



Reason as Balance

The evolution of *‘aql*

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Islam's self-understanding as a middle way is both well-known and distinctive. Contrasting itself with some evolved forms of the earlier religions, the new faith announced itself as neither purely legalistic nor purely spiritualising. Ethically, its pattern of life was to embrace neither the severe asceticism of early Christianity, nor the hedonism of ancient Rome. 'Thus have We made you a middle nation,' (2:143) the last people of God are informed; and the commentators decided that this was to be geographical, spiritual, and moral. But in what sense could such a self-image be, pre-eminently, a basis for the intellectual life? Can one set too much store by reason (can it be itself if practiced to excess?). Or too little?

Muslim commentators often wish to champion the revelation as a supreme advocate of reason. God's word, the Book, as speech (*nutq*), is the very ground and guarantor of logic (*mantiq*), and the Book is itself a set of arguments accessible to the mind (although definitions of 'mind' have, as we will see, widely diverged). Nineteenth and twentieth-century apologists were especially concerned to show the Qur'ān as the quintessence of *‘aql*, or intellect.

Read through a Biblical concordance [says Rashīd Riḍā], and you will never find the word 'intellect' [*‘aql*], or any synonym for this human faculty which raises human beings above the entire animal kingdom, whether it be 'insight' [*lubb*] or 'intelligence' [*nuhā*]. This is because this category is never mentioned in either the Old or the New Testament, since it is not a basis for the understanding of religion and its arguments and lessons; neither is the Bible's religious discourse rationally oriented or based on reason. Similarly absent are the words 'thinking' [*tafakkur*], 'contemplation' [*tadabbur*],

and looking at the world, all of which are among the greatest functions of the intellect. By contrast, the intellect is referred to approximately fifty times by name in the Noble Qurʾān; the phrase ‘people of insight’ [*uluʾl-albāb*], which is to say, ‘people of intellect’, appears more than ten times, while ‘people of discernment’ [*uluʾl-nuhā*] is also to be found, once, at the end of Sūra Ṭāhā. Furthermore, these Qurʾānic references mostly apply to God’s signs [*āyāt*], and to the fact that those who are addressed by them, who understand them and receive guidance through them, are the intelligent [*ʿuqalā*]. Most of these verses pertain to the physical universe, which point to God’s knowledge, will, wisdom, and compassion.¹

Such polemics were reactive against a European belief in ‘Oriental unreason’. Although in the eighteenth century it was not uncommon for Europeans to compare Islam favourably with Catholic ‘superstition and obscurantism’,² the racial and imperial confidences of the nineteenth century inverted the image. Ernest Rénan, riding the warhorse of European triumphalism, had attacked Islam as a kind of intensified Judaism, an irrational legalism which rejected the spirit of reason and needed to be fought without

mercy.³ Hence the Muslim apologist’s retort that Islam is quintessentially reasonable, a view which also drew strength from the growing polemic against Sufism, understood in Suhrawardī’s sense as an escape from the city of reason to the wilderness where God can be found.⁴ Ali Bulaç has documented the recurrence of this Islam/rationality trope as perhaps the most characteristic apologetic theme in modern Islam, in Turkey and elsewhere.⁵ In the Western milieu, many converts to Islam claim that they are attracted to what they regard as its clear, rationally-accessible teachings, unobscured by elaborate mysteries.⁶ But it is not only insiders who wish to take this view. Non-Muslim academic accounts, which have largely left Rénan behind, now frequently draw attention to the central role of reason in Islamic theology.⁷ Oliver Leaman, for instance, claims that ‘whereas Judaism is strongly linked with ethnicity, and Christianity with a leap of faith, Islam has successfully grown, by contrast with these religions, by stressing its rationality and evidentiality.’⁸ Josef Van Ess, author of

3 ‘At the present time, the essential precondition for the spread of European civilization is the destruction of the Semitic thing par excellence ... the destruction of Islam ... Islam is the most complete negation of Europe: Islam is fanaticism ... The future, sirs, is therefore Europe’s, and Europe’s alone ... Here is eternal war, the war which will end only when the last son of Ishmael dies in misery, or is banished through terror to the depths of the desert.’ (Ernest Rénan, *De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l’histoire de la civilisation, discours d’ouverture du cours de langue hébraïque, chaldaique et syriaque au College de France* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1862), 27-8.

4 John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), 233.

5 Ali Bulaç, *Din ve Modernizm* (Istanbul: Endülüs, 1990); an example of the genre in translation is Hilmi Ziya Ülken (the Turkish translator of Spinoza and Rousseau), *İslam Düşüncesi* (Istanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi, 1947); French translation by Gauthier Dubois, Max Bilen and Hilmi Ülken, *Pensée de l’Islam* (Istanbul: Fakülter Matbaası, 1953).

6 Anne-Sophie Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004), 116-26.

7 An older school, associated with the pupils of Leo Strauss, still sometimes maintains the idea of an Islamic ‘orthodoxy’ which fought against Hellenistic ‘rationality’; but the works of Dimitri Gutas, Robert Wisnovsky and Peter Adamson have largely discredited this thesis.

8 Oliver Leaman, ‘Arguments and the Qurʾān’, 55-67 of Leaman (ed.) *An Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, see p. 55.

1 Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Wahy al-Muḥammadī* (Cairo: al-Manār, AH1352), 195.

2 Tim Winter, ‘Ishmael and the Enlightenment’s *crise de coeur*: a response to Koshul and Kepnes,’ in Basit Bilal Koshul and Stephen Kepnes (eds.), *Scripture, Reason, and the contemporary Islam-West encounter: studying the ‘Other’, Understanding the ‘Self’* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 149-175.

the greatest history of Islamic theology ever to have appeared in a European language, concludes in rather similar terms: ‘Christianity speaks of the “mysteries” of faith; Islam has nothing like that. For Saint Paul, reason belongs to the realm of the “flesh”, for Muslims, reason, *‘aql*, has always been the chief faculty granted human beings by God.’⁹

All these attempts, Muslim and non-Muslim, to portray Islam as the reasonable religion *par excellence* root themselves in the Qur’ānic text. ‘The Qur’ān does indeed,’ says Leaman, ‘display an unusual commitment to argument and logic in its self-explanation,’¹⁰ and a systematic exploration of this has very recently been offered by Rosalind Gwynne.¹¹ Here, however, lies the great fault-line in modern Islam, whose origins are ancient, pre-dating in some respects the religion itself. Modern fundamentalist tendencies, emanating frequently from Saudi Arabia and tracing their ancestry to the scriptures via Ibn Taymīya (d.1328), reject formal dialectics, while not accepting a self-definition as ‘irrationalist’. For such thinkers, all important truth, which is to say, truth which saves, is necessarily explicit in the Book, from which ‘We have omitted nothing’ (6:38). Scripture is ‘clear’ (*mubīn*), and God has not burdened humanity with the demand to evolve elaborate metaphysical interpretations either of His evidences in nature, or in the specific revelation of the Qur’ān. Those who do so are guilty of underestimating both the clarity of the Book, and the benign intentions of a God who wishes all to be saved, including those

incapable of following a syllogism.¹²

Both advocates and enemies of reason base their positions in scripture. Who is normative? One way of answering might be to point to the unpopularity of Ibn Taymīya’s ḥanbalite fideism, and to the centrality of sophisticated philosophical theology in the medieval *madrassa* curriculum (the manuals of Jurjānī, Ījī, Nasafī, and Taftāzānī). Most scholars voted with their feet, and welcomed the logic-based theologies which, finally schematised by Rāzī, traced their roots back to early Islam’s need to deploy reason against schismatics. Yet the recent revival of ḥanbalite and Taymiyan fortunes, rooted in an understanding of the intentions of scripture, cannot be dismissed so easily as un-Qur’ānic. Any attempt at an arbitration must consider the texts themselves.

The Qur’ān is, like any prophetic deliverance, a staccato, ecstatic, collocation of insights. Famously, but not uniquely (one thinks of the Psalms, for instance, or Oriental lectionaries, or most collections of poetry), it does not respect any thematic sequence.¹³ Despite Gwynne’s insights, most Muslims experience it not as a set of arguments, but as a dithyramb which irresistibly transforms the soul. The following account, describing an illiterate woman in India, gives an excellent sense of this:

She would then spread the prayer-mat, a beautiful soft Persian piece, its direction towards the East. She was now going towards the corner in the room where wrapped in green silk lay the Qur’an. She would take out the Qur’an and

9 Josef Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 153-4.

10 Leaman, 65. See also J. Waardenburg, ‘Faith and Reason in the Argumentation of the Qur’ān,’ in *Perennitas: Studi in Onore di Angelo Brelich* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1980), 619-33.

11 Rosalind Ward Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur’ān* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 203: ‘Reasoning and argument are so integral to the content of the Qur’ān and so inseparable from its structure that they in many ways shaped the very consciousness of Qur’ānic scholars’.

12 See Paul-A. Hardy, ‘Epistemology and Divine Discourse,’ pp. 288-307 of Tim Winter (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), see pp.293-6.

13 Although there are no shortage of theories which propose one; such as the *nazm* thesis of Amin Ahsan Islahi; see the appreciative summary in Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur’ān: a contemporary approach to a veiled text* (London: SCM, 1996), 271-283.

hold it to her heart. Her eyes then were full of tears. She was holding a book which she loved and respected so much and yet she was unable to read. She would then recall, crying like a child, that moment when the Voice repeatedly said to the Prophet in the cave of Hira: Read, Read in the name of the Lord. And the Prophet had said in utter helplessness: I cannot read.

Then she would return to the prayer-mat, lifting the Qur’an above her head, saying as though: O Book! You are above my understanding. My head is nothing more than a place whereupon you rest.

Having sat down not occupying the entire prayer-mat but a part of it, for to occupy the whole of the prayer-mat was to her an act of arrogance, she would open the book knowing only to keep the right side up, and to begin where she had left the previous day.

For a long time she would allow her eyes to rest on the two open pages before her. The letters in green ink from right to left, row beneath row, each shape mysteriously captivating, each dot below or above a letter an epitome of the entire scripture, each assembly of letters a group of dervishes raising their heads in *zīkr*, each gap between two enigmatic shapes a leap from this world to the next, and each ending the advent of the Day of Resurrection.

She would thus see a thousand images in the procession of that script and would move from vision to vision.

After spending much time just looking at the open book, she would then, with a strange light glowing on her face, lift her right hand and with the right finger start touching the letters

of each line, then another line, to the end of the page. What transpired between the book and that touch, and what knowledge passed, without any mediation of conscious thought, directly into her soul, only the Qur’an and that strange reciter could know. The entire world stood still at this amazing recital without words, without meaning, without knowledge. With that touch a unity was established between her and the Qur’an. At that moment she had passed into a state of total identity with the word of God. Her inability to read the scripture was her ability to hear once again: Read! Read, in the Name of thy Lord!¹⁴

Truth has a calligraphic form, it seems; and we are unsurprised to note the centrality of calligraphy, a minor art in Christendom, to almost all historic Muslim civilisations. Scripture (*kitāb*) seems to imply writing, and there is a way in which its writing’s form unveils reality in a way that transcends reason.

But even more significant has been aurality and a receptivity to the mantic voice of the Unlimited. The illiterate woman of Delhi, finding truth in the Arabic cursive mysteries, is wholly Islamic, but is less representative than the auditor of Qur’ānic cantillation, the Islamic art, that is to say, mediator of the sacred, *par excellence*. Here is Isabelle Eberhardt, in Algiers:

The place was cool and dark as I went in, and a handful of oil lamps were the only source of light.

A feeling of ancient Islam, tranquil and mysterious.

Stood for a long time near the *mihrab*. Somewhere far behind us, a clear, fresh, high voice went up, a dreamlike voice

14 Hasan Askari, *Alone to Alone: from awareness to vision* (Leeds: Seven Mirrors, 1991), 113.

that took turns with that of the elderly imam standing in the *mihrab* where he recited the *fatiha* with his quavering voice.

Standing next to each other, we all prayed as we listened to the exhilarating yet solemn exchange between those two voices. The one in front of us sounded old and hoarse, but gradually grew louder till it was strong and powerful, while the other one seemed to come from somewhere high up in the mosque's dark reaches as it sang triumphantly in regular intervals of its unshakeable, radiant faith in Allah and his Prophet ... I felt almost in ecstasy, my chest tightening and my heart soaring up towards the heavenly regions that the second voice seemed to be coming from in a tone of melancholy joy, utterly convinced and at peace.

Oh, to lie upon the rugs of some silent mosque, far from the mindless noise of city life, and, eyes closed, the soul's gaze turned heavenwards, listen to Islam's song forever!¹⁵

This is the Qur'ān as healing (17:82), a balm for hearts. The scripture seems to imply that our tragedy is an ignorant alienation from the Real, wherein lies all wholeness and appropriateness, and that only Heaven can send down the rain which revives the hearts. Whether it saves through its calligraphy or its cantillation, the Book does not seem to be saving through reason; it does not deny it, but it insists on 'descending upon your heart' (2:97), for its Author is not reached by the faculties of perception (6:103). Islam has a historic hospitality to Platonism, regretted by modernist advocates of a supposed Averroist rationalism, but noted in detail by Henry Corbin and others; and this is to be attributed

not only to the Platonic resolution of all diversity to the One Source, so congenial to Islam's rejection of a triune or other differentiation within the Godhead; but also to the sense that, as in the *Timaeus*, the One is manifest aesthetically and, particularly, musically, in the ground of creation.

Ion, in the early dialogue with Socrates, acknowledges that as a singer of poems he is an instrument played upon by a supernatural power. And the Prophet Muhammad, like him, is an Aeolian harp: the wind plays him, while his personhood contributes nothing; the Voice is therefore the pure sound of the Unseen. The Qur'ān, a web of 'signs', is in this rather Platonic sense understood as the voice of the divine substrate of creation; it is the true music of the spheres. The ascent to the One, therefore, is not through the logic-chopping powers of our 'dingy clay', but through acquiring a true and loving ear that can properly hear this music.

Could it be that the very existence of prophecy, which the scripture proclaims as necessary to man's salvation, indicates that human reason, unaided, cannot reach truth? Is this the crux of the argument not only between Plato and Aristotle, but between Athens and Jerusalem?

Perhaps, some souls have imagined, this is the lesson of the Qur'ānic prologue where the Devil, Iblīs, falls from grace. God has commanded the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, the newly-created, sleepy creature, and they do so, 'except Iblīs', who protests that 'You have created me of fire, and him of clay.' (7:12) Hence this proud worshipper of God Alone, who uses logic to defy God's own command, is cast out, to be the calamity of the world. Meditating upon this story, some Muslims have taken it as a warning against a presumptuous, vainglorious reliance upon reason, and against the sin which originated in a syllogism. God's command, for His lovers, is enough; His

15 The Diaries of Isabelle Eberhardt, ed. Elizabeth Kershaw (Chichester: Summersdale, 2002), 55-6.

beauty makes all argument irrelevant. Here is Rūmī:

O master, (you must avoid) the analogy drawn by the low senses in regard to the Revelation which is illimitable.

If your sensuous ear is fit for (understanding) the letter (of the Revelation), know that your ear that receives the unseen (meaning) is deaf.

The first person who produced these paltry analogies in the presence of the Lights of God was Iblis.

He said, ‘Beyond doubt fire is superior to earth: I am of fire, and he (Adam) is of dingy earth’.¹⁶

For this hugely-influential reading of the Qur’ān (and Rūmī is unchallenged as Islam’s greatest poet), love is the Burāq, the miraculous winged beast that helps us ascend to true knowledge. Reason, the steed of the formal theologians, is a noble part of God’s creation, but is desperately slow and limited.

Intelligence is (like) swimming in the sea: he (the swimmer) is not saved: he is drowned at the end of the business.

Leave off swimming, let pride and enmity go; this is not the Oxus or a (lesser) river, it is an ocean;

And, moreover, (it is) the deep Ocean without refuge: it sweeps away the seven seas like straw.

Love is as a ship for the elect: seldom is calamity (the result); for the most part it is deliverance.

Sell intelligence and buy bewilderment: intelligence is opinion, while bewilderment is (immediate) vision.

Sacrifice your understanding in the

presence of Muṣṭafa (Muḥammad): say, *‘ḥasbiya ’llāh, for God sufficeth me’*.¹⁷

Muslims thus find themselves spread along a spectrum, each enjoying a bright colour of the faith. The Qur’ān is so replete that Ibn Rushd, the iconic Arab ‘rationalist’, can use its verses as examples of rational induction;¹⁸ and modern Muslim advocates of reason can and do use it to dispel mystical fancies. But the fact of its origin in the empyrean has made it also the religion’s theophany of theophanies, a mystic fact, whose very shape or sound inspires an ecstasy that seems to show God more fully than any logical inference ever could.

The Qur’ān, then, seems to be the authentic root of two disciplines whose mutual relations are controversial: formal systematic theology (*kalām*), and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). Sufism is typically absent from the *madrasa* curriculum, which gives pride of place to *kalām*. And *kalām* presents itself as a fiercely rationalistic discipline, according to some more so even than Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*).¹⁹ A standard *kalām* text such as Taftāzānī’s (d.1390) *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id* devotes three quarters of its length to systematic metaphysics (*ilāhiyyāt*), with the remainder dedicated to issues of prophecy and the afterlife which can only be demonstrated through revelation. Such texts defined orthodoxy; yet they seem to have been less influential upon the minds of most Muslims than the passionate Sufism of the likes of Rūmī, whose pessimism about *kalām* is evident.

Here we are faced with an evolving tension within classical Islamic intellectual life and

17 Mathnawī, 4:349-50. ‘*ḥasbiya ’llāh*’, is ‘God sufficeth me’ (Qur’ān 9:129).

18 Gwynne, 26.

19 For a justification of this claim see Eric Ormsby, *Ghazālī: the Revival of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 47. Ormsby points out that Ghazālī’s refutation of the Arab philosophers was based on rationality and a *kalām* approach: ‘as a science of dialectic, relying on argument and counter-argument, theology possessed an inbuilt mechanism for correcting itself.’

16 Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, tr. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1926), 2:184-5.

society of a kind which required – and occasionally delivered – brilliant reformers. It is striking that only in a few texts do we observe an attempt to provide a grand synthesis of the two approaches, which we might, to borrow European terminology, describe as the logical and the passionate. Ghazālī (d.1111) is the most obvious, and successful, example. Other claimants would include Ibn ʿArabī (d.1240), Ibn Kemāl (d. 1534), Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (d.1762), and Sait Nursi (d. 1960), before we enter the purely modern period, where such synthetic theologies have been challenged by modernists and fundamentalists, both of whom, for different reasons, are uneasy with mysticism and *kalām*.

This synthetic renewal, which often draws in individuals acclaimed as the ‘renewers’ (*mujaddid*) of their centuries,²⁰ is a key dynamic in Islamic religion and history. Hence tendencies perceived as erroneous, or even heretical, may be helpfully understood as the result of an imbalance towards one type of epistemology at the expense of the other. Sachiko Murata and William Chittick have reflected extensively on this inner Islamic metabolism, identifying *kalām* with the principle of drawing inferences about God as Transcendence (*tanzīh*); and Sufism with the principle of experiencing God as Immanence (*tashbīh*); the dyadic categorisation of divine names as Names of Rigour and Names of Beauty is one outcome.²¹ Their conclusion is that these two inexorable consequences of the postulate of monotheism run like twin constants through Islamic religious history. Each is allocated its own realm, form of discourse, and even, on occasion, ritual life and structured authority.

20 According to a well-known hadith, God will provide the community with a renewer every hundred years (al-lākim al-Nisābūrī, al-Mustadrak ʿalā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn [Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1334-42], 4:522).

21 Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1994), 251-3.

Islam is necessarily diverse, given its tendency to decentralise religious authority and to reject the principle of the monopolising of truth by a single scholar or institution. This was set out clearly by the Ottoman chief jurist Mollā Fenārī (d. 1431), who, despite the centralising tendencies of the Ottoman state, took the Prophetic dictum that ‘whoever interprets the Qurʾān according to his own opinions should be ready for his place in Hell’ to refer to several false hermeneutic temptations. Firstly, there is the following of personal notions (*khawāṭir*). Secondly, a narrow conformity to the method of a single theological school, as in the case of the Muʿtazilites. Thirdly, to persist in speculations about the meaning of ambiguous scriptural texts. Finally, to be certain that one’s own judgement (*ijtihād*) is correct, for such an attitude would be to set oneself on a par with Revelation.²² The result of this somewhat latitudinarian understanding was religious diversity, and the perpetuation of the bifurcation referred to above.

Does this complex and sometimes apparently polarised picture help us to answer our question about rationality as ‘balance’? Clearly, thinkers such as Ghazālī, who are normative in Sunnism, will speak of *kalām* as a valid discipline within its own, essentially apologetic and even therapeutic space, as a useful tool against formalistic error, notably that of the *falsafa* practitioners and the Muʿtazilites. As though to refute those who characterise Muslim theology as denying the rationality of God, he insists that the formal rules of logic have an objective validity which must characterise God’s power and acts.²³ As his own career implies, however, he regards experience, or what he calls ‘tasting’ (*dhawq*) as superior; although it can never challenge

22 Meḥmed ibn İsmāʿīl Fenārī, ʿAyn al-Aʿyān (Istanbul: Rifʿat Bey Maṭbaʿası, AH1335), 9. The hadith is narrated in Muslim, *Musāfirīn*, 40.

23 Taneli Kukkonen, ‘Possible Worlds in the Tahāfut al-Falāsifa: Al-Ghazālī on Creation and Contingency’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (2000), 479-502.

the truths known in theology; rather, it supplies a more authentic proof for them.

To assess the case we have been making about Islam, we need to set aside as unnecessarily complicated any consideration of the debates in classical Islam about the role of reason and inspiration in metaphysics,²⁴ and focus on the early period, when this tension did not exist. Before the third century, it was not customary to record inner experiences and ‘unveilings’, and it is therefore not always easy to discern how these interacted with other registers of religious discourse. However it is likely that a close integration was normal. This was certainly the case with regard to the balance between ‘reason and revelation’, which, again, were not experienced as dichotomous in the first two centuries.²⁵ The Muʿtazilite theologians who emerged towards the end of this period seem to have been the first to have proposed such a tension (ʿaql against *naql*, or tradition), and although the theologians decided against Muʿtazilism on the grounds of its tendency to expand human freedom in a way which radically curtailed the power of God, this Muʿtazilite polarity remained a theme, proving its worth in several autonomously Sunni contexts.

Prior to this perhaps inevitable bifurcation (which at the extremes led to an arid transcendentalism [Zamakhsharī laughs at the Sufis because they love God],²⁶ or to Ismaili resurrections of ancient pagan notions of divine incarnation), *fiqh*, ‘understanding’, seems to have meant an integrated experience of body, mind, and soul. In the apostolic period, ʿaql, a word which later evolved in contentious ways, meant *fiqh* itself. This, certainly, was the insight of Muḥāsibī, taken

up in Ghazālī’s project of reintegration.²⁷ For the first Muslims (*al-ṣadr al-awwal*), knowledge was not obtained by alternate routes, let alone by methods that could be portrayed as standing in tension with each other. Truth was given in the *vestigia dei* evident in nature, which activated the heart, a process facilitated and given a discursive outcome by the special revelation in scripture. ʿAql, or *fiqh*, were not solitary methods; rather every evolution which they implied into areas of recondite logical theory was a consequence of an originally unitive epistemology, to which the Qur’ān, in its sonic and discursive totality, was the key. The Prophet’s own mysticism, exemplified in vital episodes of his life, such as the Ascension (*miʿrāj*), was not a kind of affective rapture disconnected from the rest of ʿaql or *fiqh*; it was simply one of its dramatic expressions and outcomes. This was the original wisdom which, ultimately, found expression in the seemingly curious Ashʿarite belief in a physical soul.

In primal Islam, the word ʿaql thus had a supple, comprehensive meaning. In a hadith, the Holy Prophet provides a principle that later underlay juridical definitions of human accountability (*taḳlīf*): ‘The Pen does not record the works of three people: one sleeping until he awakes, the one who is mentally unsound until he regains his sanity (*hattā yaʿqil*), and the child before maturity.’²⁸ In a similar hadith we read: ‘Four [types shall be excused] on the Day of Resurrection: a deaf man who could hear nothing, a stupid person [*aḥmaq*], a senile man, and someone who died in the period [*fatra*] between the decline of one religion and the arrival of the next.’²⁹ Here the prophetic voice explains that consciousness is what defines our

24 For an illuminating example in translation, see Nicholas Heer (tr.), *The Precious Pearl: al-Jāmiʿs al-Durra al-Fākhira*, together with his Glosses and the Commentary of ʿAbd al-Ghafūr al-Lārī (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979).

25 ‘[T]here is no doubt that in the ancient Muslim attitude reason and revelation or reason and Shariʿa were not distinct.’ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966), 104.

26 Zamakhsharī’s *Kashshāf*, to Qur’ān 3:31.

27 Al-lārith al-Muḥāsibī (ed. Iusayn al-Quwwatī), *al-ʿAql wa-fahm al-Qur’ān* (2nd edition, n.p.: Dār al-Kindī and Dār al-Fikr, 1398/1978); Abū ʿĀmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-ḥalabī, AH1347), 1:28-9.

28 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad* (Cairo: al-Maymaniyya, AH1313), 1:104.

29 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 4:24.

status as human beings. ʿaql is what makes us human, and distinguishes us from other orders of creation for which there will be no judgement. The implication is clear that the unreached, who had no access to prophecy, still possess ʿaql, but may still be saved: what is required is a full assent based on knowledge.

Prophetic teaching also insists that ʿaql survives death, and this became a feature of Muslim belief concerning consciousness before resurrection while remaining in the grave. ‘God’s Messenger, may God bless him and grant him peace, once mentioned the angel that asks questions of the dead, and ‘Umar asked: “O Messenger of God, shall our minds [ʿuqūl] be restored to us?”, to which he replied, “Yes, they shall be just as they are today.”’³⁰

A further meaning of intelligence comes in a hadith in which the Companions are instructed on the correct position of the body during worship. ‘God’s Messenger, may God bless him and grant him peace, used to touch our shoulders before the Prayer, saying: “Form straight lines! Do not stand unevenly, lest your hearts be at odds! Let those of you who have minds and intelligence [ulu’l-ahilām wa’l-nuhā] follow me.”’³¹

In other hadiths, a more abstract portrayal of the ʿaql is evident. ‘When God created the ʿaql, he commanded it to come – and it came. Then He commanded it to move away – and it moved away. Then he declared: “I have created nothing nobler than you. It is through you that I take, and through you that I give.”’³²

30 Ibn ʿAbbal, Musnad, 2:172.

31 Muslim, Ṣalāt, 122.

32 Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Munajjid, al-Islām wa’l-ʿaql ‘alā daw’ al-Qur’ān al-Karīm wa’l-ḥadīth al-nabawī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1976), 40: the hadith is classified as ‘good’ (jayyid); see al-Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, Ithāf al-sādat al-muttaqīn bi-sharḥ Iḥyā’ ʿulūm al-dīn (Cairo, 1311), I:455.

Discussing the age of the Companions of the Prophet, and their students (*al-tābiʿūn*), the modern writer Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Munajjid cites a range of statements confirming the Prophetic insistence on the principle of reason, which again indicate the variety of applications of the concept. For instance:

‘Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ was asked what ʿaql was, and he replied: ‘Correct conjecture [*al-iṣāba bi’l-ẓann*], and understanding the present by understanding what has occurred in the past.’³³

‘Reason is the best thing by which God is worshipped.’ (Wahb ibn Munabbih)³⁴

‘Just as some trees are more fruitful than others, so are some people more given to reason.’ (Wahb ibn Munabbih)³⁵

‘The best thing that is given to people in this world is reason; and the best thing that they can receive in the afterlife is God’s approval.’ (ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr)³⁶

Such examples could be multiplied; yet it is clear that the new religion valued reason and intelligence highly, in a versatile and intuitive way that implies a broader definition than the contemporary understanding of ‘intellect’. The basis was the corpus of ‘God’s arguments’, as Gwynne describes the Qur’ān’s own reasoning, which allowed the mood of primal Islam to maintain a high regard for the mind (indeed, the first Christians who observed Islam argued for the new religion’s inferiority because of its emphasis on reason and its apparent disinterest in mystery).³⁷ The need to filter the proliferating hadith canon

33 Cited in Munajjid, 55.

34 Munajjid, 55.

35 Munajjid, 55.

36 Munajjid, 56.

37 Sidney H. Griffith, ‘Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians’, in Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Conference 4 (1979), 63-87.

with systematic tools not only of textual authentication but also of analogical methods of deducing (*qiyās*) rulings from the texts, ensured that intellectual rigour was expected of scholars, excepting, sometimes, those ḥanbalites who preferred the anthologising of huge quantities of often doubtful material). Such demands are intrinsic to the texts and to their understanding of the human responsibility to God which, in a context where the mind was not deemed polluted by original sin, easily centred on ʿaql.

The early material cited above does not, however, refer to the intellect in a scholastic sense, although it could convincingly be cited by those who evolved such a definition. Instead, it denotes a general sense that human integrity is maintained by intelligence, a principle which underlies axioms of piety such as the careful formulation of intention, self-scrutiny, and the exclusion of emotion and egotism from the exegesis of scripture. ʿAql, therefore, incorporates centrally the principle of self-knowledge and self-control (the word ʿaql originally signified ‘restraint’, ‘the hobbling of an animal’); and this placed Islam firmly in the camp of the ancients who began all philosophy at Delphi, with the maxim ‘know thyself’. Primal Islam launched an integrative human project which united bodily functions (through consciously-practiced and assessed purity laws and rituals) with social relations, political and economic life, formal worship, and the life of the soul. As Ghazālī reminded his generation, the purpose of every form of the revealed law was to remind its practitioners of God, and this ‘reminder’ (*dhikr*) required a consciousness that was inseparable from reason. *Fiqh*, later restricted to the sense of ritual and positive law, in its original Prophetic sense denoted intelligence itself.

Ghazālī’s warm polemic against those who ‘alter the terminology of the sciences’ is moved by a fear of Islamic fragmentation.

The jurist who peddles his rulings at the courts of kings; the philosopher or theologian whose sophistry dazzles patrons but is polluted by vainglory; the Sufi who is delighted by miracles and patched robes, but neglects God’s law – all these are symptomatic of an atomised religious consciousness; and the solution, or revival (*ihyāʾ*), can only take the form of a rediscovery of the original integrative genius of the Prophetic way. Thus should we understand his debate against Avicenna’s pupils: far from rejecting reason as a path to truth, Ghazālī is advocating it, but a reason that, as with the ʿaql of the first Muslims, is detached, versatile and sober, rather than schematic, proud and indifferent to other indispensable dimensions of the human totality. Avicenna’s taste for wine is entirely symptomatic in Ghazālī’s diagnosis: a mind that can allow its own self-perversion through intoxication, however slight, is a mind whose ability to discern truth must be doubted, since it cannot discern even the meaning of its own nobility, or the rights of the body.

For Ghazālī, and therefore for normative Sunni Muslims, the mind is, in a sense, identical to the *sunna*. *Fiqh*, including – and even especially – its practical regulatory aspects, *is* intelligence. Here Islam departs from the classical European insistence on a bifurcation between body and mind (and, for mystics and for liberal romantics of the type of Schleiermacher, the soul as well). Real rationalism, that is to say, reverence for the miracle of ʿaql, must include a belief in innate knowledge, since the experiences of the senses are inadequate in explaining how we have come to know certain things. There are certain truths, such as the mathematical, which we experience as intuitive and rooted in an innate knowledge. Ethical knowledge also seems to be *a priori*:³⁸ it proceeds from

38 This is not disputed by Ashʿarism, which merely seeks to deny that such knowledge is itself sufficient to render us morally accountable.

ʿaql as understood as the wise perception of the human totality (*kamāl*), including the corporeal (what Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘body-subject’). True reason, ʿaql, is therefore a knowledge by recollection (*dhikr*); and again this calls Plato to mind.³⁹ What we know, where it matters, is what we have managed to remember, which is why the Prophet is ‘only a reminder’ (88:21), and the Qurʾān is ‘a reminder; and whoever wishes, will remember’ (84:54). To achieve this ‘remembering’, and therefore to account for the apparent mystery of our *a priori* knowledge of axioms and ethics,⁴⁰ we are required to exist in a harmonious balance which incorporates body, intellect and soul into a single human subject, an *omnium, al-insān al-kāmil*. Only such a being is capable of true reason, of ʿaql.

Contemplating the fragmented contemporary consciousness, some secular philosophers have emphasised the importance of rediscovering an embodied wisdom as a basis for knowledge, and feminist thinkers such as Irigaray have made this the centre of their epistemology. Such reflections are driven by a sense of crisis. Europe, picking up on a late Hellenic tendency to combine intellectualism with celibacy and other forms of ‘mortifying the flesh’, proved unstable, and at the Renaissance the latent instability detonated, producing the split between sacred and profane which ultimately led to the almost complete triumph of the latter. Western Europe, inheritor of a variety of Christianity which had in turn borrowed from aspects of pagan Hellenism, finally reintegrated the gods and myths of antiquity into its arts in a way that in Islam or Orthodoxy would have been unimaginable; it even renounced its pure Gothic sacrality in favour of imperial Romanesque and ostentatious Baroque and Rococo evolutions. The end result of this

39 *Meno*, 80d-e.

40 And perhaps, if Chomsky is right, our knowledge of a universal general grammar.

radical body-mind-spirit disjuncture is a feverish reaction against one or a combination of these three principles (every substantial form of youth culture now exemplifies this imbalance), and the secularity which generates this is in turn reinforced, so that sociologists can now write books with titles like *The Death of Christian Britain*.⁴¹


Commentators sometimes predict that the decline of Christianity in Europe will be followed by a rise in the fortunes of Islam. Michel Houellebecq, perhaps the greatest contemporary prophet in Europe, foretells this precisely in his novel *The Possibility of an Island*, although he predicts that Islam will in turn be replaced by a new secular faith rooted in advanced techniques of genetic manipulation. A.N. Wilson, contemplating the future of European religion in the new millennium, is also sure that Islam will prevail, writing:

Islam is a moral and intellectual acknowledgement of the lordship of God without the encumbrance of Christian mythological baggage [...] That is why Christianity will decline in the next millennium, and the religious hunger of the human heart will be answered by the Crescent, not the Cross.⁴²

However such confidences, rooted in the judgement that Islam’s immutable liturgy and values coupled with an uncomplicated and reasonable monotheism, must eventually allow it to prevail over its rivals in the post-Christian battle for hearts and minds, must be moderated by an awareness of the continued strength of literalist radicalism and other unmistakable signs of Muslim decadence. If it is the case that an implicit tension between body, mind and spirit provided a *point d’appui*

41 Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001).

42 A.N. Wilson, ‘The Dying Mythology of Christ’, *Daily Express* 21/10/99.

for secularist tendencies which ultimately allowed the collapse of Christian commitment in Europe,⁴³ then it is necessary to acknowledge that through modern influences the same fissiparous tendency is shaping some of the most significant of contemporary Islamic movements. The contemporary turn away from *kalām* and spirituality, and of the great synthetic renewals which reintegrated Islam's various disciplines, has produced a fragmented and impoverished Muslim intellectuality and spiritual style which, one may foretell, will not long resist the same secularising tendencies which have caused the atrophy of European Christianity. Islam, which seems called to be Europe's spiritual and intellectual deliverance following the postmodern collapse of Enlightenment reason and the rise of the new barbarian principle of hedonistic individualism and predatory capitalism, must overcome this internal degeneration as a matter of urgency. Providentially, with a Sunni revival evident on all sides, the atmosphere currently gives reason to believe that the normative will prevail. 

43 The great exponent of this view among European Muslim theologians was undoubtedly the late Tage Lindbom; see for instance his *Myth of Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), a book which has had immense influence on current European Islamic self-understanding.