



# Islamic Thought Beyond Denominational Borders

## *Challenges and Perspectives for a Comprehensive Approach*

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The disciplines of Arabic and Islamic Studies have undergone a major paradigm shift over the past two decades. For most of the twentieth century, the majority of scholars in these fields focused primarily on the limited materials available in print, taking manuscript materials into consideration only by way of exception. During the latter part of the twentieth century, methodological considerations were often at the forefront of the discussion, in an attempt to relate to and catch up with the theoretical discussions in other disciplines such as history, sociology, or anthropology.

Today, there is a growing awareness among scholars of Near Eastern Studies of the vast and mostly still unexplored manuscript collections in countless public and private libraries in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Eastern and Western Europe, and North America, and, therefore, of the many glaring lacunae in research. We can say without any exaggeration that the number of so far untapped textual sources can be estimated at several hundred thousand works and fragments of works.

Other than was still the case some twenty or thirty years ago, philology, which can be broadly defined as the study of literary texts, the establishment of their original form, and the analysis of their meaning in their respective intellectual contexts, is again on the rise, with a growing number of specialists engaging in producing critical text editions and covering entirely new ground on the basis of so far neglected manuscript treasures.

There are many causes that prompted this shift. A major factor was no doubt the growing importance of religion evoking an increasing awareness for religio-cultural heritage in defining one's own identity. The Islamic Revolution of 1979/80, for example, resulted in a growing interest among the scholars of Iran in their own religious heritage, including its vast collections of Arabic and Persian manuscripts. Over the past thirty years, hundreds of catalogues have been produced covering by now all major Iranian collections. The Shii Zaydis of Yemen also undertook enormous efforts to save their own religious heritage through catalogues and editions. A similar obser-

vation can be made for Turkish scholarship, whose representatives increasingly value, rediscover, and study their own Islamic heritage—this after nearly a century of almost complete neglect of the Ottoman past. The rise of Salafi Islam had a similar effect, generating an ever-growing appreciation of the Islamic religious heritage, including manuscripts (of the right sort only, of course).

Another important factor to completely change the fields of Arabic and Islamic Studies is the digital revolution and the new technological possibilities it offers to preserve, disseminate, and explore manuscript sources. The unprecedented accessibility of completely new primary materials in nearly unlimited quantities now allows scholars to enter unexplored fields of research—and in many cases to define such fields from scratch. In all disciplines of learning, scholars are acutely aware that what we possess now represents only a fraction of the Islamic literature that has been preserved. Against the background of this new awareness of what remains to be done and the increased availability of primary materials, a growing number of scholars of Islam are nowadays returning to basic research and solid philological work in its widest sense. As a result of these developments, we are witnessing a period of extraordinary and constant discoveries and breakthroughs in all disciplines of Near Eastern Studies.

The paradigm shift I just described, therefore, started primarily within the Islamic world and was partly prompted by the political developments in the region and the ensuing rise of religious consciousness over the previous decades. However, the resulting scholarly awareness often stops short at religious borders, disregarding non-Islamic sources and even non-orthodox Islamic sources: scholarly engagement embedded in a predefined cultural-religious context rarely comes without narrowly defined ideological objectives and constraints. The fact that the disciplinary borders in Western, especially European, academia between Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, and the study of Eastern Christianity are traditionally rigorous is an additional obstacle. Scholars still normally opt for a one-dimensional approach with an (often exclusive) focus on either



Kitāb al-Tabṣira fī 'ilm al-ḥisāb, a mathematical treatise of al-Muẓaffar b. Yahyā al-Maghribī, copied in Yemen in 1673. MS Berlin, State Library, Glaser 40 © Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin PK, Fotostelle (with kind permission)

Muslim, Jewish, or Christian authors, even when, as we shall see, they all shared the same language. As a result, it has long been ignored (and often still is) that a comprehensive picture of the intellectual history of the Islamic world can only be gained when denominational borders are systematically disregarded.

The sacred scripture of Islam, the Qur'ān, defines itself as the ultimate, perfect link in a chain of progressive divine revelations and is thus well aware of its generic link with the two earlier monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity. Not only did Muslims in the early period adopt and adapt Jewish and Christian notions as they had developed during late antiquity, Christians and Jews also played an active part throughout the following centuries in the evolution and development of Muslim thought.

The linguistic situation of the Near and Middle East since the rise of Islam greatly facilitated intellectual interactions beyond denominational borders. Moritz Steinschneider (1816–1907), one of the founding fathers of the modern scholarly study of Judaism and the Jews, has rightly remarked that the Arabic language by and large replaced Hebrew as the language of the Jews of the Near and Middle East during most of the Islamic age—an observation that holds also true for the majority of Christian communities living under Muslim rule.

Indeed, from the eighth century onwards, socially-mobile Christians and Jews began to use Arabic not only for oral communication but also as their written language for religious, literary, and scientific purposes. They increasingly composed and consumed works in Arabic in virtually all disciplines of learning, besides their continued use of culturally distinctive literary and liturgical writings in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and Coptic. Moreover, Muslims, Jews, and Christians often read the same books, so that a continuous exchange of ideas, texts, and forms of discourse was the norm rather than the exception. The ensuing process of knowledge formation was variegated and multidimensional—Christian and Jewish writers influenced Islamic thought no less than Muslim authors left their imprint on Jews and Christians.

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To demonstrate that this intellectual whirlpool effect touched Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike, I shall now discuss three cases. It would be incorrect to say that since they were the dominant community, it was exclusively the Muslims who were at the giving end while the Christian and Jewish minorities were only ever at the receiving end. The cases I have chosen rather represent entirely different patterns of reception and adaptation.

The *first case* concerns the rational theology of the so-called Mu'tazila, a school of thought that originated in the eighth century and developed into the leading current of Islamic rational theology during the tenth through twelfth centuries, after which its influence gradually declined. Characteristic traits of Mu'tazilite thought were their belief in objective ethical values that are bind-

ing for God and man alike, and, closely related to this, in the human responsibility and freedom of choice, as well as their insistence on the unicity of the Divine.

As is the case with many aspects of Islamic religio-intellectual history, discursive theology in general and Mu'tazilite dialectical reasoning in particular were closely related in their evolution and development to parallel phenomena among the followers of other religions that were present in the Muslim world. The earliest preserved manifestations of discursive theology, *kalām* in Arabic, in Muslim circles can be traced back to the early eighth century. Characteristic features of Muslim dialectic argumentation were already

present in seventh-century Syriac Christological disputations.

The methodological tools of discursive theology had also begun to leave their mark on Jewish thinkers writing in Arabic since the ninth century, and it seems that it was again the Christian *kalām* tradition that proved influential for the formation of Jewish medieval theology. The earliest extant Jewish *kalām* work is the *Twenty Chapters* of Dāwūd b. Marwān al-Muqammaṣ, a student of the Syrian-Orthodox theologian Nonnus of Nisibis, who apparently flourished during the first half of the ninth century—so

far the earliest theological summa in Arabic that we possess. The *Kitāb al-Amānāt wal-i'tiqādāt*—that is, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*—of the tenth-century Rabbanite Jewish scholar Sa'adya Gaon (882–942) seems likewise to have been inspired by Christian theological literature as well as Islamic models.

The new tradition of Jewish rational thought that arose during the ninth century was in its initial stage thus primarily informed by Christian theological literature, with regard both to content as well as to methodology. Increasingly, specifically Mu'tazilite Islamic ideas resonated among Jewish thinkers, many of whom eventually adopted the entire doctrinal system of the Mu'tazila. The now emerging "Jewish Mu'tazila" dominated Jewish theological thinking for centuries to come.

The earliest attested Jewish compendium of Mu'tazilite thought is *The Book of Blessing* of the Karaite Levi ben Yefet, the son of the prominent Karaite Bible exegete and legal scholar Yefet ben Eli ha-Levi (d. after 1006). Levi wrote the book at the request of his father as a vindication of Judaism on the basis of Mu'tazilite rational theology, but unlike his father, who disapproved of Islamic Mu'tazilite theology, Levi adopted the doctrines of the Mu'tazila and implicitly recognized Muḥammad as a friend of God endowed with prophethood, though ranking below Moses.

Levi ben Yefet's theological tract was soon eclipsed by the writings of the Rabbanite Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon (d. 1013) and his Karaite opponent and younger contemporary Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf al-Baṣīr (d. between 1037 and 1039), whose *kalām* works gained an almost canonical status among the Karaites. Literary evidence suggests that Mu'tazilite ideas constituted the central doctrinal foundation of the Rabbanite community until the middle of the twelfth century. For the Karaites, Mu'tazilism continued to



Nukat al-Mughnī, an anonymous (Karaite) recension of the theological summa *Kitāb al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wal-i'ādā* by the Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (d. 1025), MS St. Petersburg, National Library of Russia, RNL Arab.-Yevr. 381, ff. 47b–48a © National Library of Russia (with kind permission)



provide a significant doctrinal framework at least through the seventeenth century, an observation that also applies to the Byzantine Karaite milieu, where many of the works originally composed in Arabic were transmitted in a Hebrew translation.

From an Islamicist's perspective, this development is extremely fortunate, for Jewish thinkers not only composed their own works in the spirit of the Mu'tazila, they also extensively copied the works of Muslim representatives of the school, more often than not transcribing the Arabic into Hebrew characters. Countless examples of such copies are preserved today in the numerous Genizah collections around the world. Most of the Islamic materials that are preserved here have been completely lost in the manuscript libraries of Islamic provenance as the literary heritage of the Mu'tazila had (with few exceptions) ceased to be transmitted within Muslim circles from the fourteenth century onwards.

By way of illustration, I shall briefly present a theological summa by the vizier and patron of the Mu'tazila al-Ṣāḥib b. ʿAbbad (938–995), who served the Buyid dynasty that ruled the central lands of Islam from the mid-tenth to the mid-eleventh century and who was himself an adherent of the movement. A remarkable figure, al-Ṣāḥib regularly organized intellectual discussions in his court in Rayy (now part of Tehran) that were attended by representatives of various strands of thought, including philosophers and non-Muslims. Moreover, Islamic historical sources inform us that al-Ṣāḥib composed comprehensive theological works, but none of these has been preserved in the Islamic world. So far we only possess some concise theological tracts of his that appear to have been written as introductions to the doctrine of the school. That he was widely read within Jewish Mu'tazilite circles is evident from two extensive fragments of a theological summa of his that are both written in Hebrew characters. Unlike the concise tracts that are preserved in Islamic collections, these fragments clearly show that al-Ṣāḥib was not only an adherent of the Mu'tazila but a theologian in his own right.

This example—one out of many—illustrates what students of Muslim intellectual history can gain by looking for relevant source material beyond strict denominational borders. The scholarly investigation of the Jewish Mu'tazila, its historical connection to their Muslim counterparts, and a systematic exploitation of the Islamic primary materials preserved in Jewish collections are still in their infancy. While representatives of the "Wissenschaft des Judentums" ("Science of Judaism") towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century such as David Kaufmann, Martin Schreiner, or Arthur Biram were aware of this important episode, the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany and World War II put an end to this early attempt to study Muslim and Jewish Mu'tazilites as part and parcel of one single intellectual phenomenon and to analyse the historical relations between them. It was only some years ago that scholars of both Jewish and Islamic studies "rediscovered" this important field and joined forces to work on the relevant materials.



K. Nahj al-sabīl fī l-uṣūl by al-Ṣāḥib b. ʿAbbad (d. 995). MS St. Petersburg, National Library of Russia, RNL Yevr.-Arab. II 1224/3, ff. 19b–20a © National Library of Russia (with kind permission)

The prevalent pattern of dominance and *subordinance* did not invariably dictate the directions of intellectual transmission. My *second case* will demonstrate that the dynamics could be completely different. It concerns the outstanding Jewish scholar David ben Joshua Maimonides (b. ca. 1335, d. 1415), the last head of the Jewish community of Egypt from the descendants of Moses Maimonides, the famous philosopher and legal scholar of the twelfth century. David ben Joshua's professional life took place within the confines of the Jewish community (or communities), and his works (all written in Arabic, but in Hebrew characters) circulated exclusively

among Jewish readers. Born in Egypt, David succeeded his father Joshua Maimonides as *nagid* or Head of the Community following the latter's death in 1355. For reasons that remain unclear, he left his homeland to take up residence in Syria for a decade during the 1370s and 1380s. He resumed office as head of the Rabbanite Jewish community after his return to Egypt and retained it until his death.

Apart from being a prolific author himself, David is known to have collected books and was an accomplished scribe.

Numerous autograph copies of works by earlier Jewish and Muslim authors in a variety of disciplines have survived. It was particularly during his time in Aleppo that David assembled an impressive library containing numerous books that he had either commissioned or copied himself. They testify to his scholarly abilities and his erudition in both the Jewish and Islamic literary traditions. He wrote a commentary on the *Mishneh Torah* (*Repetition of the Torah*), an influential code of Jewish law by his ancestor Moses Maimonides, as well as numerous works in the fields of ethics, philosophy, and logic, in addition to a comprehensive handbook of Sufi mysticism. These works show David's deep immersion into a variety of Islamic rational sciences. In philosophy, he was not only familiar with the thought of Avicenna, but also acquainted with many writings of the twelfth century founder of a new type of Islamic philosophy, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī. David was likewise familiar with the writings of the renowned Muslim theologians Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209). In addition, he quotes extensively from the earlier Islamic literature on mysticism, and was evidently well-versed in the Islamic astronomical tradition.

Although none of the works of David ben Joshua ever reached a wider Muslim readership, he did reach out on a more personal level. During his time in Syria, David befriended the Muslim scholar ʿAlī b. Ṭaybughā al-Ḥalabī al-Ḥanafī al-Muwaqqit (d. ca. 1391), author of a commentary on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. It took modern scholars quite some time to accept that a Muslim scholar had commented on a text by Maimonides that was originally composed in Hebrew. It is now clear that ʿAlī b. Ṭaybughā became interested in the *Mishneh Torah* due to the influence of David, whose Arabic translation of the *Mishneh* and his commentary on the work he used.

The extant manuscripts of David's translation and commentary and of 'Alī b. Ṭaybughā's commentary on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* thus provide evidence of a fruitful and stimulating exchange between two distinguished scholars of the early fifteenth century, a Jew and a Muslim, on a text of primarily Jewish interest, and here, again, the scholarly investigation of their œuvre is still in its infancy.

My *third example* concerns the prominent philosopher, 'Izz al-Dawla Ibn Kammūna. His case again completely breaks away from the two patterns described so far.

Ibn Kammūna was born in Baghdad in the thirteenth century into a Jewish family and received a thorough education in both Jewish and Islamic letters. Little is known about his life, but it is evident that he held a high-ranking position in the administration of the Ilkhānid Empire, although there is no indication that he ever converted to Islam. Like many Muslim scholars of his time, he enjoyed the patronage of the Minister of State, Shams al-Dīn al-Juwaynī (d. 1284) and his family, to whom he dedicated

most of his works. He also corresponded with the most important intellectuals of his time. Ibn Kammūna's philosophical writings, and particularly his commentary on the *Book of the Intimations* by the above-mentioned Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, as well as his independent works in this discipline significantly shaped the development of Islamic philosophy in the Eastern lands of Islam over the following centuries. Ibn Kammūna's commentary on Suhrawardī's *Intimations*—the first commentary ever written on this work—immediately became very popular and was extensively quoted in the philosophical works of his Muslim contemporaries and of the following generations. Hundreds of copies of Ibn Kammūna's philosophical writings were produced during his very lifetime and over the decades and centuries following his death. The majority of Muslim scholars and scribes were aware that he was Jewish and refer to him as "al-Yahūdī" or "al-Isrā'īlī." Others do not mention his Jewishness at all, which suggests that it was a matter of no concern for them. Compared with the widespread reception of his philosophical œuvre among Muslims, the Jewish reception of his writings is limited.

Again, the scholarly research of Ibn Kammūna has a history of its own. For a long time he was exclusively known for his *Examination of the Three Faiths*, a work belonging to the genre of interreligious polemics while his—far more important—philosophical œuvre was, with few exceptions, completely ignored. One looks for him in vain in any Handbook on Islamic philosophy, be it written by Western or non-Western scholars. Only in recent years do we see a growing interest in his philosophical works, both in the West and, perhaps even more importantly, in Iran, as a result of an increased interest among contemporary scholars in post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy. In Iran, the scholarly interest in Ibn Kammūna comes with the conviction—based on rather questionable data—that at some stage he had converted to Islam.



Maqāla fī tanqīḥ al-abḥāth li-l-milal al-thalāth by 'Izz al-Dawla Ibn Kammūna (d. 1284). MS Shiraz 538, ff. 5b–6a (with kind permission)

Although the case studies discussed relate exclusively to intellectual encounters between Muslims and Jews, *Christians* were equally involved in this multi-religious intellectual symbiosis. Among the many relevant examples, let me just recall the case of the ninth-century Zaydī Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm who hailed from Medina and who, during his time in Egypt, was in close contact with local Christian theologians whose views helped shape his own doctrinal thought substantially. Moreover, he evidently acquired a thorough knowledge of the Bible, from which he freely quotes in

his writings. His familiarity with contemporary christological debates also allowed him to compose one of the most remarkable and most sophisticated Islamic refutations of Christianity. Let us also recall the influential Christian Aristotelians in Baghdad of the tenth century—the Jacobite Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (d. 974) and his circle—whose writings were part of the standard repertoire of Muslim philosophers. A last prominent example is the barely studied corpus of Arabic literature by Coptic writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which testifies to

the profound influence of Muslim writers, e.g., al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, as well as of prominent Jewish writers such as Maimonides and particularly his *Guide of the Perplexed*.

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I hope that I have been able to convince you, on the basis of the examples provided—and again, they are only a very small sample—that one of the main tasks of modern scholarship is to trace, publish, analyze, and contextualize the so-far neglected manuscript materials, be they written by Muslims, Jews, or Christians, in Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, or Coptic script, in order to revise and widen our knowledge of the processes of social, religious, and intellectual cross-pollination among the three monotheistic faiths, a topic which has not lost any of its relevance in today's world.

Let me conclude by quoting Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887–1974), one of the giants among the students of the intellectual history of Near Eastern societies: "Beliefs and ideas are indeed contagious and the history of beliefs and ideas is often a history of imitation by contagion. But for the contagiousness of a belief or an idea to take effect, there must be a predisposition and susceptibility on the part of those who are to be affected by it." (*The Philosophy of Kalām*, p. 70)

Intellectual predisposition and susceptibility in a positive sense, together with the awareness that symbiosis is the norm rather than the exception in the dynamics of the transmission of ideas and intellectual strands beyond borders of any kind—be they denominational, political, or linguistic—may help us all to develop a different approach to cultures, religions, and political entities that are often seen as being remote, alien, inimical.

Moreover, an open mind in research, a willingness to widen the scope of scholarly investigation and to share its results with a wider audience can significantly contribute to shaping a less biased and more refined public opinion. ■