuʿmānī, *al-Ghayba* (Beirut, 1983), 154f.; cf. S. A. ARJOMAND, "Islamic Apocalypticism in the Classic Period", in *The Encyclopaedia of Apocalypticism*, ed. B. McGINN, II (New York, 1999), 264.

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

At first sight, this anti-Arab streak is surprising, especially in Shī'ism,
for neither Imāmism nor Ismā'īlism was a movement to restore the Per-
sian empire or rehabilitate the Iranians at the cost of the Arabs. On the
contrary, Ismā'īlism was a movement to overcome all such earthly divi-
sions 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 ex-
ternalist to allow for the religious unification of mankind. Complete uni-
versalism could only be achieved at the cost of both. Ismā'īlī (or more pre-
cisely Qarmaṭī) missionaries in Baḥrayn expressed this by preaching that
it was the Arabs who had killed Ḥusayn.[89] What they were articulating
was the Shī'ī 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 Shī'ī). Most Ismā'īlīs in Baḥrayn were eth-
nic 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 Mahdī: all those who adopted the right
belief were *ipso facto* gentiles. In both, ethnicity rested on a combination
of descent and belief.[90] By refusing to be Jews, the Christians broke with

[87] al-Mas'ūdī, *K. al-tanbīh wa-l-ishrāf*, ed. M. J. DE GOEJE (Leiden, 1894),
391 f; id., *Murūj*, v, § 3600; Bīrūnī, *Āthār*, 132 = 129; W. MADELUNG, "The Assump-
tion of the Title Shāhānshāh by the Būyids and 'the Reign of the Daylam' (*Dawlat
al-Daylam*)", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 28 (1969), 87n.

[88] Bīrūnī, *Āthār*, 213 = 196f. For an account of the entire episode, see
H. HALM, *Das Reich des Mahdi* (Munich 1991), 222–36; tr. M. Bonner (Leiden,
1996), 247–64.

[89] GOLDZIHER, *Muhammedanische Studien*, I, 175. Compare *Akhbār al-dawla
al-'abbāsiyya wa-fi akhbār al-'abbās*, ed. 'A. 'A. AL-DŪRĪ and 'A.-J. AL-MUṬṬALIBĪ
(Beirut, 1971), 198.8.

[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 an-
cestry 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.[91] 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.[92] *Das war also des Pudels Kern*, his enemies responded. But the thesis of the three impostors (which the Sunnīs also credit to the Ismāʿīlīs

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Revolt and the ʿAbbāsid Revolution", in I. R. NETTON (ed.), *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth*, I (Leiden 2000), 179 f; cf. also ead., "*Mawālī* and the Prophet's Family", 184 ff.

[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).

[92]) Ibn Rizām citing Abū Ṭāhir's physician, cf. HALM, *Reich*, 231 f; tr. Bonner, 258 ff; Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyasatnāme*,[2] ed. H. DARKE (Tehran, 1985), 309; tr. H. DARKE (London, 1960), 236 (ch. 46, § 36), probably reflecting the same source.

in other contexts)[93] actually reflects the sentiments of Ibn al-Rāwandī, al-Sarakhsī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and other radical philosophers better than those of the Ismāʿīlīs, who must have borrowed it from such philosophers, wittingly or unwittingly,[94] 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 Ismāʿīlīs 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.)[95]

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 adherents. The transition to the new post-prophetic order had failed. The coming of a new religion continued to be predicted,[96] and the Bahrayn Ismāʿīlīs did eventually succeed in abolishing the law in circumstances unknown, but by then they were too peripheral to count. Meanwhile, another branch of Ismāʿīlīs 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

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[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 origines islamiques", in his *Opera Minora*, ed. Y. MOUBARAC (Beirut, 1963), I, 83 f. See also Maḥmūd of Ghazna to the caliph in 420/1029 in Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, VIII (Hyderabad, AH 1359), 39, where the Ismāʿīlīs are said to regard all religions as made up by sages; Ghazālī, *Bāṭiniyya*, 24 (ch. 3, ii), where godless philosophers, dualists and sceptics concoct such beliefs for Shīʿī consumption. Both Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī and Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī wrote books affirming their belief in prophethood in no uncertain terms, but to no avail.

[94] Cf. *EI¹*, 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 Lisbon in the 1340s; M. ESPOSITO, "Les hérésies de Thomas Scotus", *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 33 (1937), 59, 65, 69. See further F. NIEWÖHNER, *Veritas vise Varietas* (Heidelberg, 1988); S. BERTI, F. CHARLES-DAUBERT and R. H. POPKIN (eds.), *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (Dordrecht, 1996).

[96] Nicholson, "Meditations of Maʿarrī", no 263:4 (*wa-qīla yajīʾu dīnun ghayru hādha*).

Africa in 297/909 and moving on from there to Egypt in 358/969; and having acquired real power, the Fāṭimids unsurprisingly did their best to suppress messianic expectations. The prophets were not cursed, but on the contrary venerated as indispensble for salvation in North Africa and Cairo. Individual Ismāʿīlīs 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. Ismāʿīlism 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 Shuʿūbism. Exactly how all this happened remains unknown. The question has traditionally been discussed under the name of "the Sunnī 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 hand[98] and with conscious policies rather than the inadvertent effects of a barbarian in-

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[97] Cf. CRONE, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 205–208, 325 f.

[98] Cf. G. MAKDISI, *Ibn ʿAqīl et la résurgence de l'Islam traditionaliste au XIᵉ siècle* (Damascus, 1963); id., "The Sunnī Revival", in D. S. RICHARDS (ed.), *Islamic Civilisation 950–1150* (Oxford, 1973).

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 Ismāʿīlism 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 Ismāʿīlism; 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

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[99]) Cf. for example G. Leiser's introduction to his edition and translation of I. Kafesoglu, *A History of the Seljuqs* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1988), 4.

[100]) F. SOBIEROJ, "The Muʿtazila and Sufism", in F. de Jong and B. Radtke (eds.), *Islamic Mysticism Contested* (Leiden, 1999); P. CRONE and S. MOREH, *The Book of Strangers* (Princeton, 2000), 175 f.; CRONE, "Fārābī's Imperfect Constitutions", notes 61–68.

[101]) AL-TANŪKHĪ, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara*, ed. ʿA. Shāljī (Beirut, 1971–72), I, 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 accomodate 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 *Iḥyā'*, 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

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

[103]) O. PRETZL, "Die Streitschrift des Ġazālī gegen die Ibāḥija", *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Phil.-hist. Abt., 1933; cf. also Krawulsky, *Briefe*, 210ff.

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 commu-
nity, 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.[104] 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/elev-
enth. Like his predecessors, he had a strong sense of the difference be-
tween the conventional religion and the natural (God-given) capacity of
the human mind to know the ultimate truth,[105] and he seems to have
been more of a Neoplatonist philosopher in private than one would guess
from his pastoral works.[106] But at the same time he had a genuine sym-
pathy and respect for traditional believers and common people, and also
an intense sense of the importance of keeping the Muslim community to-
gether. 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 so-
ciety 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 ex-
pensive education, and did not have to be licensed by an imam. But how-
ever high the Sufis soared, they had to respect the confessional bound-
aries on the ground. In effect, al-Ghazālī was herding his coreligionists

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[104] Al-Ghazālī, *Fātiḥat al-ʿulūm* (Damascus, n. d.), 139ff; id., *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-
dīn* (Cairo, AH 1282), II, 110ff (*K. al-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām*, ch. 5); CRONE, *Medieval
Islamic Political Thought*, 237ff, 305, 348.

[105] H. LANDOLT, "Ghazālī and *'Religionswissenschaft'*", *Asiatische Studien*
45 (1991), 19.

[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 Ismāʿīlīs, the higher faculty was possessed by the Imām, in whose instruction (taʿlīm) the believer could find the escape from perplexity: it was taʿlīm, not messianism, that was the great attraction of Ismāʿīlism 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 Yaḥhā al-Suhrawardī, a former Peripa-

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[107]) Cf. Ghazālī, Munqidh, 15 = 67 f, on the four groupes 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.

[109]) Najm al-Dīn Rāzī Dāya, The Path of God's Bondsmen, tr. H. ALGAR (New York, 1982), 54 and n. 10.

tetic, 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.[110] Reason produced a thousand explanations but ultimately it just produced doubt, ʿAṭṭār agreed: knowledge of God was better reached through the heart and the soul.[111] In short, as a two-level religion, Sufism was increasingly to supplant and absorb the systems developed by the philosophers and the Ismāʿīlīs.

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[110]) Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, ed. and tr. J. WALBRIDGE and H. ZIAI (Utah, 1999), XVII, 4.

[111]) H. RITTER, *Das Meer der Seele* (Leiden, 1978), 79f.