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Islam and the Invention of Religion: A Study of Medieval Muslim Discourses on *Dīn*

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Abstract

In recent years, the validity of the category of religion has been increasingly subjected to severe criticism across several academic disciplines. The thrust of this critical position – despite the nuances and sophistication of the various arguments advanced in support of it – rests, in the main, on one central claim: that the notion of religion did not exist in non-Western and premodern civilizations and is therefore a unique invention of the modern West. It is my contention, however, that in fixating on the Western construction of the category of religion and the theoretical problems associated with it, scholars have neglected to consider whether a similar concept might have existed prior to the modern West, and if so, what this might mean for our understanding of religion as a historical phenomenon. As a remedy to this trend, this article will engage in a comprehensive conceptual historical analysis of the Arabic term *dīn* (and its related terminology) in order to demonstrate that, contrary to popular belief, premodern Muslims did indeed possess a concept akin to the modern sense of "religion" long before the rise of the modern West, and that, furthermore, they were the first historical community to sustain and develop a rich and robust analytical discourse around the idea of religion, which consequently played a major role in various social, political, and intellectual endeavors in Islamic history. My investigation will reveal that premodern Muslims continuously redefined and repurposed the concept of religion (based on a readily available conceptual vocabulary produced within the Late Antique Near East) in the process of offering particular sociological accounts of the origins and nature of religion, addressing political concerns like the unravelling of power, classifying the "Other," and more.

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Keywords

category of "religion" – conceptual history – theories and methods in Religious Studies – Islamic political thought – Islamic theology – heresiography – comparative religion – early Islamic history

Résumé

Ces dernières années, la validité de la catégorie de religion a fait l'objet de plus en plus de critiques sévères dans plusieurs disciplines universitaires. L'idée maîtresse de cette position critique – malgré les nuances et la sophistication des divers arguments avancés à son appui – repose, pour l'essentiel, sur une affirmation centrale, à savoir que la notion de religion n'existait pas dans les civilisations non occidentales et prémodernes et est, par conséquent, une invention exclusive de l'Occident moderne. Je soutiens, cependant, qu'en se concentrant sur la construction occidentale de la catégorie de religion et les problèmes théoriques qui y sont associés, les chercheurs ont négligé de se demander si un concept similaire aurait pu exister avant l'Occident moderne, et si oui, qu'est-ce que cela pourrait signifier pour notre compréhension de la religion en tant que phénomène historique. Pour remédier à ce biais, cet article entreprendra une analyse historique conceptuelle complète du terme arabe *dīn* (et de ses catégories apparentées) afin de démontrer que, contrairement à la croyance reçue, les musulmans prémodernes possédaient en effet un concept proche du terme moderne "religion" bien avant la montée en puissance de l'Occident moderne, et qu'en outre, ils ont été la première communauté de l'histoire à soutenir et développer un discours riche et consistant autour de l'idée de religion, qui a par conséquent joué un rôle majeur dans divers efforts sociaux, politiques et intellectuels dans l'histoire islamique. Mon enquête révélera que les musulmans prémodernes ont continuellement redéfini et réorienté le concept de religion (fondé sur un vocabulaire conceptuel facilement disponible produit dans le Proche-Orient ancien tardif) est en train d'offrir des résultats sociologiques particuliers sur les origines et la nature de la religion, abordant des préoccupations politiques comme l'effondrement du pouvoir, la classification de « l'autre », etc.

Mots-clés

catégorie de « religion » – histoire conceptuelle – théories et méthodes en études religieuses – pensée politique islamique – théologie islamique – hérésiographie – religion comparée – débuts de l'histoire islamique

Introduction

Most of us take the idea of religion for granted. Although we might not be able to provide an adequate definition for it (is any definition ever adequate?), we all seem to associate the concept with the same set of phenomena: divine entities, holy personalities, ancient rituals, and sacred books. As with many of our so-called modern categories, however, this catch-all term has come to be viewed as a terribly crude representation of a far more complex phenomenon, one which evades universally valid classification. This critique has been waged most forcefully in recent years by numerous scholars in the fields of Religious Studies and Anthropology who have passionately argued for the inaptness of such a term within non-Western contexts and its non-correspondence to an objective reality in the world.[1] More than anything, this has stemmed from the elevated degree of self-reflexivity peculiar to these disciplines, particularly with respect to their Western origins. The latter is an especially poignant issue for these fields since they uniquely concern themselves with the study of the non-Western world. Anthropology famously began as a study of non-Western cultures, which in recent decades has led to a newfound preoccupation with the overlooked consequences of the colonial origins of the discipline.[2] Nevertheless, despite a growing critical awareness in the field, it remains primarily devoted to the study of the non-Western world. This trajectory is somewhat inverted in the case of Religious Studies. Unlike Anthropology, it began with the critical and historicized study of Western Christianity, but since then has increasingly incorporated the study of non-Western religions and, as a consequence, has had to deal with the striking differences that emerge across these disparate traditions.[3]

1 For a list of the major works in this trend, see Kevin Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," *JAAR* 78 (2010): 1112-38, at 1112n1.

2 The watershed work in this regard is the edited volume compiled by the highly influential anthropologist, Talal Asad, *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press; Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1975), who begins the book with an introduction (ibid, 9-19) in which he clarifies that his concern is not with the implication of anthropology in the colonial enterprise, but rather – more radically and incisively – the ways in which the power dynamic between the West and the non-West "has been dialectically linked to the practical conditions, the working assumptions and the intellectual product of all disciplines representing the European understanding of non-European humanity" (ibid, 18-19). Asad also happens to be the author of one of the seminal works on the critique of the universal applicability of the modern Western understanding of religion, which lends support to the implicit connection I make between the two discourses above; see idem, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

3 One encounters this implicit motivation (that is to say, the discovery of the problem of the plurality of religions) in the first work to critique the validity of a universal category called

It is in light of this unique background that the critical perspective towards the category of religion can be better understood. In my view, the thrust of this position – despite the nuances and sophistication of the various arguments offered in support of it – rests, in the main, on one point: that the notion of religion did not exist in non-Western and premodern civilizations and should therefore be seen as an invention of the modern West. This assumption has become something of an unquestioned orthodoxy in recent years,[4] bolstered in turn by the broader post-colonial turn within the academy, which has created a cottage industry around the quest for the dubious Western origins of several modern categories and ideas. Despite the valuable contributions of this critical literature to our understanding of religion, however, a curious contradiction remains at the heart of this enterprise, one which should garner our suspicion: namely, that despite the noble aim of these scholars to decenter the West by provincializing its contingent categories, their works consist solely of studies of the modern West,[5] or the colonial encounter in the non-Western

"religion," Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: McMillan, 1963); (reprinted Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991). In a way, this critical discourse began as a distinctively Christian theological movement aimed at promoting a more modern and humanistic stance towards the truth-claims of other religions, an ideal which one encounters in an important edited volume on the subject of religious diversity (of which Smith himself partook): see John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987). I have written an article on this subject, which should hopefully be out within the next year or so.

4 As one prominent writer in this discourse puts it, "In the academic field of religious studies, the claim that religion is a modern invention is not really news," Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 3. My suspicion is that if I were to set out to collect a bibliography of the instances in which this trope was uncritically rehearsed, it would run dozens of pages long.

5 Just to name the most well-known works in this genre: Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Nongbri, *Before Religion*. Although Asad does engage Islam in one of his chapters, his analysis centers on the modern Middle East and his overall concern in the book is with exploring religious practice in the premodern Christian West. Fitzgerald, likewise, ostensibly engages Buddhist and Hindu traditions (since that is where his expertise lies), yet his work only seeks to evaluate *modern academic* writing on these traditions and not the writings of the historical subjects themselves. The obvious exception is the late Shahab Ahmed's, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), which is primarily a study of the Islamic past; nevertheless, I contend that when it comes to his criticism of the category of "religion," his argument rests heavily on the assumed validity of the aforementioned works (see his comments ibid, 176), which consequently inhibits him from seriously entertaining the possibility of a considerable degree of overlap between *dīn* and "religion." Interestingly, it is in the foundational work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (mentioned above) that one encounters the most

world (which is to say one still mediated principally by the Western understanding of religion).[6] By fixating on the Western or colonial construction of the category of religion and the theoretical problems associated with it, they have neglected to consider whether a similar concept might have existed prior to the modern West, and if so, what this might mean for our understanding of religion.[7] But this is not merely an innocuous academic oversight. In the sagely words of Robert Ford Campany, "If 'religion' is nothing but a Western projection onto non-Western premodern societies, we have had many writers calling for the projector simply to be switched off, but treating the other societies as if they were mere screens. Such a stance strikes me as colonialist in its turn."[8] As a remedy to this trend, this article will engage in a comprehensive philological and historical analysis of the development of the Arabic term *dīn* (and its related categories) in order to demonstrate that, contrary to widespread belief, premodern Muslims did indeed possess a concept akin to the modern sense of "religion" long before the rise of the modern West and that, furthermore, they were the first historical community to sustain a rich and robust analytical discourse around the idea of religion, which consequently played a major role in various social, political, and intellectual endeavors in Islamic history.

The immediate objection to my proposal would be that in engaging in such an inquiry I am unjustly imposing modern concepts onto a civilization which did not conceive of the world in those terms. To be clear, I heed the call of those thinkers who have alerted us to the potential to distort the past through

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in-depth (yet still inadequate) engagement with premodern non-Western religious traditions, a demonstration of historical groundedness, which, I would contend, has since fallen out of vogue in the critical literature on religion.

6 Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Robert A. Yelle, *The Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Literalism and Colonial Discourse in British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Many thanks to Brannon Ingram for bringing these important works to my attention.

7 Ahmet T. Karamustafa has made a similar observation in his brief, but thought-provoking comparison of *dīn* and "religion" (the only work to date, aside from Smith's preliminary inquiry, which has broached the subject meaningfully): "Curiously, this soul-searching on the nature and definition of religion has occurred largely as an in-house Euro-American affair, and apart from some notable exceptions, there have been relatively few serious attempts to question the concept of religion from a comparative perspective," idem, "Islamic *Dīn* as an Alternative to Western Models of 'Religion'," in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 163-72, at 163.

8 Robert Ford Campany, "'Religious' as a Category: A Comparative Case Study," *Numen* 65 (2018): 333-76, at 338.

the lens of the present, particularly when it comes to the idea of religion. Where the concept does not clearly exist and the conceptual disembedding of religion from other facets of life did not take place, it is blatantly anachronistic and potentially misleading to employ such modern notions to understand the society under examination. Nevertheless, this was emphatically not the case in the premodern Muslim world. As I have shown elsewhere, medieval Muslims frequently constructed an ontological and epistemological distinction between matters of religion (associated primarily with ritual, creedal beliefs, and the divine law) and the realm of the non-religious, which was fundamentally defined by its independence and differentiation from this domain of life. The relationship between these two realms naturally differed from the arrangement of these respective spheres in the modern West: for one, in the medieval Islamic understanding, it was religion that regulated and delimited the secular realm (whilst still maintaining a clear distinction) rather than the inverse, which, as many scholars have exposed, is central to the function of secular power in the modern world.[9] All this notwithstanding, the existence of these differences does not imply that there is an insurmountable gap between the respective epistemic frameworks of these two civilizations, but only that these concepts and categories differed in substance and function. The same, I would argue, applies to the stand-alone concept of religion, which is the topic under study in this article. While it is true that the term "religion" was invented in the modern West, all this implies is that the *modern Western understanding* of religion was fashioned during this period. This does not preclude the possibility that an analogous category could have existed prior, but simply that the concept (if it did indeed exist) would have likely been understood and operationalized in different ways than in the modern West.

In posing such a hypothesis, I draw on the recent work of critical race historians who have persuasively argued for the value of a non-essentialist conceptualization of race in understanding premodern societies. As scholars like David Nirenberg and Geraldine Heng have argued, the popular idea that race was invented in 19th century Europe rests on a falsely organic view of the premodern world and a commitment to a temporal metanarrative that conceives of modernity as the beginning and end of history, which is, ironically enough, precisely the teleological historical outlook that critical scholars have

9 Rushain Abbasi, "Did Premodern Muslims Distinguish the Religious and Secular? The *Dīn-Dunyā* Binary in Medieval Islamic Thought," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 30 (2019): 456-501. For the ways in which the modern understanding of the secular redefines religion, see the classic work by Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

been trying to undermine for decades.[10] Though one must surely admit the scholarly and humanistic value of the unmasking of categories like "religion" and "race" as human constructs implicated in certain power structures rather than timeless truths, it seems that we have reached a critical juncture where we can choose either to perpetuate certain myths that emerged in the wake of this important movement, or begin to search for similarities across time and space as a way of bringing the world before and outside the modern West back into the history of *human* ideas.

In what follows, therefore, I conduct a series of genre-based case studies of the understanding of the category of religion within medieval Islamic thought. Drawing on the philosophy of language theorized by the late Wittgenstein[11] – as valuably mediated through the European intellectual historian, Quentin Skinner[12] – my aim is not to uncover the essential Islamic conception of religion, which would be an inherently impossible task, but to examine, rather, the historical development of an indigenously Islamic vocabulary for "religion" within distinct discursive contexts. Each utilization of the concept was implicated in particular social and political contestations, and was likewise aimed at addressing broader intellectual trends and debates within the Islamic tradition. Thus, despite the expansiveness of the time period under study and the disparity of the genres I examine, my attention to serial contextualization[13] in each case study will ensure that due regard is given to

10 See Robert Bartlett, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 39-56; David Nirenberg, "Race and the Middle Ages: The Case of Spain and Its Jews," in *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, eds. Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); idem, "Was there race before modernity? The example of 'Jewish' blood in late medieval Spain," in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, eds. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 232-64; and Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For a brief, but insightful exploration of racializing techniques in the premodern Islamic context (which also attests to the value of studying non-Western conceptualizations of race), see Rachel Schine, "Race Conscious Pedagogies through the Library of Arabic Literature," Library of Arabic Literature, February 24, 2021, https://www.libraryofarabicliterature.org/2021/race-conscious-pedagogies/.

11 The classic statement encompassing his view of language is that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language," Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 25.

12 Quentin Skinner, "The Idea of Cultural Lexicon," *Essays in Criticism* 29 (1979): 205-24.

13 On this methodological approach to the *longue durée*, see David Armitage, "What's the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*," *History of European Ideas* 38 (2012): 493-507.

expounding the unique understanding of the concept held within each historical moment, though without overlooking the important fact that these authors were consciously writing within a tradition of religious discourse, addressing ideas and persons – past and future – whom they considered to be part of the timeless audience of their consciously universal discussions.[14]

As this article will reveal, premodern Muslims actively conceived of a category of "religion" as constituted by an entire system of beliefs and rituals/practices vested in particular historical communities who defined themselves primarily in terms of these distinguishing factors. Moreover, they continuously redefined and repurposed the concept of religion in the process of offering particular sociological accounts of its origins and nature, addressing political concerns like the unravelling of power, classifying the "Other," and more. They were also, I will argue, the first discursive community in history to routinely and systematically analyze the category of religion as an object of inquiry. What's more, in many of these instances, these thinkers examined religion from a decidedly non-normative perspective, which is to say that they approached their subject as scholars attempting to understand -by empirical and rational means- what they considered to be a universal human phenomenon. Though they did not in fact "invent" the concept of religion (and indeed it must be asked whether the search for the "invention" of an idea is a fool's errand), they served as the principal transmitters of a reified understanding of religion for a millennium prior to the modern West.[15]

My inquiry will begin chronologically, delving first into the more uncertain matter of the early development of the concept of religion in Islam, which was fundamentally shaped by broader religious and social trends within the Late Antique Near East. Upon entering the 8th century, I will proceed thematically, first by exploring the role of religion in medieval political tracts penned in Iraq and Khurāsān, then by pinning down the various attempts by Levantine and Transoxanian authors to define religion within the study of theology, and ending with a close reading of three medieval Islamic works of comparative religion extending from Persia into northern India. The article will conclude with a reflection on the potential implications of this alternative genealogy for our understanding of the Islamic past and religion more broadly, as well as

14 For an insightful discussion of the potential pitfalls of an over-emphasis on contextualization in the study of intellectual history, see Peter Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas," in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, eds. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32-55.

15 It remains to be seen what potential role Islam may have played in the spread of a reified concept of religion into the European context (an important question which will not be pursued here).

some theoretical considerations on the process of translating a concept like religion across the so-called Islam-West divide. I must begin, however, with a brief survey of the pre-Islamic history of the development of the idea of religion and its subsequent transmission into Islam, since it is precisely the emergence of Islam within Late Antiquity that set the stage for its novel approach to the idea of religion.

The Early Development of Religion in the Near East

From the Monotheisms to Mani: The Reification of Religion in Late Antiquity

Despite being the first in the academy to argue for the incoherence of the category of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith was also the first scholar to bring attention to the exceptionality of Islam in terms of possessing a word for religion (i.e., *dīn*) in the way we commonly understand it today, which is to say religion as a distinct realm of life and a single organized belief-system with a distinct set of rituals and authorities. He ultimately wrote this conceptual development off as a mundane process of reification, which, given his Marxist predilections,[16] can be understood in philosophical terms as the false "apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly supra-human terms,"[17] thereby replacing what was initially a human relationship with one of alienation between subject and object. Within the context of Islam (and religion more broadly), however, Smith had a more specific and distinct understanding of the term in mind, which is to say the process by which the original understanding of *dīn* as one's individuated relationship with the divine came to be gradually (and mistakenly) replaced by a concrete understanding of *dīn* as representative of the historical institution of Islam.[18] This isn't the place to deal with the intricacies of Smith's complex argument, which regularly moves between the theological and historical in a

16 Smith's first doctoral dissertation (which served as the basis for his first book, *Modern Islam in India*) was a Marxist critique of the British occupation of India and was notoriously rejected by the University of Cambridge, leading him to submit another to Princeton University some years later. For insightful discussions of his early Marxist tendencies and later rejection, see the relevant contributions by William A. Graham, Amir Hussain, and Peter Slater in *The Legacy of Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, eds. Ellen Bradshaw Aitken and Arvind Sharma (New York: SUNY Press, 2017).

17 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 82.

18 See his chapter entitled, "The Special Case of Islam," in Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 80-118. In my use of "reification" throughout the article, I specifically refer to this

way that muddles any distinction between the two. Nevertheless, his historical account of the development of the idea of religion was remarkably sound and merits a close reappraisal.

As Smith himself informs us, it was not Muhammad, but the Persian prophet Mani (d. 274) who was the first figure self-consciously to write a scripture and establish a religion.[19] The Avestan *daena*, not the Arabic *dīn*, was the first word in history for religion in the modern sense of the term.[20] This he contrasts with the case of the Latin *religio*, which was used instead as an adjective to describe the quality of things, as a reference to rituals, or to denote the idea of obligation or taboo.[21] Crucially, as Smith perceptively notes, Muhammad and his followers would initiate their religious movement within this broader Late Antique Near Eastern context, a period and region in which the idea of religion became increasingly concretized and employed as a label for various communities.[22] This would set the stage for the considerable significance that would be attached to the idea of religion in the Islamic tradition, which Smith rightly highlights. Nevertheless, he neglects to demonstrate how exactly this transmission took place, so it would be worthwhile to revisit this history in light of more recent findings.

In general, prior to the formation of religiously-based communal identities in world history, it was ethnic or regional identity which took precedence in the self-conceptualization of human collectivities, to the extent that one can talk about conversion in the ancient world as the voluntary act of joining another ethnicity or leaving one's land for another.[23] Even the earliest religious traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism were not understood by their members as "religions" in the modern sense: the adherents of these traditions or groups lacked a word for "religion" in the modern sense, and their reified self-referential titles, "Hinduism" and "Buddhism," only emerged during the

understanding of religion as an abstracted concept which is subsequently concretized and objectified in specific systems of thought and forms of life.

19 Ibid, 94-95.

20 Ibid, 99.

21 Ibid, 20-21. The Roman poet and philosopher, Lucretius (99 BC-55 BC), was the first to introduce the notion of religion as an abstract entity in the European context (ibid, 23), but the sense in which he used it was not brought into the literary mainstream until the rediscovery of his text during the European Renaissance, and even then only gradually.

22 Ibid, 97.

23 Jason BeDuhn, "Mani and the Crystallization of the Concept of 'Religion'," in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings: Studies on the Chester Beatty Kephalaia Codex*, eds. Iain Gardner, Jason D. Beduhn, and Paul Dilley (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 247-75, at 252.

modern colonial encounter.[24] In the Roman Empire, there of course existed the sundry *religiones*, or cults of worship of the gods, the incorporation of which was highly central to Roman identity prior to its Christianization.[25] Yet as Peter Brown has acutely observed, this sense of religion was far removed from the understanding of religion we are accustomed to today in which morality, philosophy (in the general sense, i.e., as abstract propositions about the world), and ritual are brought together into one totalizing system: for the early Romans, the former two were derived from man-made traditions and therefore were considered to be completely separate from the affairs of the gods, which was the distinct domain of *religio*.[26] In the words of the Classicist James B. Rives, in the Graeco-Roman world "there was no one unified and coherent set of beliefs and principles, no sacred scriptures, no priestly class, and no associated moral code. Instead of 'a religion,' we can more usefully think of it as a group of loosely related but largely distinct ways of thinking about and interacting with the divine world."[27] When it comes to the monotheisms, however, matters become a bit more complicated.

One of the major transformations in the religious life of Late Antiquity brought on by the rise of the monotheisms was the move from local to universal religions,[28] which had a major impact on the self-understanding of the inhabitants of that world. This was certainly the case for Jews living under Roman rule who, after having being recognized by the political authorities as a legitimate religious collectivity in the 4th century, and having been deeply influenced by the process of Christianization in much of the surviving Roman

24 John Ross Carter, "A History of 'Early Buddhism'," *Religious Studies* 13 (1977): 263-87 builds on Smith's suggestions in *The Meaning and End of Religion* in order to demonstrate the anachronistic implications of the use of terms like "religion" and "Buddhism" in the study of Buddhist history. For the history of the modern development of Hinduism as a religion, see Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For Buddhism, see Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*.

25 Eric M. Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

26 Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (*Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition*) (Malden; Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 70-71.

27 James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden; Oxford; Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 52.

28 On this, see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Indeed, in its confrontation with the more universalizing force of Christianity, even the Roman empire itself began to adopt a more universalist stance towards religion (through their very rejection of Christianity): see J. B. Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999): 135-54, at 153-55.

Empire, began to internalize their identity as a unified religious group and actively contributed to its formation through the building of synagogues and other communal activities.[29] Shaye Cohen traces this shift back even earlier. Before the 2nd or 1st century BC, Cohen makes clear that one cannot speak of "Jewishness," but rather "Judaenness," which was a thoroughly ethnic-based identity (that is to say one united by genealogical commonality). This changes, on his account, during the Hasmonean age (in the 1st century BC), a period in which outsiders were welcomed into the Jewish community, which in turn led to an emphasis on belief and the adoption of the Jewish way of life over claims of common descent.[30] This idea has recently been taken up by Simcha Gross, who has offered an important rebuttal to the provocative thesis put forward by Daniel Boyarin for the early modern invention of "Jewishness," arguing to the contrary "that abstractions that were in some ways akin to 'Judaism' did exist *some* of the time for *some* Jews as well as non-Jews in the premodern world."[31] Yet despite this important qualification, his argument is based primarily on the existence of communal activities which only suggest *signs* of a religious self-conceptualization among Jewish people in the premodern world (particularly in moments of communal boundary crossing), rather than the existence of a stable concept or term signifying Judaism as a "religion," thus still confirming that, historically speaking, the concept of religion and the reliable identification of "Judaism" with the Jewish people was virtually non-existent in the premodern context (at least among Jews themselves).[32]

One encounters a similar trajectory in the early development of Christianity, which, during the first five or so centuries of its existence, initiated a broad shift within the ancient world from the predominance of ethnic identity towards the increasing role of religious affiliation in communal self-conceptualization.[33]

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29 Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 179-202 and 289.

30 Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1999), 109-39.

31 Simcha Gross, "'Judaism' Here, There, but not Everywhere: Persian and Other Non-Western Perspectives," Marginalia, July 5, 2019, (https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/judaism-not-everywhere-persian-non-western-perspectives/) (emphasis in the original).

32 As Boyarin writes, "There is no word in any premodern Jewish text or in any Jewish language that matches in meanings and offered definitions to the usage and definitions of 'religion' …", idem, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 11.

33 This is most forcefully argued for by Daniel Boyarin in multiple works: see his *Borderlines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford:

Under the Romans, an ambiguity arose around the distinctively Christian combination of previously separated domains (e.g., philosophy and ritual) and the universal scope of its mission, which posed a problem of classification for political authorities (as opposed to the many pagan cults in the empire). After a period of continuously blurred lines, a major transformation seems to have taken place upon the issuance of the famous religious declarations of the early 4th century, the Edict of Toleration of 311 and the Edict of Milan of 313, which adumbrated the increasingly central role Christianity would play within the Roman Empire, thereby substantially supplanting an ethnic identity with one primarily defined by religion.[34] An enduring legacy of this shift was the development of a new attitude towards religion, encapsulated best by the *Theodosian Code* issued in 438 AD, which ends with a section – entitled *On Religion* – outlining a new political order based on the disciplining of non-Christian beliefs, a complete reversal of previous Roman practice.[35]

Nevertheless, as the German scholar of religion Ernst Feil has demonstrated in his masterly four-volume study of the history of the term *religio* in the West, which extends from the Greeks to the modern period, the understanding of the concept in the premodern era is one far removed from the modern sense of "religion." Terms like *fides* and *lex* were more commonly used to represent other religious communities, while the Latin *religio* continued to denote the more limited idea of obedience or devotion to God, or another related meaning.[36] The same can be said of the Greek *thrēskeia*, which though pregnant with diverse and complex meanings, still remains a far cry from the modern sense of "religion."[37] There are, to be sure, important developments along the

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Stanford University Press, 1999). Adam H. Becker has nuanced this view by demonstrating how Syriac Christians in fact moved towards distinctly *ethnic*, rather than religious notions of communal identity in the Middle Ages, suggesting in turn that we focus on how categories of ethnicity and religion relate to one another rather than attempting to prove definitive moments of transformation; see idem, "The Ancient Near East in the Late Antique Near East: Syriac Christian Appropriation of the Biblical Past," in Greg Gardner, Kevin Osterloh, eds., *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 394-415, at 412-14.

34 BeDuhn, "Mani and the Crystallization," 255-56.

35 Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 75.

36 By way of conclusion, he writes that "It would therefore be appropriate, especially when it comes to a genuine understanding of medieval authors, to assume no modern understanding of 'religion,'" Ernst Feil, *Religio: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs vom Frühchristentum bis zur Reformation*, 4 vols. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 1:128.

37 See Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 123-210. I am grateful to Brannon Ingram for bringing this work to my attention.

way, like the *Divine Institutes*, an apologetic Christian tract written by the religious advisor to Constantine I (r. 306-324), Lactantius (c. 250-c. 325), whose redefinition of *religio* as the one true religion against the *superstitiones* of the Roman cults marked "an important moment in the emergence of 'religion' as a distinct category in the Western intellectual tradition."[38] Still, the term was not used with this connotation in any reliable and stable manner up until the early modern period. To garner just one piece of evidence in support of this point, an examination of early modern Latin translations of the Qur'an reveals that it was not until the 18th century that the term *religio* came to be widely used by European authors in speaking about other religions: until then, a combination of the terms *lex* and *fides* were used to translate the Arabic *dīn*. It is only with the unusually skillful translation of the Italian Arabic professor Ludovico Maracci (1612-1700), published in 1698, that we find the first consistent translation of *dīn* into *religio*.[39] Needless to say, in conceding that the idea of religion (in the modern sense) was absent from premodern Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Jewish discourses, one need not subscribe to the broader (more ideologically driven) position that it could not have emerged anywhere but in the early modern West.

Following Smith's lead, a more fruitful place to look for a notion of religion than the Roman world is the other direct predecessor to Islamic rule in the Near East: the Sasanian Empire.[40] Almost an entire century prior to the official Christianization of the Roman Empire, the Zoroastrian priest Kerdīr initiated a program of religious reform that oversaw the transformation of Zoroastrianism from a primarily ancestral-based form of religious identity (like the Roman *religiones*) to a more universalizing and coercive faith-based communal identity under the Sasanians, a process which would continue in Iran up until the Arab conquests in the 7th century.[41] His famous inscriptions, which outlined a portion of this project, speak of the Zoroastrian religion (*dēn* (*ē*) *mazdēsn*) in opposition to Jews, Buddhists, Christians (of different varieties), Manicheans,

38 Jermey M. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 105-06.

39 Glei and Reichmuth, "Religion between Last Judgement," 260-67.

40 The previous discussion of Roman, Hebrew, and Latin Christian sources leaves open the possibility that one might find a notion of "religion" in Byzantine Greek, Syriac, and Iranian sources. For reasons of space and expertise, I focus in this article only on the pre-Islamic Iranian case, on which some important work has been done in recent years.

41 On this development, see Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 375-88.

and other religions found in Iran at the time, thus displaying an overwhelmingly communal conception of religion.[42]

This was, as it so happens, the reality one encounters in looking to the late Sasanian period, as Michael Morony has shown in his study of Late Antique Iraq (though his conclusions can be extended to the broader Byzantine and Sasanian contexts).[43] Among the various religious communities living under the later Sasanians (e.g., Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians), one witnesses the proliferation of faith-based personal identities attached to a distinct way of life, the formation of closely knit communities regulated by their own bodies of law, and the official or semi-official recognition of each of these social groupings by the state.[44] Significantly, this process took place in the two or so centuries leading up to Islamic rule, which is what led Morony to conclude that "The existence of such [religious] communities is fundamental to the formation of Islamic society and serves as the single most important distinction between Muslim and Hellenistic society."[45] Much of this has to do with the fact that it was precisely these religious communities that the early Muslims had to govern in the wake of their rapid conquests, which naturally informed how they thought about the political and social function of religion. In other words, the modes of social organization found among the Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian communities of the time, as well as their unique relationship to the Sasanian state, became an essential part of the basis upon which the early Islamic understanding of the relationship between religion and governance (especially as it related to their subject populations) was formed.[46] No wonder then that Sasanian political literature (and its associated canonical

42 Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "KARTIR," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 15/6: 608-28. For a full translation, see D. M. MacKenzie (ed. and trans.), "Kerdir's Inscription," in G. Herrmann (ed.), *The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-i Rustam* (*Iranische Denkmäler, Iranische Felsreliefs, I*) (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1989), at 35-72.

43 As Arietta Papaconstantinou writes, Morony's findings have "been widely accepted for the passage from Byzantium to Islam, since the integrationist policies of both pre-Islamic 'superpowers' are seen to have resulted in a centrifugal drive on the part of dissident religious groups and in their gradual transformation into independent communities," eadem, "Confrontation, Interaction, and the Formation of the early Islamic *Oikoumene*," *Revue des études byzantines* 63 (2005): 167-81, at 174.

44 Michael G. Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq," *JESHO* 17 (1974): 113-35, at 114-17; idem, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 277-79.

45 Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 277.

46 For an in-depth account of each of these Sasanian religious communities, as well as the changes and continuities of the early Islamic rule, see ibid, 280-506.

figures) became an integral component of Islamic political thought from the 2nd/8th century forward (more on which below).

Even in terms of language and theology, the commonalities between Iranian religions and Islam are striking. Early in its history, the Middle Persian *dēn*, which bears a striking resemblance to the Arabic *dīn*, represented a combination of things including divine wisdom, human insight, and an individual's good deeds and habits. This eventually developed, however, into the notion of a distinct Zoroastrian religion comprised of a variety of elements, including the broader Iranian socio-political system, which was seen as inextricably linked to the religion.[47] In the religious literature, for example, we hear of the "good religion of the Magians" (*dēn-i māzdēsnān*), those "learned in religion" (*dēn ākāsān*; presumably referring to the knowledge of Zoroastrian doctrine and scripture),[48] and even the familiar concept of the "one [true] religion" (*aîvak dîno*; resembling the Arabo-Islamic *dīn wāḥid*) in contradistinction to other religions like Judaism and Christianity.[49] The Prophet Mani would take the Sasanian understanding of *dēn* even further by proposing a full-blown theory of religion around this notion. Building on the growing awareness of the variety of distinct religions as independent belief and ritual systems, Mani reconfigured this conceptual legacy into his own understanding of the various religious communities as distinct manifestations of a single perennial truth. This desire to compare and contrast the different "religions" (*denan*) ultimately "fostered an analysis that distilled out of the phenomena a conceptual category to which these communities could be imagined to belong"[50] – what one might regard as the first attempt to essentialize religion as a universal category. Mani's definition of religion (*dēn*) consisted of five principal elements: that it was "(1) The product of revelation, (2) authorized by a founder figure, (3) organized as a community, (4) in a particular land, (5) guided by textual resources."[51] What is novel, therefore, in the case of Mani and his followers, is that they understood themselves primarily in terms of a religious, rather than an ethnic identity, and that too from the very inception of their movement.

Arguably, it is this historical development within the broader Near East that made it possible for Muhammad self-consciously to declare the establishment of a new *religion* in the city of Mecca a little over three centuries later. In support of the Persian connection, one might consider Mani's supersessionist

47 Mansour Shaki, "Dēn," *Encyclopaedia Irania*, 7 (1994): 279-81.

48 H. W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books*, 145-46.

49 L. C. Casartelli, *The Philosophy of the Mazadayasnian religion Under the Sassanids*, trans. Firoz Jamaspji Dastur Jamasp (Bombay: Jaehangir Bejanji Karani, 1889), 171.

50 Beduhn, "Mani and the Crystallization," 267.

51 Ibid, 268.

attitude towards previous religions, which bears a marked resemblance to the orthodox Muslim belief of Islam as a continuation and perfect manifestation of earlier religions, though the mechanism of this transmission remains unclear. Furthermore, although I have focused on the Sasanian end of the pre-Islamic Near Eastern landscape, Philip Wood has made a very compelling case for a process of religious reification in the late Roman world on the eve of Islam's emergence (and which markedly resembles Qur'anic theology), which only lends further substance to the idea that Islam was perfectly situated to develop an entirely novel understanding of religion from its very inception.[52] In this regard, there also existed important Syriac precedents to the Islamic understanding of religion, as we see, for example, in the term *deḥltā*, which although more accurately rendered as "fear" (rather than religion), was "related to the broader evolution of a specifically religious notion of community, which in turn would ultimately help to constitute modernity's 'religion.'"[53] In short, the heightened awareness of religion as a distinct category of life and a form of communal identity which we find in early Islam was in many ways the product of earlier developments in the religious life of the Near East. Thus, one can confidently say, in opposition to the popular view held by critical theorists of religion, that the development of the term religion as a concrete concept representing distinct communities, their practices, and their beliefs, already began outside the West more than a millennium and a half prior to the European Enlightenment.

The Qur'an and the Transmission of Dīn *in Early Islam*

The earliest traces of the Late Antique reification of religion in the Islamic context are to be found within the Qur'an itself, which has come to be understood within the academic community as "the earliest and most important artifact of the life of Muḥammad and, therefore, the best witness to the religiosity and sociocultural milieu of his earliest followers."[54] Smith was the first to make this

52 Philip Wood, "Paradigms of Religion in Late Antiquity: Wilfred Cantwell Smith Revisited," (forthcoming in a collected volume edited by Wood and Leif Steinburg to be published in the coming year with Edinburgh University Press). I am grateful to Philip for sharing the article and allowing me to cite it.

53 Adam H. Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and 'Fear' as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the *Martyrdom of Gregory* and the *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh*," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2 (2009): 300-36, at 304. Becker briefly alludes to the remarkable resemblance between the Syriac *deḥltā* and the Arabo-Islamic *taqwā*, both of which possess the original connotation of fear, but which gradually came to represent the differentiation of believers from non-believers, ibid, 333-34.

54 Sean William Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 11.

observation: he mentions, for instance, the novelty of Islam in having been named within its founding text, which is a phenomenon unprecedented in the history of religious scriptures. There are a total of 94 instances of the use of the term *dīn* in the Qur'an, most of which are non-reified and signify meanings such as "judgement" (as in *yawm al-dīn*, "the day of judgement") and "obedience" (*la-hu-l-dīn*, "to Him alone does obedience belong"). In terms of *dīn qua* religion, however, the Qur'an displays a spectrum of connotations, ranging from faith as an existential experience to religion in the sense of a system of beliefs and practices or a community of practitioners (the latter in particular is also expressed more consistently by the term, *milla*).[55] Among the refied usages, two of the more well-known examples actively associate dīn with the religion of Islam: "this day I have perfected your religion (*dīnakum*) for you, completed my blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion Islam (*al-islām dīnan*)," and "the true religion in the sight of God is Islam (*inna'l-dīna 'indallāhi'l-islām*)."[56] That these are indeed very clear instances of a reified understanding of religion is ironically made clear by Fred Donner's explicit recognition of the fact in a recent article, in which he attempts to argue them away as possible interpolations by the Umayyads (and in one instance relying on a single variant reading), thus buttressing his theory of the early community as a "Believer's movement."[57]

55 Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 227-29. It should be noted that the consistent reification of the Qur'anic *milla* is quite in line with its later usage in Islamic writings (as we will see below), which reinforces the importance of the Qur'anic text for the classical Muslim conception of religion.

56 Q. 5:3; 3:19. One must also note, in this regard, Q. 22:78: "Strive hard for God as is His due: He has chosen you and placed no hardship in your religion (*al-dīn*), the community (*milla*) of your forefather Abraham. God has called you Muslims – both in the past and in this [book] – so that the Messenger can bear witness about you and so that you can bear witness about other people." All translations of the Qur'an are my own, though I have drawn on both Arberry and Abdul Haleem.

57 Fred M. Donner, "*Dīn*, *Islām*, und *Muslim* im Koran", in *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 129-40. One of the problems with Donner's thesis of possible interpolation is that it seems unlikely (or perhaps even absurd) to think that 'Abd al-Mālik (r. 685-705) would have been bold enough to tamper with the text of the Qur'an, and yet proceed only to subtly insert small, diversely formulated suggestions of a reified concept of *dīn*, *islām*, and *muslim* throughout the Qur'an as a way of legitimizing their rule; a rather roundabout, risky, and presumably ineffective way of promoting a specific religio-political ideology. What seems much more probable is that they endowed these terms with new politicized connotations which were perhaps not present in the early community: on this, see note 81 below. Beyond this counterfactual, however, Q. 22:78 is in fact attested to in an early Qur'anic fragment (Bibliothèque nationale de France Arabe 328c), which is part of the famous "Birmingham Quran manuscript"

Pace Donner's thesis, the reification of *dīn* in only some instances of the Qur'an can be explained rather straightforwardly by a general development in the meaning of the term, which can be discerned through a chronological analysis of the Qur'anic text, as Yvonee Haddad has demonstrated. Based on the division of the chapters of the Qur'an into the Meccan and Medinan periods, she determined that the former period underwent a gradual transition from *dīn* as accountability and reckoning towards *dīn* as a notion of divine unicity (*tawḥīd*) and commitment to God.[58] However, the overwhelming signification continued to be one of a personal nature, centering on the relationship between the individual and the divine. It is only towards the end of the Meccan period, and definitively in the Medinan period, that one can observe a shift "from *dīn* as a reference to personal commitment to one in the collective sense."[59] Historically, this can be explained as the product of the new multiconfessional environment in Medina, in which Muslims encountered multiple Jewish tribes and a number of Christian emissaries.[60] This does not of course

dating at the very latest to 645 CE, thus undermining Donner's hypothesis: see https://corpuscoranicum.de/handschriften/index/sure/22/vers/78?handschrift=158. I am grateful to Nicolai Sinai for pointing this out to me.

58 Yvonne Haddad, "The Concept of the Term *Dīn* in the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World*, 64 (1974): 114-23, at 118.

59 Ibid, 120. The crucial verse here, according to Haddad, is Q. 6:161: "Say: 'Indeed, my Lord has guided me to a straight path – a correct religion (*dīnan qayyiman*) – the way of Abraham (*millata ibrāhīm*), inclining toward truth (*ḥanīfan*). And he was not among those who associated others with God.'"

60 Although the Jewish presence in Medina rests on strong historical grounds, the Christian presence in Medina is less certain and is a topic of continuous debate. The most comprehensive study of Christians in Mecca and Medina during this period is that of Ghada Osman, "The Christians of late sixth and seventh century Mecca and Medina: An investigation into the Arabic sources," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2001). Based on her reconstruction of this early history from later Islamic sources, she establishes that several individual Christians likely lived in Mecca and Medina in the late 6th and early 7th centuries, and that they may even have developed a distinct sense of group solidarity among their ranks. Nevertheless, on the whole, they seem to have not developed into a significant community in their own right for two primary reasons: Christianity was relatively new to the area and had little time to establish itself before the rise of Islam and, furthermore, they generally adhered to a religious ethic of individualism popular at the time, which is what led them to convert to Christianity in the first place, but also hindered their ability to develop into distinct communities; see ibid, 424-28. Still, despite the lack of an established community, there is strong evidence that point to multiple interactions between the Muslims in Medina and Christians from other parts of Arabia, particularly with groups sent from Najrān, which was a Christian stronghold in Southern Arabia: see, for example, Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Ibn Isḥāq*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1398/1978), 128 and Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat Ibn Hishām*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā (et al.), 2 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1375 /1955), 1:549, 553-54, 573-76, 678;

imply that the Prophet conjured such a reified concept of religion *ex nihilo*, but rather that the connotation of religion gradually changed and expanded for the Muslim community in light of the changing circumstances it faced (drawing on a readily available range of meanings in the broader Near East).

These distinct connotations of *dīn* would have come foremostly by way of Middle Persian, as first observed by the celebrated German orientalist Theodor Nöldeke in a brief note tucked away in an 1883 article.[61] Since then his initial suggestions have been generally corroborated by further research on this conceptual transmission.[62] The Middle Persian view of religion was, according to some scholars, "in many ways close to today's general concept of religion and comprises cultic and legal as well as psychological dimensions."[63] This linguistic exchange would have occurred prior to the revelation of the Qur'an, since it is now fairly certain that the Sasanians exerted a considerable cultural influence over the pre-Islamic Arabs. Though the historical ties between the Arabs

see 2:602, for multiple encounters (mostly debates) between these Christian delegations and the Muslims of Medina. In a majority of these reports, reference is made to a particular verse of the Qur'an, which further substantiates the argument that the multiconfessional context of Arabia had a direct impact on Qur'anic discourse. Jack Tannous has argued for understanding these reports as the products of later "polemical counternarratives" between Christians and Muslims; see idem, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 355. Although one must of course concede that many of these reports are readily explainable in this way, it makes little sense to lump the Najrān emissary narrative with other, more clearly polemically-inspired narratives, given that in this particular story the Christians are neither persuaded to adopt Islam, nor to affirm the prophecy of Muhammad. Even Patricia Crone's alleged "negative assessment" of the historicity of these events, which Tannous cites in support of his claim (ibid, 356n11), does not in fact mention the Najrān narrative: see eadem, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 219-20. Moreover, recent historical reassessments have strongly substantiated the veracity of the existence of various pacts made between the Prophet and various Jewish and Christian communities (including that of Najrān): see Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Ahmed El-Wakil, "The Prophet's Treaty with the Christians of Najran: An Analytical Study to Determine the Authenticity of the Covenants," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27 (2016): 273-354. There also exist several *ḥadith* attesting to both the considerable presence of Christians in Medina and a good deal of familiarity on the part of the Prophet and his followers of various Christian practices; see Osman, op. cit., 367, 371-73, 376.

61 Theodor Nöldeke, "Untersuchungen zur semitischen Grammatik", *ZDMG* 37 (1883): 534n2.

62 See Reinhold Glei and Stefan Reichmuth, "Religion between Last Judgement, law and faith: Koranic *dīn* and its rendering in Latin translations of the Koran," *Religion*, 42 (2012): 247-71; Stefan Reichmuth, "The Arabic Concept of *Dīn* and Islamic Religious Sciences in the 18th century: The Case of Murtaḍā Zabīdī (d. 1791)," *Oriens*, 44 (2016): 94-115.

63 Glei and Reichmuth, "Religion between Last Judgement," 251.

and Iranians goes back multiple millennia to the Achaemenid period,[64] it was between the 3rd and the 5th centuries that the Sasanians and the pre-Islamic Arab Lakhmid dynasty (c. 300-602) established a strong political alliance, which naturally paved the way for an immensely fertile exchange of both commercial and cultural goods. This was vividly on display in the city of Ḥīra in central Iraq, where there arose "a voluntary cultural orientation of the Hiran elites towards the court culture of Ctesiphon, by assimilating Persian luxury items, aristocratic values and power semiotics."[65] This ultimately resulted in the emergence of a bicultural Arab-Persian elite, which would facilitate the influx of Persian literary and cultural norms into the Arab population. It should also be noted in this regard that Ḥīra was "the preeminent center of Pre-Islamic Arabic-speaking Christianity,"[66] which suggests another (namely, Syriac) source for the transmission of religious ideas into Islam. To counter Byzantine influence, the Sasanians would extend their influence to the Ḥijāz as well, the evidence for which can be found in later Islamic sources,[67] and although the archaeological traces of the Persian cultural presence in the Ḥijāz is strikingly scarce, the significant influence of Persian on the Arabic language has been well-established for some time.[68]

Indeed, among the various words of foreign origin in the Qur'an, many seem to have been derived from Middle Persian. The term *dīn*, in particular was most certainly derived from the Middle Persian or Parthian *dēn*, which is a borrowing from the Avestan *daēna*, which means a "belief" or "vision," most likely through an Aramaic intermediary.[69] This seems to correlate with

64 Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 13-35; C. E. Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs before Islam," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 597-602.

65 Isabel Torl-Niehoff, "Late Antique Iran and the Arabs: The Case of al-Hira," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6 (2013): 115-26, at 123. The establishment of strong political and economic ties usually opens the way for cultural transmission: as Torl-Niehoff writes, "Commerce means the exchange of commodities, but also of ideas," ibid, 118.

66 Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 433 (see note 13 on the same page for further literature on this topic).

67 Ehsan Yarshater, "The Persian Presence in the Islamic World," in *The Persian presence in the Islamic world*, eds. Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 23-30; Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs before Islam," 597-602.

68 Yarshater, "The Persian Presence," 46-54; Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs," 609-11.

69 See Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin; Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1926), 63; Arthur Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Boston; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 131-32; and Johnny Cheung, "On the Middle Iranian Borrowings in Qur'ānic (and Pre-Islamic) Arabic," in *Arabic in Context: Celebrating 400 Years of Arabic at Leiden University*, ed. Ahmad al-Jallad (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017), 317-33, at 326.

the general trends of Persian loanwords in the Qur'an, as Jeffrey Cheung has recently brought to light. These borrowings, Cheung observes, largely appear within two semantic fields: the first are items and products related to luxury and entertainment, which is unsurprising given the considerable level of trade between the two regions. The second are primarily abstract religious ideas, like the term *dīn* itself, as well as the word for sin (*junāḥ*) and even the infamous maidens of paradise (*ḥūr*).[70] The fact that there are religious terms shared between the Qur'an and the Middle Persian lexicon points to an important avenue of Persian influence on the conception of religion in early Islamic thought. This is all the more significant in light of the fact that the Qur'an itself was a highly influential and canonical work of the Arabic language in a strictly linguistic sense, to say nothing of its deep cultural and religious impact on the burgeoning Muslim community.[71]

To be clear, however, my argument for the Persian origins of *dīn* does not necessarily rest on the idea of a direct Zoroastrian influence on Qu'ranic theological discourse (an issue which remains up for debate). My point is, rather, that the Sasanian conception of religion expressed through Middle Persian would have likely made its way into Arabic prior to Islam, and thus would have been available and serviceable to the Prophet and his followers as they began to differentiate themselves from other religious communities in Medina (and perhaps even earlier). Though the exact mechanism of this transmission requires thorough excavation, that this would have happened prior to the rise of Islam is borne out by the fact that we find the term *dīn* invoked by pre-Islamic Arab poets with reference to Jews and Christians in a clearly reified, rather than existential sense.[72] This of course does not conclusively preclude the possibility of other conceptual sources for *dīn*, as briefly discussed above, but it seems to me

70 Cheung, "On the Middle Iranian Borrowings," 332.

71 On this, see A. M. Zubaidi, "The Impact of the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth* on Medieval Arabic Literature," in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A. F. L. Beeston (et al.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 322-43.

72 In *God and Man in the Koran*, Toshihiko Izutsu mentions several poems which attest to "*dîn* as a system of ritual practices" (ibid, 227) and as "a whole system consisting of a certain number of creeds and ritual practices that are shared by a community" (ibid, 228). For the poet Nābigha's use of *dīn* with reference to Christianity, see W. Ahlwardt (ed.), *The divans of the six ancient arabic poets: Ennābiga, 'Antara, Tharafa, Zuhair, 'Alqama and Imruulqais. Chiefly according to the MSS. of Paris, Gotha, and Leyden; and the collection of their fragments with a list of the various readings of the text*, (Osnabrück, Biblio Verlag, 1972), 3 (no. 1:24). I am grateful to Nicolai Sinai for this reference and his general reinforcement of this point. 'Urwa b. al-Ward's likewise mentions the "*dīn* of the Jews": see 'Urwa ibn al-Ward, *Die Gedichte des 'Urwa ibn Alward herausgegeben*, ed. and trans. Theodor Nöldeke (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1863), 42 (no. 13:1).

that the evidence points more in the direction of the Persian line of transmission. Nevertheless, what cannot be debated is the rather straightforward fact that the Qur'an itself presented the early Muslims with a reified understanding of religion, one which as we will see, played a significant role in later Muslim conceptions of "religion."

The Category of Religion in Early Islam

The significant influence of the Qur'an on early Islamic conceptions of religion can be observed, however, in the widespread acknowledgement from very early on of a stand-alone category called *dīn* of which many different communities partake. The mere existence of such precedents, it must be noted, should force us to reconsider the now popular thesis that the idea of the existence of multiple distinct religions was one invented in the modern West.[73] Such an understanding is clearly on display in numerous verses of the Qur'an in which religious groups like the Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and the enigmatic Sabians are explicitly named.[74] Another important source for the idea of the existence of other religious communities was the explicit Qur'anic claim that Islam came to prove itself as the only true religion over against all others.[75] It is precisely the existence of such verses that presents a considerable challenge to any scholarly attempt to read the early Islamic movement as a fundamentally ecumenical enterprise.[76]

To be sure, one cannot discern with any reasonable certainty the exact contours of the religious identity of the early Muslim community, since the evidence appears to go both ways. In support of Donner's well-known thesis of the gradual reification of Islamic identity,[77] one may consider the significant fact that the Arab conquerors were perceived in primarily ethnic rather than

73 This thesis has been most popularly argued for in Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

74 Q. 2:62, 113, and 120; 5:18, 51 and 69; 9:30; and 22:70. As I will demonstrate below, these verses led several Muslim authors to conceptualize a particular typology of the world's religions.

75 Q. 9:33 states that "it is He who sent His messenger with guidance and the true religion (*dīn al-ḥaqq*) to manifest it over all religion (*'alā'l-dīn kullih*), although they who associate others with God dislike it."

76 See, for example, the numerous critical reviews of Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers*: e.g., Jack Tannous, review of *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, by Fred Donner, *Expositions* 5 (2011): 126-41, at 133.

77 Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

religious terms[78] and were comprised of a multi-religious soldiery (like the empires before them).[79] Even the notorious poll-tax (i.e., *jizya*) was not justified with reference to Islam up until the rule of the ʿAbbāsids.[80] Nevertheless, several non-Muslim sources from the 1st century of the Islamic calendar attest to the fact "that the early Muslims did adhere to a cult that had definite practices and beliefs and was clearly distinct from other currently existing faiths," as Robert Hoyland has systematically demonstrated.[81] If we read this evidence in light of the aforementioned Qur'anic verses, it seems reasonably clear that, at bottom, the early Muslim community would have had some understanding of the existence of several distinct religious communities. In fact, a recent ecumenical reading of the Quran takes the abstract noun *islām* to be a reference to the broader prophetic monotheistic tradition, in contradistinction to the various *din*s *qua* religions of Muhammad, the Jews, and others, thus allowing for the possibility of a conception of soteriological pluralism (and thus a much more expansive early community of believers) alongside the very clear religious differences constructed throughout the text.[82]

78 Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5. Though Donner would emphasize still the religious motivations of the conquests, a point which Hoyland addresses (through affirmation and qualification) in a very useful overview of early Islamic identity: see idem, "Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 25 (2017): 113-140.

79 Wadad al-Qadi, "Non-Muslims in the Muslim Conquest Army," in *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, eds. Antoine Borrut and Fred M. Donner (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of The University of Chicago, 2016), 83-128.

80 Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Administering the Early Islamic Empire: Insights from the Papyri," in *Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria*, ed. John Haldon (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 57-74, at 60-64 and Jean Gascou, "Arabic Taxation in the Mid-Seventh century Greek Papyri," in *Constructing the Seventh century*, ed. Constantin Zuckerman (Paris: Association des Amis du Centre d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2013), 671-77, at 676-77.

81 Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1997), 549-50. Hoyland does, however, concede that the early Islamic community was religiously pluralistic (ibid, 555) and that the more public expression of Islam does seem to emerge with the Umayyad caliph, ʿAbd al-Mālik b. Marwān (d. 86/705), from whom we witness the first presentation of Islam as the singular truth over against all other religions (ibid, 457). Nevertheless, this does not imply that a distinctive religious identity had not previously emerged, but rather that it only became utilized towards specifically political ends a century after the Prophet's death (a point Tannous also makes in *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 304).

82 Juan Cole, "Paradosis and monotheism: a late antique approach to the meaning of *islām* in the Quran," *BSOAS* 82 (2019): 405-25. Cole's argument is at its strongest in its analysis of the remarkable conceptual and etymological overlap between *islām*, the Aramaic

Ultimately, the specifics of this debate have no bearing on my particular inquiry, given that no matter the answer one proffers on the hotly-contested issue of the self-understanding of the early Muslim community, one must undoubtedly concede the fact that Muslims were historically responsible for advancing the Late Antique Near Eastern process of the reification of religion (a point which will be overwhelmingly demonstrated throughout the course of the article), whether or not this took place during the Prophet's life or a century later. It stands to reason, nevertheless, that in light of the very clear process of religious reification taking place in broader Near East on the eve of the advent of Islam, it seems much more likely that this conceptual legacy would have had a direct impact on the self-conceptualization of the Prophet and his community, rather than emerge out of thin air a century or so later.

To return to the topic of the Qur'an, however, an important forum for the reification of religion in Islamic thought would naturally be the early exegeses of the Holy Book, a good example of which we find in the early Qur'an commentary (*tafsīr*) of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). Muqātil was born in the city of Balkh (in modern-day Afghanistan), but spent much of his life in Merv, the capital of Khurāsān, where he wrote his commentaries and taught at the Grand Mosque, ultimately migrating to and dying in the city of Basra.[83] This Persian-speaking background, I suspect, may have had something to do with the exceptionally strong reification of religion in his exegetical discourse (this is a thread we will see continuously reappearing throughout this conceptual history). Muqātil was considered among the class of story-tellers (*quṣṣāṣ*) who held particular prominence in the early Islamic world, but who were later viewed with suspicion by the scholarly mainstream (this is because unlike the later *ḥadīth* scholars, they didn't care much for citing their sources), which for our purposes makes him an even better representative of the common perception of Islam in the early period. He would also draw on other religious

maṯ̲ẖlmānūtā, and the Greek *paradosis*. His reading of the relevant Qur'anic verses is also plausible, but would have been further enhanced by a deeper engagement with the very real possibility of these verses being understood in light of the orthodox distinction between the perennially true *dīn* and the multiple *sharīʿa*s, only the last of which remains true (an idea itself borne out by several other passages of the Quran), thus invalidating any sense of salvational plurality inherent in the Qur'an. His main piece of external evidence, namely John bar Pankaye's mention of a *maṯ̲ẖlmānūtā* of Muhammad in the late 7th century, is I think vulnerable to the simple objection that one could very likely read this terminology simply as a projection of the Christian writer's *own* understanding of Islam, which need not necessarily have any connection whatsoever to the early Muslims' self-understanding of their religion.

83 Achmad Tohe, "Muqātil ibn Sulaymān: A Neglected Figure in the Early History of Qur'ānic Commentary," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 2015), 1-2.

traditions in his commentary, another controversial practice that played a part in his condemnation by other Muslim religious scholars,[84] but one that makes his a far more interesting commentary in terms of the understanding of religion, and one that also raises the possibility that the early fluidity of the Muslim community and its close interactions with other religious communities played a role in their conception of Islam as a distinct religion.[85]

Muqātil employs the phrase "adherents of the religions" (*ahl al-adyān*) on numerous occasions throughout his commentary to refer to other religious groups,[86] which appears to be one of the earliest recorded instances of such a term, and suggests furthermore that the plural "religions" was not in common usage up until the 2nd century, a point which is supported by the striking fact that the term *adyān* only appears on two (rather suspicious) occasions in the *ḥadīth* literature.[87] At one point in his commentary, for instance, he explains what he considers to be the Qur'anic position on other religions, which is essentially the view that the other religions of the world are no more than deviant sects of Islam. The verse in question presents a commandment from God to the believers to not be like those who associate partners with Him, nor "those who have divided their religion (*dīnahum*) and became sects (*shiyaʿ*), every faction rejoicing in what it has."[88] According to Muqātil, this division refers to

84 Ibn Ḥibbān writes that "he (Muqātil) used to take [that portion of] knowledge of the Qur'an from the Jews and Christians which was in accordance with their scriptures"; see idem, *al-Majrūḥīn min al-muḥaddithīn wa'l-ḍuʿafāʾ wa'l-matrūkīn*, ed. Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm Rāyid, 3 vols. (Aleppo: Dār al-Waʿy, 1396), 3:14.

85 There is a strong possibility that Muqātil used direct Jewish source-material for his *tafsīr* given his detailed comments on various aspects of the Jewish religion and the significant population of Jews in the towns he inhabited: see Haggai Mazuz, "Possible Midrashic Sources in Muqātil b. Sulaymān's *Tafsīr*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 61 (2016): 497-505.

86 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Shaḥāta, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth, 1423), 1:279, 287, 291; 2:630; 3:380, 414, 616; 4:77, 316, 318, 635.

87 In a weak *ḥadīth* reported in one of the canonical collections, the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 99-101/717-20) writes to his governors about spending the war spoils in accordance with the Caliph ʿUmar's precedent, since the Prophet explicitly attested to his sense of political justice given that, among other things, ʿUmar "levied the poll-tax (*jizya*) on the adherents of other religions (*ahl al-adyān*)," Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *al-kharāj wa'l-imāra wa'l-fayʾ* 7, *bāb fī tadwīn al-ʿāṭāʾ*, no. 2961. For the other instance of this term, see page 31 below. I would also add here that such cases of conceptual historicity seem to attest to the early origins of parts of the authenticated *ḥadīth* corpus, thought even if one were not to concede this point, this abbreviated case study demonstrates the immense value of the *ḥadīth* in helping us understand the early development of certain terms and concepts in the Islamic tradition, an exercise which can perhaps also assist in distinguishing later fabrications from earlier statements (the latter of which would be more in tune with the linguistic and conceptual landscape of the early Muslim community).

88 Q. 30:32.

"the adherents of the religions (*ahl al-adyān*) dividing their religion, [which was] Islam, and becoming sects, i.e., sects in [terms of] religion (*fī'l-dīn*), [like] the Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and others … each [of whom are] members of a religious community (*ahl al-milla*) who are content with what they have with respect to [their] religion (*bi-mā ʿindahum min al-dīn*)."[89] On this interpretation, which is quite in line with the Qurʾanic language itself, there exist several religions and religious communities, all of which are aberrations of the true perennial faith, Islam. To support his argument for common origins, he points to the fact that "all of the adherents of the religions say Abraham is from us; not one of them renounces him."[90]

One encounters a similar Abrahamic reference in the oldest extant Arabic dictionary, the *Book of the* [*Letter*] *ʿAyn* (*Kitāb al-ʿayn*), composed by al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. 170/786), a Basran-born lexicographer who is widely considered to be the father of Arab philology.[91] His scholarly activity was clearly influenced by Qurʾanic exegesis (which can be picked up by reading his dictionary), although it is uncertain whether he composed a complete commentary himself. In the verse of the Qurʾan in which God tells Muhammad, "indeed, this community (*umma*) of yours is one community,"[92] Farāhīdī takes this to refer to the "one religion (*dīn wāḥid*)," which suggests that God's intention in the verse is to declare that "anyone who follows one religion in distinction to the rest of the religions (*adyān*) is a community unto himself." This also refers back to the verse of the Qurʾan which declares that "Abraham was a community."[93] Farāhīdī then quotes a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, which discusses the salvific status of the most notable pre-Islamic Meccan monotheist, Zayd b. ʿAmr b. Nufayl, thus reinforcing the understanding of the Abrahamic religion outlined above. The Prophet is alleged to have attested that "Zayd b. ʿAmr will be raised on the Day of Judgement as a community unto himself: that is because he renounced the religions of the polytheists and believed in

89 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, 3:414.

90 Ibid, 3:380.

91 There is rich debate surrounding the authorship of the text, with many recent scholars arguing in favor of a stronger role having been played by Farāhīdī's colleague, al-Layth b. al-Muẓaffar (d. 187/803). The question seems not to have been definitively settled, with the most likely scenario being that Farāhīdī provided the structure of the text and was an important original source, while al-Layth and others added on to the original; nevertheless, the source can be definitively traced back to the 2nd century; see R. Sellheim, "al-Layth b. al-Muẓaffar," *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* and idem, "al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad," *EI2*.

92 Q 21:92.

93 Q. 71:120.

God before the sending of the Prophet (pbuh), even though he did not know what the religion would be like (*lā yadrī kayf al-dīn*)."[94]

A similar understanding is presented in the popular early biography of the Prophet attributed to Ibn Isḥāq (d. 151/767), in which the aforementioned Zayd b. ʿAmr is said to have "withdrawn from the idols, and separated [himself] from the religions (*adyān*), [like those of] the Jews, the Christians, and all the religious communities (*milal*) except the [true] religion of Abraham."[95] A more descriptive characterization of the pre-Islamic religious life in Arabia comes from the mouth of Ibn Isḥāq himself, who asserts that the Prophet was sent at a time when "the Arabs followed dissimilar and distinct religions (*al-ʿarab ʿalā adyān mukhtalifa muftariqa*), despite [the existence of] that which united them, like [their] reverence for the sacred, the pilgrimage to the House (i.e., the Kaʿba), and adherence to the traditions of Abraham (pbuh) which [existed] among them, each of them claiming that they [alone] were the followers of his (Abraham's) religious community (*milla*) …"[96] Here we have not only the acknowledgement of distinct religious communities, but more interestingly, a somewhat crude analysis of the salience of the "Abrahamic" label for each of the so-called Abrahamic faiths, a question which continues to preoccupy scholars even today.

The Abrahamic religion mentioned in each of these statements is considered by Muslims to be the religion of the *ḥanīf*, which is depicted in the Qurʾan as the unorganized version of the perennially true religion of Islam adhered to by the Arabs prior to the sending of the Prophet Muhammad. Described in one verse as a "natural religion laid down by God," one scholar has suggested that the Qurʾanic *homo religiosus* might be rendered as *homo ḥanīfi*,[97] which supports the idea that the Qurʾan itself reified religion through

94 Al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-ʿayn*, eds. Mahdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Samrānī, 8 vols. (Baghdad: Dār al-Rashīd, 1980-85), 8:427.

95 Muḥammad b. Isḥāq, *Kitāb al-siyar wa-l-maghāzī*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1978), 116 (this edition contains the recensions of Ibn Bukayr and Ibn Salama). In another recension, he is said to have "hesitated from [adopting] any of the religions" (*yatawaqqaf ʿan jamīʿ al-adyān*) and to have even "withdrawn from the religion of his people" (*fāraq dīn qawmih*), which in practical terms meant that "he dissociated himself from idols, [the eating of] naturally-dying animals (*mayta*), those whose blood pours forth (*al-damm*), and those that have been sacrificed for idols," Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raʾūf Saʿd, 6 vols. in 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1991), 1:206. On the reliability of these traditions and the historical authenticity of the monotheistic figure of Zayd more generally, see Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʿba," JSAI 13 (1990): 85-112, at 99-103.

96 Ibid, 120.

97 Frederick Denny, "Some Religio-Communal Terms and Concepts in the Qurʾān," *Numen* 24 (1977): 26-59, at 31.

its universalization of the category. The term itself most likely derives from the Syriac *hanpā*, meaning "heathen," which obviously contradicts the Muslim understanding.[98] Nevertheless, it is the Islamic understanding of the concept as the pure religion going back to Abraham which would prevail in subsequent centuries, again illustrating the strong impact of the Qur'an on the conceptual vocabulary of the Muslim community. In one sense, then, *dīn* signifies the true religion, which is to say the perennial form of Islam (a normative understanding), but in another sense it could be used as a designation for the various religious communities that stand in contradistinction to the Muslim community (an analytical category).

In the broader scheme of the development of monotheistic thought, Islam thus represents a significant step forward in the exclusivist understanding of religion deeply embedded in the Abrahamic faiths. The origins of this unique conception of religion can be traced back to the Book of Exodus, as Jan Assmann has provocatively argued in his analysis of what he calls "the most grandiose and influential story ever told."[99] What is particularly novel and earth-shattering about this tale, Assmann informs us, is its introduction of the idea of *revelation* into the world, which is the novel idea of "a binding instruction from God, issued once and for all time, encompassing and regulating all aspects of human and social existence."[100] Central to this understanding of religion is a command to remember a foundational event and to adhere to a law from on high, which in turn separates religion from mere culture and lends itself to a much stronger form of religious identity. My only qualm with Assmann's otherwise compelling thesis of "the invention of religion" is that the *modern* sense of "religion" as a set of beliefs and practices contained within an identifiable faith-based community only emerges with the *third* of the Abrahamic monotheisms. Although the Qur'an draws explicitly on the Exodus narrative and is clearly inspired by the idea of revelation as understood within Judaism and Christianity, it is only with the appearance of this particular foundational monotheistic text that a reified religious understanding (one recognizable to the modern eye) becomes widespread.

This is true not only in terms of the abstract theology of Islam, but also in terms of its social and communal development. The concrete idea of religion would be put to a more practical use in dealing with the all-important question

98 Mun'im Sirry, "The Early Development of the Quranic *Ḥanīf*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 56 (2011): 345-66, at 354. Sirry also suggests that much of the Qur'anic discourse on *ḥanīf* aims at recasting this term in a positive light.

99 Jan Assmann, *The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1; 338.

100 Ibid, 329.

of membership in the community, which was a pressing issue for Muslims from early on as "apostasy" became widespread.[101] The notion of distinct religious communities clearly emerges, for instance, in related discussions of the crucial question of what was to be done with those non-Muslims who left their own religions, particularly in light of the prophetic command to kill those who apostatize from Islam. One *ḥadīth* often cited in this regard is recorded in the early collection of traditions compiled by Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), the *Muwaṭṭa'*, in which the Prophet is alleged to have told his community not to concern themselves with "the one who leaves the Jews for the Christians or leaves the Christians for the Jews, nor he who leaves his religion from among the adherents of all religions (*ahl al-adyān*) except Islam. Your concern should be with the one who leaves Islam for another [religion] and makes it known."[102] Mālik's student, the renowned jurist, Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), similarly interprets the Prophetic statement, "he who converts is killed" (*man baddala qutila*), to refer only to those who leave the religion of truth (i.e., Islam), not the one who apostatizes from a religion other than Islam. His reasoning is that "he who leaves a religion other than Islam for another religion is simply leaving one falsehood for another, and one should not be killed for abandoning a falsehood; one is only killed for leaving the truth, because he is not leaving the religion for which God mandated Paradise and Hell for that which opposes it. He is simply following a religion which is destined for the Fire, if he [chooses to] remain in it."[103]

What these early discussions illustrate is that a clear sense of the existence of distinct religious communities was required for the early Islamic state to properly govern its population, a point which is borne out by significant historical evidence. For example, the *dhimmi* model of religious administration (fundamentally based, as it is, on the differentiation between distinct religious communities) for which Muslims later became notorious had its origins in the famous "Constitution of Medina," which granted equal protection to all members of the *umma* (likely referring to a broader notion of a political community) whilst allowing the Muslims and Jews therein to retain their own

101 These are historically referred to as the "wars of apostasy" (*ḥurūb al-ridda*), which began in the reign of the first caliph, Abū Bakr. For a brief overview of this complicated historical episode, see M. Lecker, "al-Ridda," *EI2*. I place the term apostasy in scare quotes since what the tribes did (with a few notable exceptions) was withhold their political allegiance to the successors of Muhammad, which isn't quite *religious* apostasy in the strict sense of the term.

102 Mālik b. Anas, *al-Muwaṭṭa'*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Aʿẓamī, 8 vols. (Abu Dhabi: Mu'assasat Zāyid b. Sulṭān Āl Nahyān, 1425/2004), 4:1065.

103 Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Umm*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1410/1990), 1:294.

respective *dīn*s (almost certainly referring here to their distinct religious practices and laws).[104] In light of this and our previous findings, it is clear that the reification of religion was not only part of the context in which Islam emerged, but was deeply inscribed into Islamic discourse and practice from very early on for a variety of scriptural, linguistic, and even political reasons.

The Kalīla wa Dimna *and the Persian Influence on Early Islamic Understandings of Religion*

The earliest extended discussion of the multiplicity of religions – as well as the first theoretical discussion of religion in the abstract – in the Islamic context appears in the extremely influential Middle Persian to Arabic translation of the *Kalīla wa Dimna* by the Persian ʿAbbāsid-era bureaucrat, ʿAbdullāh b. al-Muqaffaʿ (d. 142/756). The popular book is of course Indian in origin, written in Sanskrit around the year 300.[105] Often seen simply as a collection of fables, the *Pañcatantra* ("The Five Topics") was in fact a self-declared work of political counsel and hence of deep relevance to the early ʿAbbāsid bureaucrat. It was translated in the year 550 into Pahlavi, which was the medium Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ used for his own translation. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ added three more tales from the Mahābhāratha, another Indian collection, as well as other stories. It was his Arabic translation which would emerge as the sole source for the cross-cultural fluorescence of the text through subsequent translations into New Persian, Turkish, Spanish, German, Latin, and more.

In the standard De Sacy edition of the *Kalīla*, the fourth introduction contains the autobiography of the chief physician of Khusraw Anūshirwān (r. 531-579), Burzōy (Barzawayh in Arabic), who originally translated the text into Pahlavi. In this remarkable section, which makes its first appearance in the translation of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ,[106] Burzōy describes his spiritual journey

104 See the translation in Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 230. Even Donner felt obliged to acknowledge the possible meaning of "religion" in his translation of *dīn* (he renders it as "religion/law"), which clearly poses some problem for his thesis (though he generally reads the clause as support for his conception of an early ecumenical community/*umma*, ibid, 72-73).

105 Patrick Olivelle, *Pañcatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xii-xiii.

106 It must be noted that the basic structure and theme of Burzōy's autobiography (of a sage inquiring into different religions in search of truth) appears in the Zoroastrian text, *Dādestān ī Mēnōy Xrad*, which seems to have been written prior to the advent of Islam (though this is not entirely certain). Nevertheless, there remain many divergences in the specific details of the tale, the most important of which is in the denouement of the narrative, at which point the sage only became further reinforced in his Magian beliefs (quite unlike Burzōy who remains undecided). See E. W. West (trans.), *Pahlavi texts*, 5

through the various religions of the world. Reminiscent of the protagonist in Darron Aronofsky's *The Fountain*, Burzōy tells the reader how he gradually came to the realization that there is more to life than a career as a physician, given that there is ultimately no cure for death itself; instead, it is only knowledge of what is eternal, he determines, that can deliver true salvation. He begins to despise medicine and longs after religion (*wa aradtu al-dīn*), but remains plagued by many religious doubts (*ishtabah ʿalayy amr al-dīn*).[107] In particular, he finds himself in the face of a seemingly intractable dilemma, which is the existence of several distinct religious communities (*wa ammā al-milal fa-kathīra mukhtalifa*) – some inheriting their traditions from their ancestors, some accepting them by coercion, and others adopting them for worldly prestige and gain – each of which claim to be the only true religion, viewing the rest as misguided. Despite their shared claim to superiority, Burzōy laments, they disagree over essential doctrinal issues like the nature of the Creator and the end of the world, leaving one to wonder whether there remains any meaningful way to assess the validity of these claims.

In search of some clarity, Burzōy resolves to seek out the "scholars of each religious community" (*ʿulamāʾ ahl kull milla*) in the hopes of uncovering the truth from this confused medley. Yet all he encounters are individuals praising their own religions (*madḥ dīnih*) and rejecting the rest (*dhamm mā yukhālifuh min al-adyān*) due to their inherent biases, which he deems to be a completely dishonest and irrational state of affairs.[108] Still, he continues his exploration of the world's religions (*al-baḥth ʿan al-adyān*) in order to find some means of fairly adjudicating among them, but ultimately finds nothing which satisfies any objective rational standard. At one point he even decides to follow the religion of his forefathers (*dīn ābāʾī*), as so many others do, but it too collapses upon closer examination.[109] He finally settles upon a universalist ethical posi-

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vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 3:5-8. Elsewhere West dates the text (though with great reservation) to the period of 550-625, which is to say prior to the rise of Islam, idem, "Darab Dastur Peshotan Sanjana, B. A. The Dina-i Mainu-i Khrat, or the or the Religious Decisions of the Spirit of Wisdom (Book Review)," *JRASGBI* (1896): 234-36, at 235. On the parallels between the two texts, see Shaul Shaked, "From Iran to Islam: Notes on Some Themes in Transmission," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984): 31-67, at 52-58; Francois de Blois, *Burzōy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalīlah wa Dimnah* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1990), 33; and Thomas Benfey, "The Scholars of Sasanian Iran and Their Islamic Heirs," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2020), 153-54.

107 Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *Kalīla wa dimnah*, ed. ʿAbdullah ʿAzzām and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (Cairo: Muʾassasat Hindāwī lil-taʿlīm waʾl-thaqāfa, 2014), 63-64.

108 Ibid, 64.

109 Ibid, 65.

tion in which he will limit himself to "everything which the intellect deems to be good (*tashhad al-ʿuqūl annahu birr*) and all of that which the adherents of each religion have agreed upon (*yattafiq ʿalayh kull ahl al-adyān*)." These would be familiar to the modern agnostic reader: things like renouncing murder and theft, and avoiding lying and offensive speech, just to name a few.[110]

In Burzōy's account (transmitted through Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ), there appears not only an explicit critique of the efficacy of the religious enterprise, but more importantly for our purposes, the commonplace acknowledgement of the existence of multiple distinct religious communities in the world, which are comprised of individuals devoted to common beliefs about reality and certain ethical mores. In his translation, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ uses two words for religion: *adyān*, with respect to the different religions, and *milal*, to refer to the actual communities which comprise each religion. For Burzōy and his Muslim translator, it was simply an uncontroversial fact about the world that there existed multiple religions whose adherents bickered over their various theological and ethical differences. That this strongly reified view of religion should emerge within a work of "religious skepticism"[111] makes sense as a historical phenomenon: to critique religion is to objectify it and subject it to scrutiny, which renders it a more concrete phenomenon than what one would find, for instance, in the understanding of religion held by an antinomian mystic attempting to transcend the orthodox boundaries of Islam. Importantly, however, this text was widely read and continuously translated into other Islamicate languages over the course of several centuries, which illustrates that such an understanding of the phenomenon of religion would have been widely available to medieval Muslims (and indeed, medieval Europeans as well).[112] In fact, as will be made

110 Ibid, 66.

111 Thomas Benfey has rightly cautioned against the unqualified use of this label as a characterization of Burzōy's position, given that he ultimately upheld the validity of the religious enterprise (namely, the belief in an afterlife for which one must work in this world), but simply rejected (out of a certain pragmatism) the various religions current in his time, settling instead on a lowest common denominator position. I still do think, however, that he evinces a skeptical attitude towards religion, which though it must be distinguished from earlier and later forms of complete epistemological skepticism, would have served as an important source for the later strands of religious skepticism which we encounter in the Islamic context (some of whom explicitly draw on Burzōyan lines of argumentation, as we'll see below). See Benfey, "The Scholars of Sasanian Iran," 151-52.

112 See the comprehensive list of translations in C. Brockelmann, "Kalīla Wa-Dimna," *EI2*. Of course, the text was also ripe for dubious interpretations, as was the case for Raymond de Béziers' Latin translation of the work in 1313 for the French royal family, which distorted Burzōy's religious skepticism into a tale of his conversion to Catholicism; see Amanda Luyster, "The Conversion of Kalila and Dimna: Raymond de Béziers, Religious Experience, and Translation at the Fourteenth-Century French Court," *Gesta* 56 (2017): 81-104.

readily apparent by the end of this article, this broad strand of skepticism appears to have continued in an even more aggressive form throughout the course of medieval Islamic history and initiated a variety of responses, thereby prolonging a theoretical discourse on the critique of religion.

In the course of his argument for Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's authorship of the *Kalīla*, François de Blois establishes that this sort of religious skepticism would have been present at the time of Burzōy: it was "the kind of thinking that was, it seems, prevalent in the 6th century on both sides of the Byzantine-Persian frontier, a kind of thinking we can easily imagine flourishing during the time of Khusroy I, a time when Persia was opened up for Hellenic cultural influences."[113] This means that this skeptical view towards religion would have been floating around for several centuries within the Near East prior to the founding of the Muslim community, which, moreover, found itself in power precisely at this "Byzantine-Persian frontier" very soon thereafter. Consequently, the translation works of figures like Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ would serve as another important avenue through which this understanding of religion would have carried through from the Hellenic-Persian context into the Islamic world, in addition to those mentioned above. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ was, of course, responsible for more than simply translating the *Kalīla wa Dimna*; he is considered by many to be one of the primary intermediaries through which the Persian cultural and political legacy entered into and began to dominate Islamic socio-political thought.[114] Three works in particular are responsible for directly transmitting this heritage: the *Khudāynāma*, the *ʿĀyīnnāma*, and the *Tājnāma*, each of which are attributed to him (though they only exist today in fragments). They are clearly the source for writers like Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) who functioned as secondary transmitters of Persianate norms into the mainstream of Arabo-Islamic thought (since they had no direct knowledge of the languages). According to the Italian Arabist, Francesco Gabrieli, the work of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ

> reveals itself as the principal means of transmission to the Arabs of the epic, history and institutions of Iran which were subsequently to be the subject of many elaborations and developments, all more or less the work of the imagination, in later authors … the part taken by Ibn al-Muḳaffaʿ in

113 Francois de Blois, *Burzōy's Voyage to India*, 32-33.

114 Theodor Nöldeke, *Die Geschiche der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (Leiden: Brill, 1879), xiv-xxvii.

> transmitting to Arabo-Islamic culture this ancient Iranian tradition … is of the very greatest importance.[115]

I would argue further that medieval Muslims not only acquired significant socio-political norms from the Persians, like the importance of class hierarchy and the customs of kingship, but also the conceptual legacy of their reified view of religion which was deeply embedded in this literature.

This appears to be the case for Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ himself, who clearly held an overwhelmingly communal, rather than a personal understanding of religion. For this we may look to a curious story reported by the well-known historian Ibn Khallikān (d. 608/1211) regarding the conversion of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ to Islam. In his account, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ goes to his patron ʿIsā b. ʿAlī and confesses that Islam has entered his heart and that he would like to convert at his hands. ʿIsā agrees but delays the procession till the morrow, when the conversion could be performed in front of a larger gathering of people. Later that evening, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ sits down to dine with him and begins to "murmur prayers as was the custom of the Magians" (*yuzamzima ʿalā ʿādat al-majūs*).[116] ʿIsā, quite justifiably shocked, turns to his companion and exclaims: "[Have] you performed this Zoroastrian ritual while you have resolved on [converting to] Islam?" to which Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ replies: "It would displease me to pass the night without following any religion (*ʿalā ghayr dīn*)."[117] Although the story is

115 Francesco Gabrieli, "Ibn al-Muḳaffaʿ", *EI2*. Michael Bonner has somewhat attenuated this claim by demonstrating, for instance, that the *Khudaynāmā* was in fact based on a variety of documents translated into Arabic by several scholars, of which Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ was only one, and that too not even the first: see Michael Richard Jackson Bonner, *Al-Dīnawarī's* Kitāb al-Aḫbār al-Ṭiwāl*: an historiographical study of Sasanian Iran* (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 2015), 90. Though much work is to be done regarding this transmission of the Sasanian heritage, one can still not deny the central role played by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ through not only his translations, but also his important political writings, which in a fundamental way Arabized and Islamized Sasanian concepts and ideas.

116 The term refers to the Zoroastrian practice of eating silently and murmuring liturgies in a muted voice so as to avoid polluting the food with one's saliva: see Michael Maroney, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, 296. For the Muslim reader, however, the term would have been understood as a recitation of Zoroastrian scripture, which was viewed by Persian Muslims as a sort of incomprehensible "mumbling," hence the phonetically-derived term *zamzama*: see Mary Boyce and Firoze Kotwal, "Zoroastrian *Bāj* and *Drōn* – *I*," *BSOAS* 34 (1971): 56-73, at 72n86.

117 Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282), *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1900), 2:151. Also in al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-islām wa wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa'l-aʿlām*, ed. Bashār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2003), 3:910. Shaul Shaked reads this as one of several pieces of evidence attesting to Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's Zoroastrian,

first recorded many centuries after Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and may well be fabricated in order to cast suspicion on the controversial figure, here we have a more intimate example of one man's ultimate existential concern understood through the lens of a fairly reified understanding of religion as membership within a religious community. Nevertheless, this view was not of course limited to the resolution of existential concerns, but was equally applicable to the wider realm of politics, where the objectification of religion was enormously fertile for those who sought to perpetuate their power.

Religion as an Object of Politics: Three Theories on the Causes of Imperial Decline

Some scholars would like to claim that it is only under the modern secular political order that religion has been transformed into an object of politics, but that is to give credit where it is not due, since it is in the fusion, rather than the separation of religion and politics that we find the earliest signs of the political objectification of religion. The origins of this idea in the Islamic world can again be traced back to Sasanian Iran. To begin, there is of course the well-known adage of Sasanian origin cited widely by medieval Muslims, which asserts that "religion (*dīn*) and kingship (*mulk*) are twin brothers."[118] Although the understanding presented therein is one of the combination of religion and politics, such a convergence logically implies that there is a distinction to be made between the two (since they are seen as *brothers*, rather than as a *single individual*). Thus, in articulating this idea, Muslim writers did not mean to suggest that religion and politics were one and the same (i.e., informed by the same epistemological source, namely, revelation), which is often the implication of the modern Islamist slogan *dīn wa dawla* ("religion and state"). Their point, rather, was that the two work most effectively in conjunction with one another.

It is precisely this view of religion and politics as two distinct domains of life in need of one another which led many medieval Muslims to understand religion as "first and foremost about community formation."[119] For Muslims, the social effects of religion were not latent, as the renowned French sociologist

rather than Manichaen background, as many of his medieval critics would have it; see Shaked, "From Iran to Islam," 50.

118 For the Sasanian origins of this axiom, see Shaked, "From Iran to Islam," 38-40.

119 Patricia Crone, "What are Prophets for? The Social Utility of Religion in Medieval Islamic Thought?" in *Islam, the Ancient Near East and Varieties of Godlessness: Collected Volumes in Three Volumes, Volume 3*, ed. Hanna Siurua (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 186-99, at 186.

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) (and many of his successors) would claim, but manifestly apparent, since *revealed* religion was also *civic* religion and thus was seen to be eminently useful for the maintenance of political and social order. For a good illustration of this idea, we may turn to our usual suspect for the transmission of Persian norms into the Islamic context, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, who first popularized and systematized this politicized understanding of religion in the Islamic context. In particular, it is in his longer work on politics and ethics, the *Manners Magna* (*al-Adab al-kabīr*), that he presents a thoroughly functionalist account of religion. In this important and influential work, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ envisages three forms of political rule, the strongest of which is the kingship of religion (*dīn*). This rule is in effect, he writes, "when he (the king) upholds the religion of his people, and if their religion is such that he gives them their due and metes out to them what they deserve, they will be pleased with him and he will turn the discontented among them into people who will gladly conform and submit."[120] On Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's understanding, it is the king who establishes the religion of the people, not God, which has the further implication that one of religion's central objectives is to appease the subjects and generate political legitimacy.[121] What is particularly remarkable about this position, as Noah Feldman has insightfully noted, is that Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ approaches "the constitutive relation between religion and the state from the external perspective of the neutral observer." For him, religion is of interest inasmuch as it serves as a particularly effective tool for the consolidation of power.

Feldman rightly underscores the originality of this view within the context of the Islamic world, particularly with respect to the common juristic and theological approaches to politics and religion, in which Islam foregrounds political rule. He goes on, however, to juxtapose Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's view with the "standard orthodox accounts," which "proceed from the internal perspective of belief in Islam."[122] To be sure, his point is to highlight the differences between the respective approaches of the ethical and legal genres of medieval Islamic writings, which is a crucial insight. Nevertheless, it is equally important to note that the historical record reveals that Ibn al-Muqaffāʿ's objectification of religion was picked up by later, more "orthodox" writers (as understood within the Sunni tradition), to the extent that his approach became mainstreamed within

120 Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *al-Adab al-kabīr*, (ed.) Aḥmad Zakī Pasha (Alexandria: Jamʿiyyat al-ʿUrwat al-Wuthqā al-Khayriyyat al-Islāmiyya, 1330 [1912]), 18-19; ET in Noah Feldman, "The Ethical Literature: Religion and Political Authority as Brothers," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 5 (2012): 95-127 at 105-06 (my translation of the passage differs slightly).

121 Ibid, 107.

122 Ibid, 108.

the genre of Islamic political theory. The aforementioned tripartite typology of political rule, for example, became a standard formula employed throughout medieval political writings by both scholars and bureaucrats, ranging from the works of the Egyptian Mālikī jurist Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 520/1260) to the Chief Judge of Granada and Khaldūnian commentator, Ibn al-Azraq (d. 899/1491).[123]

An important inheritor to this tradition was the renowned Iraqi Shāfiʿī jurist and political theorist, Abū'l Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), who in a Sasanian-inspired ethical work on politics entitled, *The Facilitation of Power and the Hastening of Triumph* (*Tashīl al-naẓar wa taʿjīl al-ẓafar*), followed Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ in distinguishing between three foundations (sing. *taʾsīs*) for political rule, the first of which is religion (*dīn*), which on his account is "the firmest principle, the longest-lasting, and the most secure in terms of [garnering] obedience." There are three ways, moreover, in which the mismanagement of religion can lead to the loss of power. The first is that the ruler abandons the religion of the people, which will inevitably result in the rise of contenders and the loss of one's territory. The second is that he simply neglects to practice the religion properly, which will result in the people despising him and eventually challenging his right to rule. Significantly, in saying all of this Māwardī does not rely on any theological premise; the idea is not the familiar one that God will remove a king from his throne on account of his blasphemous defiance. The problem lies, rather, with the common people, who "believe that religion is the most important [matter] and that [fulfilling] its duties and obligations must be adhered to."[124] Therefore, if one were to neglect these, one would lose his right to rule in the eyes of the people (i.e., a loss of descriptive legitimacy). A third potential issue arises with the decision to introduce a religious heresy that promotes irrational or extreme beliefs, which would also not sit well with the subjects. This would also lead to the king's destruction, since "people will reject

123 Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīya, 1343/1925), 1:2 (noted by Feldman in idem, "The Ethical Literature: Religion and Political Authority as Brothers," 110). Ibn Qutayba seems to be the first to have actively transmitted this idea and it is clear that he takes it directly from Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, whom he explicitly cites. This also attests to the transmission of Persianate concepts and ideas via the latter. See also Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-mulūk* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Bulāq Miṣr, 1289/1872 or 1873), 54; Bahāʾ al-Dīn Ibn Ḥamdūn, *al-Tadhkira al-Ḥamdūniyya*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1417), 1:293; Usāma b. Munqidh, *Lubāb al-ādāb* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sunna, 1407/1987), 74; Muḥammad b. al-Azraq, *Badāʾiʿ al-silk fī ṭabāʾiʿ al-mulk*, 2 vols. (Baghdad: Wizārat al-Iʿlām, 1977-1988), 1:193.

124 Abū'l Ḥasan al-Māwardī, *Tashīl al-naẓar wa taʿjīl al-ẓafar fī akhlāq al-malik wa siyāsat al-mulk*, ed. Riḍwān al-Sayyid (Beirut: Dār al-ʿUlūm al-ʿArabiyya, 1987), 203.

a religion whose beliefs do not appear sound to them."[125] Though the fundamental idea of the centrality of religion to political rule has clear Sasanian roots, Māwardī's systematic elaboration of the idea should be understood as a sophisticated political analysis aimed at emphasizing the importance of religion for the nominally Muslim rulers in power in Khurāsān at the time (i.e., the Būyids and then the Seljūqs), an objective which underpinned much of Māwardī's groundbreaking interventions in Islamic political theory.

Within this particular context, however, religion is understood not as a matter of personal creed or a vague notion of the transcendent, but rather as a generic human phenomenon. Māwardī's approach to religion is a clear example of what we would call the "functionalization" of religion. He is not interested in conceptualizing religion as the relationship between the individual and the divine (at least within this context), but rather in elucidating how religion functions as a force within society in order to provide useful advice to those rulers who wish to govern their populations effectively. On this understanding, religion stands for the common metaphysical principles and associated practices adhered to by a single united community or polity. The truth or falsity of religion matters little here; what is of utmost concern is how common people relate to religion. This is explicitly stated in another passage later in the book on the topic of justice, in which Māwardī refers back to his earlier categorizations. Here he rehashes the well-accepted idea that the practice of justice takes precedence over religion (i.e., that a kingdom can endure with disbelief, but not injustice), which an ungenerous reader may read as openly contradicting the previous significance he gave to religion.[126] In his defense, Māwardī clarifies that "this statement does not nullify what preceded with respect to religion as one of the pillars of rule, because disbelief (*kufr*) professes (*tadayyun*) falsehood, and faith (*īmān*) professes truth, but both of them are religions which are firmly believed (*dīn muʿtaqad*), even if one of them is sound and the other false."[127] Far from a partisan understanding of religion *qua* true religion, "in the Islamic ethical literature," as Feldman observes,

125 Ibid, 204.

126 In his study of this important Islamic principle, Joseph Sadan recorded 33 instances of the citation of the political maxim "government may exist even along with unbelief, but not with injustice" in medieval Islamic writings, which attests to the sheer centrality of this principle in Islamic thought: see idem, "'Community' and 'Extra-Community' as a Legal and Literary Problem," *Israel Oriental Studies* 10 (1980): 102-15, at 108-11.

127 Al-Māwardī, *Tashīl al-naẓar*, 226. The rendition of the popular statement he cites is "Dominion persists despite disbelief, but not despite oppression" (*al-mulk yabqā ʿalā'l-kufr wa lā yabqā ʿalā'l-ẓulm*).

"the combination of metaphysical claims, a community that shares them, and laws that implement them, goes under the heading 'religion.'"[128]

A similar, though more nuanced understanding of the politics of religion is presented in the following passage from an anonymous Sāmānid-era political treatise (c. early 4th/10th century and thus a century before Māwardī), one which has in fact been falsely attributed to Māwardī.[129] In a section devoted to outlining the common sources of disorder within kingdoms, the author not only conceptualizes religion as a universal phenomenon, but shrewdly portrays how it operates within human societies:

> One of the [laws] according to which the affairs of the world have proceeded and upon which the customs of nations (*umam*) have perpetuated is that each kingdom has had its foundation in one of the religions [of the world] (*diyāna min al-diyānāt*) and that its origins have been [rooted in] one of the religious communities (*milla min al-milal*), upon which it has based its rules (*sharā'iṭ*) and obligations (*furūḍ*). And there has never been a single religion (*diyāna*), ancient or modern, that has not had its beginnings in the call to the knowledge of God (exalted He be) and [the testification to] His oneness, and in inciting [people] towards the abundant reward and noble return which is with Him and [in store] for the obedient religious practitioners (*al-muṭī'īn al-mutadayyinīn*), and in encouraging [them] to prepare for the abode of residence and permanence (*dar al-qarār wa-l-baqā'*, i.e., the Hereafter) and withdraw from the abode of migration and extinction (i.e., this world), to the extent that if the promulgator of its law (*sharī'a*) and the founder of the pillars of the religious community (*milla*) – whether he be true or false – were to depart from their midst, disagreement would take place over the issues facing the community and conflict [would break out] among the people of his community, and this might stem from their aspiration for leadership or out of [their] opposition to the religion. Thereafter, their disagreement would continue, which would cause partisanship (*ta'aṣṣub*) and lead to factionalism (*taḥazzub*), and the days would successively continue and the time prolong until their age (*'uhūd*) would become distant from the

128 Feldman, "The Ethical Literature," 93n6.

129 The issue of the authorship of this text has been comprehensively studied by Louise Marlow, who has proposed that the work dates from the reign of Naṣr b. Aḥmad II (r. 301-31/914-43): see eadem, *Counsel for Kings: Wisdom and Politics in 10th century Iran*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 2016), vol. 1. All of the printed Arabic editions incorrectly identify the author of the *Counsel for Kings* (*Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*) as Māwardī.

> foundation of the religion (*aṣl al-dīn*) and they would forget much of what they had enjoined through it.[130]

According to this nameless counselor, religion is considered to be at the very core of political organization. It is the metaphysical bond around which society – its norms and its laws – all revolve. It is oriented towards the transcendent and the other-worldly, and is fundamentally entropic in that its proper understanding wanes over time. This is, in the author's view, common to all religions, "ancient or modern." Moreover, all religions are plagued by the problem of fissiparity, which stems from the absence of the founder who first provided them with their rulings and beliefs. His is clearly a normative description, but one nevertheless presented as an objective sociological analysis that is remarkably original and insightful. Even though he doesn't consider the possibility of a secular political order – which is understandable given his context – the same observations could apply, for example, to modern state ideologies insofar as they too are not free from the trouble of losing their mythical hold on their subjects as time passes. What must be acknowledged up until this point, therefore, is that for those invested in offering sound political guidance to the Muslim kings of the medieval world, a sophisticated sociological understanding of the phenomenon of religion was vital. This makes complete sense given the widespread view of the union of religion and politics, which if rightly understood as a conceptual problematic, led to a wide range of theories as to how exactly this relationship should function in an ideal state.

Our anonymous author continues the aforementioned typology of imperial decline – perhaps more perceptively than our previous interlocutors – in reflecting, like Māwardī before him, on the various "types of corruption" that may lead to a ruler's downfall. One, in particular, has to do with religion, which garners his utmost attention. Its explanation is not to be found in some sort of moral decadence, but rather in the nature of religion as a human phenomenon. In his view, the danger religion poses for effective governance is to be found in the fact that

> the speech of each of the Holy Books and the reports of each of the prophets are not free from the possibility of [admitting] various interpretations, because this is present in the very nature of speech itself. It is well known that whenever a speech is most eloquent, clear, excellent in its arrangement, and inimitable, it has the greatest potential [to

130 Pseudo-Māwardī, *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Jāsiʿ al-Ḥibrī (Baghdad: Dār al-Ḥurriyyah, 1986), 111-12.

> admit various] kinds of interpretations and explanations. And there is no speech more befitting of these traits than the speech of God (may His mention be exalted), since it is the most eloquent of speech, the most succinct, and the most abundant in allusion, and combined therein are multiple meanings and simple letters. Our book, which is the Qur'an, is the chief of books and the most special with respect to these meanings, since the language through which God revealed it is the most eloquent of languages, and because it is a book whose arrangement He made a proof against its people and [a source] of knowledge for His Prophet (pbuh). It is a built-in feature of religion that it consists of the occurrence of events which require investigation, incidents from which the scholars must extract [information], and reports which are ambiguous in meaning and traditions upon which interpretations differ, and so it gathers these as time passes. So when they (the adherents of the religion) are compelled towards it (i.e., the book), their opinions regarding [countless] issues will differ and their desires will become divided over [various] incidents (in the religion's history), and for every opinion there will be followers, legislators, Imams, and those who follow the Imams. Then, over the course of time, the [number of] adherents, partisans, supporters and defenders of each point of view will increase, and this development leads to disagreement within religious communities and their conflict with one another."[131]

This particular political counselor is keenly aware of the problems inherent to scriptural hermeneutics and the potential for inter-religious conflict. According to his understanding, religion (*dīn*) is not simply the true religion of God, but the accumulated and ever-changing ideas and debates stemming from the hermeneutical engagement with a founding scripture, akin to a "discursive tradition" in the Asadian sense (or perhaps the "Context" of Islam to use the terminology coined by Shahab Ahmed).[132] A king must be aware of the ease with which religion can fragment – given its inherently fissiparous nature – since it will inevitably lead to a situation in which, he later warns, zealous believers will divide into distinct factions, thereby inciting civil strife and eventually coming to attack the king, whom they will deem illegitimate. In the attempt to stop these rebellions, the king will dig himself into a deeper hole by squandering his wealth, which will lead to his being further undermined.

131 Ibid, 117 (emphasis mine).

132 Consult, respectively, Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17 (2009): 1-30 and Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*

This catastrophic scenario can be avoided only if religion is guarded with the utmost care.[133] Such a view should not be all too unfamiliar to the modern reader. The idea is that people tend fervently to promote their beliefs or ideologies, whatever they may be, and for a polity to function smoothly, these beliefs must be regulated and attended to. For medieval Muslims, the political threat commonly associated with religion was heresy, which had the potential of subverting the authority of the mainstream religious establishment – the ideal ally of the state in Islamic political theory – and consequently bringing about the delegitimation of the ruler.

In the above, we have explored three idiosyncratic discussions of religion as an objectified and reified phenomenon, all of which were predicated on a desire to inform rulers about the strategies of good and effective governance. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ began the trend, attempting to fortify the rule of a new dynasty in the 2nd/8th century. Another, anonymous author took up the banner, adding a much more thorough analysis of religion for Sunni Iranian patrons (the Sāmānids) in the 4th/10th century. The last of our trio, Māwardī, made his utmost effort to stress the importance of religion for a Shiʿi dynasty, which had only recently subdued the Arab-Islamic caliphate. As mentioned previously, these ideas ultimately originated in Sasanian culture: as Shaul Shaked has written, "When Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ propounds the theory that the king should control everything which relates to religion so as to prevent schisms and in order to obtain uniformity of religious practice, he is actually perpetuating a typical Sasanian idea."[134] Still, I would urge that we refrain from fixating on the notion that ideas like these are merely "borrowings". As is clear from the above, medieval Muslims indigenized this view of religion and politics – as is common within history, wherein ideas are continuously relocated and repurposed across different cultures – and developed a cumulative political discourse that was thoroughly Islamized and produced by and for their distinct contexts.

Patricia Crone neatly captures the sheer pervasiveness and extraordinary character of this medieval understanding of politics in the following observation:

> … 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'

133 Ibid, 118-19.

134 Shaked, "From Iran to Islam," 40.

> of religion was most perfectly manifest to them. Religion existed for the organization of collective affairs, they said; it created communities by enjoining obedience to higher powers, it enabled humans to internalize moral codes and thus to counteract the destructive effects of individual desire (*hawā*) … It stabilized government by legitimating rulers, increasing people's respect for them, and so on. In short, revealed religion and societal organization were two sides of the same coin.[135]

In light of this fact, one might hypothesize that this highly developed discourse on religion and politics played an important role in the success of Muslim empires across the ages. Indeed, we do not encounter considerable stability among Muslim polities until the early modern Ottomans (ruling as they did for some six centuries), who in a way perfected the marriage of religion and politics (through, for example, the bureaucratization of the *ʿulamāʾ*, which in some ways preceded the secular state in its direct control of religious affairs), encapsulated best by their oft-repeated description of the polity as *dīn-ü devlet* ("religion and state").

In this regard, Feldman hits the nail on the head in his observation that far from incoherent and unsystematic ethical reflections, these political writings can be better understood as the "sophisticated constitutional theorizing about the relationship between religion and political authority." Accordingly, it might be the case that the medieval Islamic example has something to teach us about the inadequacy of our own modern understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. For instance, the endless and seemingly insoluble question often raised in the West over whether actions are really religious or political can be potentially allayed if we put the matter into comparative historical perspective. As Patricia Crone has argued, much of this drive to ontologically separate the political and religious has to do with the fact that "metaphysical truth and social utility had grown up in different compartments" in the West, which is why "when Durkheim discovered the social functions of religion he felt that he had unmasked positive religion as a purely human creation."[136] This may be valuably contrasted with the premodern Islamic approach, which did not follow a similar trajectory and thus implicitly rejected the very premise that the religious and political could be so easily separated. One may go even further, as Feldman does, to use the medieval Islamic conception of religion

135 Patricia Crone, "Post-Colonialism in Tenth-Century Iran," *Der Islam* 83 (2006): 2-38, at 7.

136 Crone, "What are Prophets for? The Social Utility of Religion in Medieval Islamic Thought?" 191.

and politics as a way of interrogating the shaky premises underpinning the current liberal secular political order. According to his judgement,

> … in the final analysis, it is the contemporary notion that affairs of church and state have little or nothing to do with people's individual and collective character that stands in need of explanation. Some may believe that by placing religion and character both in the private sphere, away from the reach of government, liberal constitutionalism has severed the close connection between character, religion, and political authority. But this seems an implausible view, especially if "religion" is understood broadly to encompass metaphysical beliefs shared by a community and implemented through law.[137]

Dīn between the Universal and the Particular: Theological Meditations on the Nature of Religion

Though it should now be abundantly clear that Muslims could, and often did assess religion as an objective element of social and political life, this did not of course preclude them from approaching the matter from a more openly confessional standpoint. This perspective emerges most frequently in their attempts to provide a definition for religion, which was, for all intents and purposes, an endeavor exclusive to the theologians. Their interest in the conceptual exercise turned on a number of pertinent scriptural, legal, and even political questions, which naturally led them to a considerable level of disagreement over the meaning of terms like *dīn*, *milla*, and *sharīʿa*. Nevertheless, what united all of these attempts to essentialize religion, which ranged from objective analyses of religion as a sociological phenomenon to more straightforwardly normative theological definitions of religion, was the implicit assumption that the task of determining the scope and nature of this discrete realm of life was crucial to obtaining a proper understanding of Islam. What follows, therefore, is a survey of various historical attempts to pin down the notion of religion from a theological perspective, each of which was inflected by distinct discursive and socio-political considerations. In an excellent encyclopedia entry on the concept of *dīn*, Louis Gardet sums up the spectrum of views in a way that serves as a useful framing for my investigation: "Thus," he writes, "the Māturīdīs willingly make faith an element in religion; the Ashʿarīs stress the prescriptions to be observed. As for the Ḥanbalī school, their accent falls on the 'authentic

137 Feldman, "The Ethical Literature," 126.

tradition' taken in the widest sense."[138] At the risk of being reductive, let us now move to an analysis of the diverse ways in which Muslims attempted to answer a vital question, one which continues to elude our understanding: namely, what do we mean by "religion"?

Religion, Rebellion, and the Precedence of Faith

An examination of the debates surrounding the understanding of religion in the Māturīdī school would be lacking without a discussion of the political controversies of the 2nd/8th century, which afflicted the newly-conquered region of Transoxania. It was there that the question of religious identity became especially salient for the nascent Muslim community. A palpable tension emerged, in particular, around the issue of the poll-tax (*jizya*), which was required to be paid by the non-Muslim subjects of the Muslim state. In Transoxania, this became a serious issue once the non-Muslim population began to adopt the Muslim faith in droves, dealing a severe blow to state revenue. The political conflict that subsequently ensued turned on a theological question of the utmost significance: how does one define who is and is not a Muslim? The rulers, driven as they were by their political interests, argued that the profession of faith alone was not enough; religious practices were equally required for one to be considered a Muslim (this would have the effect of weeding out converts less familiar with orthopraxy, thus rendering them subject to taxation). The new converts revolted against these policies, allying themselves with the Murji'a school of theology, which premised one's admission into the fold of Islam on the belief in God's oneness and Muhammad's prophecy.[139] It was in fact their advocacy for the people's interests which ultimately led to their school becoming the "leading religious movement in the region" without "any serious contenders."[140]

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138 Louis Gardet, "*Dīn*," *EI2*.

139 The Murji'a emerged subsequent to the Kufan Shī'ī revolt led by al-Mukhtār, thus promoting in its wake a stance of unity explicitly contrasted to the extreme factionalism promoted by other groups in early Islam. In general, they adopted a strong sense of justice and adhered to the idea that only faith was required for one's complete submission to Islam (the latter point would come to be attached to the term *irjā'* in later heresiographies). For more on them, see J. Givony, "The Murji'a and the Theological School of Abū Ḥanīfa: A Historical and Theological Study," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1977).

140 Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), 26-27. This history was first outlined by Wilferd Madelung in "The early Murji'a in Khurāsān and Transoxania and the spread of Ḥanafism," *Der Islam*, 59/1 (1982): 32-39; idem, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, NY: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988), 13-19.

This theological school, lacking a proper scholarly tradition, relied heavily for the promotion of their views on the celebrity attached to the renowned Kūfan jurist, Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767). Prior to the crystallization of the Māturīdī school, the preeminent school in Transoxania was the Ḥanafī school of theology, which drew heavily on Murji'a theological positions. The exact position of its founder can be gleaned from a discussion of *dīn*, which takes place in the highly influential, yet concise treatise entitled the *Book of the Teacher and the Student* (*Kitāb al-ʿālim wa-l-mutaʿallim*),[141] in which his pupil, Abū Muqātil al-Samarqandī (d. 208/823),[142] recorded the questions and answers he exchanged with his teacher on a variety of theological topics. At one point al-Samarqandī asks Abū Ḥanīfa how to respond to those who claim that "God's religion [consists of] many [parts] (*dīn Allāh kathīr*), which is to act in accordance with whatever God has ordained and to avoid all that He has forbidden." The language here is a bit obscure, but given the specific context of Abū Ḥanīfa's polemics against the Khāwārij and the Muʿtazila, the idea is clear: namely, that religion (*dīn*) cannot be reduced to a single act of faith, but is made up, rather, of several parts, which include following God's commandments. Abū Ḥanīfa rebuts this position by highlighting the fundamental difference between faith and works, which is that the former is universal whereas the latter is contingent. This is evident in the fact that according to the Qur'anic outlook, none of the prophets followed different religions (*adyān mukhtalifa*), nor did they abandon the religion of previous prophets, since all of them ultimately followed one single religion (*dīn wāḥid*). Yet despite this clear overlap, they differed in their adoption of distinct religious laws (*sharāʾiʿ*), each community possessing their own set of rules and negating those which came before.[143] This leads Abū Ḥanīfa to believe that what lies at the core of *dīn* is not a particular set of acts, but rather the more general creedal affirmation of faith.

By arguing that the divinely-revealed laws were contingent and temporally varied, and consequently, that the unchanging essence of *dīn* is belief,

141 For its influence, see ibid, 46-47.

142 On Abū Muqātil's authorship see Ulrich Rudolph, "Ḥanafī Theological Tradition and Māturidism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabina Schmidtke, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 284. For its early influence and importance as a source text for Transoxanian theologians, see Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī*, 44-46.

143 Abū Muqātil, *al-ʿĀlim wa'l-mutaʿallim*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Anwār, 1368), 11-12. For a summary of this passage and an analysis of its Murji'a tendencies, see Joseph Schacht, "An Early Murcīite Treatise: The Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wal-Mutaʿallim," *Oriens*, 17 (1964): 96-117, at 106; also Josef Van Ess (trans. John O'Kane), *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra*, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1:232; ibid, (2019), 4:631. The general structure and arguments of the book are outlined in Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī*, 48-53; the particular section is on 49.

Abū Ḥanīfa was able to define the core of religion in a way that placated the conflicts plaguing the Muslim community at the time. In other words, the celebrated father of the largest school of Islamic law engaged in an act of religious essentialism as a way of resolving a manifest problem in Islamic theology. We can better understand the context of his intervention by looking at the argument he presents in another short tract. The work in question is in fact one of two letters Abū Ḥanīfa wrote to ʿUthmān al-Battī.[144] In the letter, Abū Ḥanīfa argues that the Prophet initially only called people to testify to God's oneness and his own prophethood and that religious obligations (*farāʾiḍ*) only came at a later point (the Medinan period). Moreover, individuals differ in their ability to perform good deeds, not in their belief (which is simply testifying to God's oneness), which suggests that faith, rather than acts, are essential to one's complete submission to God (*islām*). Put more poetically: "the religion of the creatures of the heavens [i.e., the angels] and the religion of the messengers is one and the same."[145] If we read this statement in light of Abū Ḥanīfa's argument in the *Book of the Teacher*, the point seems to be that *dīn qua* faith is ultimately universal, which transposes religious law to a subordinate position in the overall conception of religion.

In placing these writings within their political context, it becomes clear that the objective of Abū Ḥanīfa's theological intervention was to expand the boundaries of religion in the face of a divided community which was actively attempting to exclude specific individuals and groups from admission into the saved sect. He explicitly calls out what he views to be the more extreme positions of the Khawārij and the Muʿtazila who, in his estimation, unjustly raised the bar of entry into Islam. On his account, such a position presents a variety of problems when one begins to consider the nature of the early Muslim community. What religious designation should be given, he asks, to those who only

144 On the verification of Abū Ḥanīfa's authorship of the text, see Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī*, 29-30. For a more thorough study of the letter see ibid, 28-36. One may still remain skeptical of these attributions, since there is overwhelming evidence that suggests that the works of 8th century figures like Ibn Isḥāq and Mālik were transmitted frequently, with students feeling free to add or subtract, leading to variant recensions. Nonetheless, even if the treatises were modified, these modifications were done relatively early and therefore can still be used as reliable sources for the opinions of the early Ḥanafī school.

145 Abū Muqātil, *al-ʿĀlim waʾl-mutaʿallim*, 35. There was a report to this effect circulating around a century later. Ṭabarī relates an incident in which the Prophet's uncle, Abū Ṭālib, sees the Prophet praying with his son ʿAlī and asks him, "Oh my nephew, what is this religion which I see you practicing?" to which the Prophet responds, "Oh my uncle, this is the religion of God, the religion of His angels, the religion of His messengers, and the religion of our father Abraham," Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abūʾl-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 11 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1387/1967), 2:313.

lived during the Meccan period and who therefore never received the religious law? Are they to be considered non-believers? A possible answer can be found in an important precedent laid down by ʿAlī b. Abi Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (and the first Shiʿi Imam), who continued to refer to his political enemies as believers in spite of their transgressions. At another point Abū Ḥanīfa asks rather tongue-in-cheek whether ʿAlī and ʿUmar (the second caliph) were called "the commander of the believers" (*amīr al-muʾminīn*) or "the commander of those who obey all of the religious commandments" (*amīr al-muṭīʿīn fīʾl-farāʾiḍ kullihā*). Ultimately, what lay behind this skillful line of inquiry was a deep concern for the religious violence plaguing his community. His position on this state of affairs was clear: there is "no sin of the people of the Qibla greater than murder, and in particular, [the murder of] the Companions of Muḥammad (pbuh)."[146]

This should not, however, be taken to mean that Abū Ḥanīfa's theological views were simply the product of political and polemical concerns: he cites numerous amounts of scriptural evidence in support of his argument, which seems to have also driven him towards this view.[147] What is of interest for our purposes, however, is that defining religion became a matter of serious political ramification and thus theological reflection. Muslims could not do without the category of religion, with all of the exclusionary baggage that came with the attempts to define it, since they lived in a polity based precisely on religious ideology. That is to say, the intertwining of theology and politics necessitated perpetual debate and discussion surrounding the question of what was exactly entailed by the idea of religion. Moreover, at least in this case, the early understanding of religion as a principally inward form of pietistic submission "suggests that the post-Enlightenment construal of religion as a private affair of the individual had long-standing counterparts in the Islamic tradition," as Ahmet Karamustafa has provocatively (and I believe soundly) argued.[148]

Returning to the Transoxanian political context, one must take into consideration the fact that when the governor of Khurāsān began nullifying the religious status of the new converts, the caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 61-101/717-720) was said to have written to the governor al-Jarrāḥ pronouncing that "whoever prays with you in the direction of the *qibla* is to be relieved of the poll tax." As a result, many people hastened to accept Islam. Someone thereafter divulged to al-Jarrāḥ that "people are rushing to accept Islam in order

146 Ibid, 37.

147 The salient verse here is Q. 26:13, in which God tells Muhammad that He revealed the same religion to him which He revealed to Abraham, Noah, and other prophets.

148 Karamustafa, "Islamic *Dīn*," 166.

to avoid the poll tax, so test them by requiring that they submit to circumcision." Al-Jarrāḥ conveyed this suggestion to the Caliph ʿUmar who vehemently disagreed, responding that "God sent Muhammad in order to summon people to Islam, not to circumcise them."[149] The final statement by the caliph, which essentially furthered the political agenda of the incorporation of the rebel *mawālī* into the mainstream polity, clearly drew on a doctrine identical to Abū Ḥanīfa's theological view of religion. This raises the question of what role varying conceptions of religion played in Islamic political activity.

Muhammad Qasim Zaman has broached this issue within the context of the early revolts of the Khawārij, probing in particular the question of what these rebels meant when they invoked Islam in their acts of protest. In the case of the Khawārij, his conclusions is that their immediate concern was communal salvation (and a certain anxiety regarding its precariousness), which led them to establish the requirement of not only faith (as Abū Ḥanīfa would have it), but also good works for a legally-valid definition of submission to God.[150] Their concern for communal salvation outweighed that for the unity of the community, which was clearly the primary concern of Abū Ḥanīfa and the Murjiʿa. It was also this major difference that led to their divergent conceptions of what *dīn* involved. This suggests to me that in early Islam, the act of defining the essence of religion was one with immense political and communal significance and therefore of the utmost importance to the self-definition of the early Muslim community. Indeed, a recent study of early modern Ottoman religio-legal debates sheds light on another instance "in which premodern Muslims argued over the social significance and conceptual boundaries of terms like *millet* and *dīn*," thus suggesting the continued relevance of this act of self-definition to the public life of Muslim societies.[151]

Zaman ends his article with some thought-provoking questions, which can help bring our discussion of the politics of defining religion into sharper relief:

> How did the activity of particular groups serve in defining what would be meant by religion – by them, and by the rest of the community? Further was there an evolution – because of Muslim revolts – in the idea of religion, the way, that is, in which religion would be understood: were, in

149 Translated in Wilferd Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran*, 15-16.

150 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "The Relevance of Religion and the Response to It: A Study of Religious Perceptions in Early Islam," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2 (1988): 265-87, at 274.

151 Nir Shafir, "Vernacular Legalism in the Ottoman Empire: Confession, Law, and Popular Politics in the Debate over the "Religion of Abraham (*millet-i Ibrāhīm*)," *Islamic Law and Society* 27 (2020): 1-44, at 2n2.

> other words, the later rebels more subtle in defining religion, or in stressing how their effort would further religious interest, than the earlier ones had been? Finally, to what extent, and in what way, did early Muslim intellectual development react to, or was influenced by, Muslim revolts, and the invocation of religion in these revolts?[152]

Starting with the last, we have already seen how the rise of Ḥanafī/Murji'a theology in Transoxania grew out of a rebellion in the name of expanding the contours of Islamic religious identity. Can one say, however, that their definition of religion was more sophisticated than that of the Khawārij or the assassins of ʿUthmān? It would be difficult to trace a clear evolution in this regard, and such a question would require its own study, yet one may claim with some assurance that following the formative period of Islamic state-building, the invocation of religion in political activity only grew in its complexity. This includes, for example, the careful legitimation of newly-installed rulers, which was most prominently attempted by the likes of the aforementioned Māwardī and one of his younger contemporaries from Nishapur, Abū'l-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085). By demarcating and outlining what was entailed by the "preservation of religion" (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), they were able to reassert the authority of their own scholarly class by cleverly attaching a mechanism of religious legitimation to the rule of those whose power could not be contested in any practical way.[153] This also includes the numerous rebellions carried out throughout the subsequent centuries in the name of a particular vision of Islam (and therefore a certain essentialization of religion). This is all to say that the contestation over the essence of religion was a fairly central element in Islamic history, and it long preceded the religious essentialist discourse of the late 18th century in Europe that we are so accustomed to viewing, quite erroneously, as completely and utterly new.

An Early Summa on the Problem of Unthinking Belief

The Ḥanafī doctrinal heritage would gradually transmute into the theological school associated with the Samarqandī scholar, Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), which would dominate the Islamic theological scene in the Transoxanian region for centuries to come. Relevant for our purposes is Māturīdī's *Book of Divine Unicity* (*Kitāb al-tawḥīd*), which is considered to be

152 Zaman, "The Relevance of Religion," 286.

153 See Abū'l Maʿālī al-Juwaynī, *Ghiyāth al-umam fī iltiyāth al-ẓulam*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Maḥmūd al-Dīb (Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 1432/2011), 323-39.

"the oldest theological summa extant from Islamic civilization."[154] The treatise begins with a section on epistemology (which would become a literary convention), the first part of which is devoted to invalidating religious belief based on authority (rather than one personally assented to through evidence), otherwise known as *taqlīd*, and arguing that religious knowledge must therefore be rationally established. Similar to the intervention of Abū Ḥanīfa two centuries prior, at stake in the "question of *taqlid* and religious assent is fundamentally that of what it is to be a 'Believer' (*mu'min*).[155] Yet unlike his distinguished predecessor, Māturīdī approaches the idea of religion as a distinctly universal social phenomenon, rather than a normative category.

Māturīdī begins with the following observation, which serves as a clear example of a theological position being predicated on a particular sociological view of religion, even if one underdeveloped and simplistic:

> Indeed, we have found that people who differ in [their] beliefs (*madhāhib*) among the sects (*niḥal*) and religions (*al-dīn*) agree on one thing (*kalima wāḥida*) despite their religious differences (*ikhtilāfihim fi-l-dīn*), [which is] that he who follows [their religion] is on the truth, and he who follows another one is in the wrong. Underlying [this] agreement [between] them (*'alā ittifāq jumlatihim*) is [the fact] that each of them have forbears whom they are bound to imitate (*salaf yuqallad*). Therefore, it has been established that he whose belief is based on authority alone does not rid [himself of] [the possibility of the] validity of that which opposes his belief. This is because there is no basis for [his authority-based belief] except for [the support of] a large number [of people].[156]

Māturīdī goes on to argue that the one who breaks free from this *taqlīd* must consequently find someone who does not simply spout empty claims, but rationally proves his teachings to be true. What is intriguing here is that his understanding of *taqlīd* – which is central to his theological project (and indeed to Islamic rational theology more generally) – is premised on an empirical observation regarding the origins and nature of religion as a human phenomenon. His view is that all religious followers are alike in claiming the exclusive validity of their own religions, which stems from the natural human impulse to

154 Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī*, 189.

155 Richard M. Frank, "Knowledge and *Taqlîd*: The Foundation of Religious Belief in Classical Ash'arism," *JAOS* 109 (1989): 37-62, at 38.

156 Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, ed. Fatḥalla Kholeif (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1970), 3.

simply follow and defend the beliefs one has inherited. For Māturīdī, this carries the further theological implication, however, that the majority of religions are false, which requires that one begin their religious journey with a carefuly inquiry into the beliefs of other people.

Later, in his chapter on epistemology, Māturīdī argues against two common positions taken with regards to the important question of the sources of moral knowledge, one of which claims that we cannot discern the good from our own intuition and the other of which asserts that we can in fact do so, yet without being able to apprehend the source of this knowledge. Māturīdī contends that "these two are far from being sources of knowledge, since the aspects of opposition (*taḍādd*) and contradiction (*tanāquḍ*) among the religions are clear, yet each one of them thinks that they are in the right. And it is impossible that the source of truth act in this way, since [in this case] falsehood takes the same shape as truth."[157] Here we again encounter a reference to the fact of the multiplicity of truth claims across all religions, though without the attendant religious skepticism. On the contrary, in this case the idea serves to support his argument against a Burzōyan reason-based morality by demonstrating that it would imply a relativistic stance on the sources of moral knowledge, which would itself collapse the very nature of truth.

As a follow-up to this, in the second section of his introduction Māturīdī goes on to establish the only two resources humans have at their disposal to ascertain the truth of religious claims: revelation (*samʿ*) and reason (*ʿaql*). In the midst of making a larger point about these two, he adds another comment on the phenomenon of religion, which again hints at the objectivity with which he approaches the subject. As a principle, he remarks, "it must be the case that people possess a religion which [their] societies (*ijtimāʿ*) impose on them, as well as a source [of their beliefs and practice] which forces them to take recourse in it."[158] In a way, this resembles the functionalist understanding of religion we encountered in medieval Islamic political writings, which viewed religion as something akin to a universal sociological phenomenon.

In fact, the resemblance to politics is not lost on Maturīdī. In explaining how revelation acts as a source of knowledge, he reiterates the same point he made above, but in different words: "Every human being," he writes, "must profess a worldview (*madhhab*) which he relies on and calls others to, to the extent that even skeptics and ignorant people share in this [phenomenon], let alone those who concede the existence of things and their realities." According to this distinguished theologian, human beings cannot function without adherence to

157 Ibid, 6.
158 Ibid, 4.

some system by which they understand their world, which is precisely what religion is (his use of *madhhab* here allows him to convey the idea more generally so as to incorporate even non-religious philosophies of life). He then goes on to add that "the politics of the kings of the earth – [from what can be gathered] from each of their tales – proceeds along the same lines, insofar as they aim for balance in all their affairs and unity (*ta'līf*) between the hearts of their subjects. Similar, therefore, is the affair of those who claim a divine message (*risāla*) or a philosophy (*ḥikma*) and the one who undertakes the administration of the various professional trades (*tadbīr anwāʿ al-ṣināʿa*)."[159] The reference to politics here is not entirely unusual: the analogy was used quite frequently in theological discourse and makes sense in light of the close entanglement of religion and politics in Islamic thought. Nevertheless, the point Māturīdī is making is clear: both politics and religion are in the business of regulating human societies. Although he does not inquire into the historical origins of this innate need, one might presume that he simply viewed it as a natural social law imposed by God (a point made explicit by later writers, as we will see below).

Dīn *and Its Definitions: The Lexicographic Approach to Theology*

It was the Ashʿarīs who would bring the most linguistic nuance to the Islamic conceptualization of religion, basing their theological reflections, as they did, on a close examination of the Arabic usages of the terms associated with religion.[160] The first in the school to do so was a Baṣran scholar who Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) – one of the staunchest enemies of the Ashʿarīs – called "the greatest of the rational theologians attached to [the school of] al-Ashʿarī, unrivalled by anyone before or after him":[161] that is, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (403/1013). His *Prolegomenon* (*Kitāb al-tamhīd*)[162] is considered to be the second oldest extant work of Islamic theology (after the aforementioned work of al-Māturīdī) and the first comprehensive treatise on Ashʿarī theology, one that became a model for subsequent works. Written for the son of the self-proclaimed Būyid "King of Kings" (*Shāhanshāh*) ʿAḍud al-Dawla (r. 967-983), who ruled over Iran and Mesopotamia towards the end of the 4th/10th century, it was intended to serve

159 Ibid.

160 Some of these are briefly mentioned in Gardet, "*Dīn*," *EI2* and van Ess, *Theology and Society*, 4:630-31.

161 Ibn Taymiyya, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab*, ed. Maḥmūd al-Arnaʾūṭ, 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1406/1986), 5:22.

162 The actual title of the work is unknown; this is the title given by Richard McCarthy in his critical edition of the work.

as an introductory outline of the major facets of Sunni thought (hence the title) as well as a polemic against other schools and religions.[163]

Bāqillānī devotes a short section in the book to a discussion of the various definitions of the term *dīn*, which is followed by an appraisal of other similar terms like *īmān* and *islām*. Far from providing a normative definition, he chooses to illustrate the lexical variety of the term. He mentions the common connotation of "reckoning" (as in *yawm al-dīn*), as well as the sense of a legal or political "judgement" (as in the *ḥukm* of a ruler). The third meaning he offers is the one most salient to our inquiry: namely, "religion" as we know it today. Bāqillānī defines this tautologically as "the confession to [one of the] religions and religious communities" (*al-dayyinūna bi'l-madhāhib wa'l-milal*);[164] so, someone says "a person confesses Islam (*yadīnu bi'l-islām*) or Judaism," which is to say that "he believes in it (*yaʿtaqiduh*), embraces it (*yanṭawī ʿalayh*), and tries to draw nearer to God through it (*yataqarrab bih*)."

It is only in his comments on the fourth meaning of *dīn* that Bāqillānī brings in an openly theological perspective: "religion also means 'obedience

163 Hassan, Ansari (et al), "al-Bāqillānī, Abū Bakr", *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, online edition, 2013, available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-9831_isla_COM_000000068 (accessed on 23 March 2019).

164 *Dayyinūna* is a difficult term to pin down, but in its most basic lexical sense can be translated as "acceptance," "acknowledgement," or "confession." Bāqillānī uses the term in another work on the defense of the Qur'an, which reveals a similar understanding of *dīn* as presented in his *Prolegomenon*. In a long section devoted to rebutting various arguments against the soundness of the Qur'an, he mentions the criticism waged against Q. 24:25: *yawma'idhin yuwaffīhumullāhu dīnahum'l-ḥaqqa*. A certain group of critics challenged the veracity of this verse by arguing that "it is known that the majority of religions (*adyān*) which God has recompensed (*yuwaffī*) are not on the truth (*laysat bi-ḥaqq*)." Bāqillānī points out that their understanding of the term *dīn* here is mistaken: "that here God did not intend by *dīn* the acceptance of [one of the] religions (*al-dayyinūna bi'l-madhāhib*) and profession of belief (*tadayyun bi'l-aqwāl*); rather he meant [by it] 'the account (*al-jazā'*) and recompense (*al-ḥisāb*)'" as in "the day of reckoning" (*yawm al-dīn*), idem, *al-Intiṣar lil-qur'ān*, ed. Dr. Muḥammad Qāsim al-Quḍāt, 2 vols. (Amman: Dār al-Fath/Beirut: Dār Ibn Hazm, 1422/2001), 2:753. This squares well with its employment elsewhere; the phrase *wajabat al-dayyinūna ʿalā sāmiʿih bi-ḥaqīqatih* ("acknowledgement of its reality is required on the part of one who hears it"), for example, is employed in a variety of texts in support of literal readings of the anthropomorphic descriptions of God (particularly with regard to the "fingers" of God, which are mentioned in the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet): see Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), *al-Tabṣīr fī maʿālim al-dīn*, ed. ʿAlī b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. ʿAlī al-Shibl (Riyadh: Dār al-ʿĀṣima, 1416/1996), 138-39; Abū'l Ḥasan b. Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Faqqī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1999), 1:284; Yaḥyā b. Ibrāhīm al-Silmāsī, *Manẓil al-aʿimmat al-arbaʿa Abī Ḥanīfa wa Mālik wa'l-Shāfiʿī wa Aḥmad*, ed. Maḥmūd b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Qadḥ (Medina: al-Jāmiʿa al-Islāmiyya, 1422/2002), 219.

and submission to God,' as in the verse of the Qur'an, 'Indeed, the true religion in the sight of God is Islam.'"[165] Yet even here he feels the need to make a further distinction, clarifying that this sense of *dīn* does not include other religions like Judaism, which are also considered "religions" in the linguistic sense (*lughatan*), but rather is meant to denote "the true religion" (*dīn al-ḥaqq*) alone, i.e., Islam.[166] This aligns quite well with the early understanding of religion presented above, which employed the term normatively to refer to the true faith, but also descriptively to signify other religious traditions (though Bāqillānī seems to be the first to expicitly theorize this distinction). His interest in linguistic clarification likely stems from the ancillary aim of his book, which was to disprove the beliefs and doctrines of other religions as a way of validating Islam. This would require that he clarify his use of these terms in an effort to maintain the lucidity and coherence of his inter-religious discussion. As the biographical reports tell us, his polemics were not simply a discursive exercise, but an integral part of his persona as a scholar known for having engaged in multiple public debates in the Būyid capital of Baghdad, as well as with Byzantine scholars in the court of Constantinople (where he was sent as an emissary in 371/981).[167] This suggests that once again an interest in inter-religious polemics occasioned the exposition of a clear conception of religion as a universal stand-alone category.

A more detailed terminological inquiry into the concept of religion emerges in another, generally Ashʿarī, work of theology written just a generation or two after Bāqillānī, *The Articles of Faith* (*Iʿtiqādāt*) by al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (active in the early 5th/11th century), about whom little is known.[168] He seems to have spent time in Baghdad like Bāqillānī (though he reached nowhere near the latter's renown) and likely knew Persian (given his Isfahani background), again supporting the Persian connection mentioned above.[169] Given

165 Q. 3:19.

166 Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-tamhīd*, ed. Richard J. McCarthy (Beirut: Maktaba al-Sharqīyah, 1957), 345.

167 David Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 119-20.

168 Against the widespread but erroneous notion that Rāghib died in 508/1108, Wilferd Madelung has confirmed that he was in fact a contemporary of Ibn Sīna and lived during the first half of the 5th/11th century, although there remain few biographical traces of him, which leaves one uncertain about the exact details of his life: see idem, "Ar-Rāġib al-Iṣfahānī und die Ethik al-Ġazālīs," in *Islamwissenschaftliche Abhandlungen Fritz Meier zum sechzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. Richard Gramlich (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1974), 152-63.

169 Geert Jan van Gelder, "Rāgeb Eṣfahāni," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2000, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/rageb-esfahani (accessed on 15 November 2019).

that he was primarily known as a gifted philologist, it makes complete sense that he would adopt a lexicographic approach in his theological discourse.[170] Contextually speaking, the work seems to have been part of a general trend towards Aristotelian-inflected philosophical theology gaining ground in the 5th/11th century within the broader Islamic Near East. It also appears to have been relatively influential, seeing as his definitions of religion were cited all the way into the early modern period.[171] Rāghib's discussion of religion begins from the very first chapter of the book in which he establishes six original sources (*uṣūl*) for all the known religions (*al-adyān al-mashhūra*) of the world, based on the verse of the Qur'an in which God mentions Muslims, Jews, Sabians, Christians, Zoroastrians, and polytheists as six discrete religious groups.[172] He adds here a rather perceptive observation, arguing that no one can possibly remove themselves completely from the grip of religion, since even if one were to take an independent stance against a certain religion (here he likely has the *dahriyya* in mind),[173] he would simply be breaking ties with the religion within which he was reared (*ikhtaṣṣ bi-madhhab huwa khārij ʿanh*).[174] Religion, according to Rāghib, has a complete monopoly over human metaphysical reflection, given that even in one's refutation one cannot help but engage it. The persistent critiques of religion pedaled by the notorious "New Atheists" in an almost obsessive manner seem to be a point in Rāghib's favor.

As is common within medieval Islamic discussions of religion, Rāghib then proceeds to reflect on the division of these religions into sects, which he views as a phenomenon endemic to all religions. Like Māturīdī before him, Rāghib begins by attempting to understand religion as a universal phenomenon prior to drawing his own particular theological conclusions within the context of Islam. He goes beyond Māturīdī, however, in creating an archetype of all religious systems, which is said to comprise of five basic elements: beliefs (*iʿtiqādāt*), religious rites (*ʿibādāt*), social interactions (*muʿāmalāt*), prohibitions (*mazājir*), and ethical mores (*al-ādāb al-khuluqiyya*). Out of these, Rāghib focuses on the first, since those who reject religion or commit heresy primarily do so with respect to beliefs. This is an important distinction, since

170 For an excellent study of his philosophy of language and the central role ambiguity plays in it, see Alexander Key, *A Linguistic Frame of Mind: ar-Rāġib al-Iṣfahānī and What It Meant to Be Ambiguous*, (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2012).

171 See Kātib Chelebi, *The Balance of Truth*, trans. G. L. Lewis (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), 116 and note 179 below.

172 Q. 22:22.

173 On them, see I. Goldziher and A. M. Goichon, "*Dahriyya*," *EI2*.

174 Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Iʿtiqādāt*, ed. Shamrān al-ʿAjalī (Beirut: Muʾassisat al-Ashraf, 1988), 23.

the other pillars – although they remain fundamental – do not serve as a cause for excommunication in Rāghib's understanding of Islam. With respect to these various creedal matters, there are three levels of disagreement, he contends. The first are those conflicts which emerge between the adherents of the six religions and those who deny religion as such, an example of which is the disagreement between religious believers and materialists (*dahriyya*) over the question of the eternality of the world and the existence of a creator. This is the broadest level of metaphysical disagreement, which essentially comes down to a distinction between those who believe in religion and those who remain skeptical about its claims. A level below these are the inter-religious disputes which have emerged between the various religions as recorded in the countless polemical texts written throughout the centuries by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.[175] According to him, these first two levels of religious discourse remain outside the strict purview of this section of his book, since he is concerned primarily with issues internal to Islamic theology. His own purpose, therefore, is to treat the most specific level of disagreement, which is the domain of intra-religious conflict (*al-khilāf bayn ahl al-millat al-wāḥida*), like the debates over the nature of the attributes of God.[176] What we have here is, on the one hand, an operational, transcultural definition of religious organization, and on the other, a tripartite universal schema of religious dispute, both of which are used to clarify the objectives and structure of a medieval book of Islamic theology.

Later in the book, Rāghib follows the precedent of Bāqillānī by devoting an entire section to clarifying the meaning of *dīn*, although he also includes a discussion of the terms *milla* and *sharīʿa*. For Rāghib, *dīn* and *milla* overlap in some ways and differ in others. They both correspond in a general sense in that they both "refer to the creeds, sayings (*aqwāl*), and practices (*afʿāl*) that one of the communities of the world professes (*tadīn bihā*) [originating] from their prophet, in order to arrive at nearness to God, exalted He be." However, they also differ in another important respect:

> When '*dīn*' is considered in terms of its etymology, it (means) obedience (*ṭāʿa*) and submission (*inqiyād*), like His saying 'under the king's religion/law.'[177] When it is considered with respect to its intended sense (*maghzāhu*) and what it conveys (*munhāhu*), it [means] "recompense," just as it is said, 'as you sow, so you will reap' (*kamā tadīnu tudān*). '*Al-dīn*'

175 Ibid, 24.
176 Ibid, 25.
177 Q. 12:12.

> is sometimes attributed to God, the Exalted and Majestic, and sometimes to the servant, just as obedience and reward are attributed to the two. As for '*milla*,' he [who says] '*amaltu al-kitāb*,' means "I dictated it" (*amlaytuh*), and it is not attributed to anyone except the Imam to whom it refers back, like the '*milla* of Abraham' and the '*milla* of Moses'.[178]

One can also attribute *dīn* to specific individuals, as in "the *dīn* of God," or "of Zayd," or even "my *dīn*," yet the same can't be said of *milla* (there is no "*milla* of God" or "of Zayd," for example). There is a second sense in which they differ, in that *dīn* can be employed with reference to "each single belief, statement, and practice that is (part) of the *dīn* of God." *Milla*, on the other hand, refers only to the totality of these (not each instantiation), which suggests that on his understanding, *milla* is uniquely meant to signify "religion" in the communal sense.[179] In his analysis, Rāghib is systematizing what may have been the everyday written and spoken usage of these terms in the Arabic language, and reflecting on the implications of this for how Muslims should understand the idea of religion.

Rāghib then revisits an issue discussed by Abū Ḥanīfa, which is the question of the understanding of *sharīʿa* as presented in the Qurʾan. For Abū Ḥanīfa, it was critical to distinguish between the perennially singular and true *dīn*, which traces all the way back to Adam, and the religious laws (*sharāʾiʿ*) of each individual community, since this supported his doctrine of the primacy of faith over works. Rāghib, however, is uninhibited by the commitment to any particular position on the matter and simply tries to make sense of two plainly contradictory verses of the Qurʾan, one in which God says that the *sharīʿa* of Muhammad and Noah are one (which is also referred to by Abū Ḥanīfa in his treatise), and the other of which expresses the idea that God has given a different *sharīʿa* to each community.[180] According to Rāghib, the first verse refers to the five "foundations of the religions" (*uṣūl al-adyān*), which he previously outlined (beliefs, ritual worship, etc.). The second verse, in which God asserts

178 al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Iʿtiqādāt*, 107.

179 Ibid, 108. The early modern Sufi scholar ʿAbd al-Raʾūf al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1621) cites Rāghib's discussion in the introduction to his famous *ḥadīth* commentary and concludes that "whoever explains *milla* here as *dīn* or *sharīʿa* is incorrect," idem, *Fayḍ al-qadīr sharḥ al-jāmiʿ al-ṣaghīr*, 6 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktabat al-Tijārīyat al-Kubrā, 1356/1937, 1:13.

180 Q. 42:13: "He has ordained for you, of religion, what He has enjoined upon Noah" (*sharaʿā lakum min al-dīn mā waṣṣā bihi nūḥan*). Q. 5:48: "To each of you we have prescribed a law and a way" (*wa li-kulli jaʿalnā minkum shirʿatan wa minhājan*). The latter is mentioned in the context of a verse that affirms the existence of previous scriptures, which Muhammad's book had come to confirm.

that each community has been granted a different *sharīʿa*, is taken to refer to the "subsidiary laws (*furūʿ*), which change according to the needs (*maṣāliḥ*) of each person, time, and place."[181] In other words, the *sharīʿa* of each religion is identical insofar as it is comprised of the same overarching divinely-inspired structure, but differs in terms of the actual content of its prescribed beliefs and practices. In this instance, we witness a significant development in response to an important doctrinal question, which ultimately stems from a more sophisticated understanding of the configuration of religion.

Following this more pedantic lexicographic discussion, Rāghib moves to a more interesting and straightforwardly theological, or one might say, philosophical question: how do we know that there is a phenomenon called religion, which God reveals to us, in the first place? He chooses to embark on this inquiry due to the existence of various strands of skepticism against the validity of religion. He concerns himself with four lines of argumentation, in particular, which he briefly outlines and subsequently rebuts. The fact that these views are present in the Islamic world in the 5th/11th century – given that Rāghib devotes a considerable amount of writing to them – seems to support the idea that there was a widely-accepted understanding of an abstract concept of religion, which was at the center of a rich debate over its validity. Yet even if we don't accept the historicity of the existence of actual groups promoting these views, the uncontroversial acknowledgement of these ideas by an orthodox scholar like Rāghib attests to the fact that the *ʿulamāʾ* were deeply aware of and concerned with the potential critiques against religion. As Paul L. Heck has noted, "skepticism in Islam was never isolated or self-standing but was, rather, a key point of reference within a scholastic milieu where theological questions were endlessly debated" and thus "was always a force at work in the scholarly history of Islam."[182] In this case, it led to the further refinement of the philosophical defense of Islam, and consequently, the increasing reification of religion.

The first argument against religion which Rāghib aims to debunk is a relatively weak one. According to some skeptics, religion mostly consists of the performance of various ritual acts of worship (*muʿẓam al-dīn innamā huwa al-ʿibādāt*), yet the same God who is the object of this veneration has no need for these actions (as believers themselves will claim). This they compare with the situation of kings, who are delighted at the service of their subjects and compete with other kings over their attention. Given the kings' yearning for

181 al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Iʿtiqādāt*, 108.

182 Paul L. Heck, *Skepticism in Classical Islam: Moments of Confusion* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

power, a healthy dose of reverence towards them makes complete sense. Why is it then that God ordains a religion for us to worship him (*yashraʿ lanā dīn nataʿabbad bih*), if He is in no need of our reverence?[183] Rāghib counters by arguing that our worship of God is really aimed at our own benefit, which is the purification of the soul. Thus, the critics are right in noting the disparity between the kings and God, but don't take the further step in understanding that the worship of God is greater since it is wholly for man's own benefit.[184] This correlates with his second rebuttal against a related claim: namely, that worship is ultimately intended as a means of obtaining pleasures (*ladhdhāt*) and that God, given His generous nature, may as well reward us even without our deserving it. For Rāghib, the latter statement may very well be true, but the idea goes against reason (here he uses *ḥikma*) since returning to God in a state of spiritual corruption would be like presenting oneself to a king in disheveled clothes and addressing him in an improper manner.[185]

The third criticism is one we frequently come across today and, on the whole, more sophisticated than those previously mentioned, which is that if there were a true religion (here it is phrased, "if God had a religion" *law kāna lillāh dīn*), then its veracity should be more than apparent to the human mind. Again employing the example of politics (which illustrates the strong medieval linkage between kingship and religion), the critics assert that if a human ruler (*al-sulṭan al-basharī*) wanted to make something known to his subjects, he would have left traces of it all over the place. Why has God, therefore, not done the same? In terms of the current evidence we have in favor of what people claim to be religious truth, it does not satisfy or soothe the heart, and has consequently led to the proliferation of a wide variety of opposing religious views. One must conclude from this that an individual's religious belief is no more than the product of his or her intrinsic motivations. Religion is nothing more than a cover for the fulfillment of a deeper human need to be part of a community or a desire to obtain a specific worldly end. Someone who has a different purpose in mind will simply follow a different religion, and just like that people move from one religion to another. Rāghib's initial counter to this is to say that God does in fact make his religion clear, but that those who do not recognize this are devoid of the light of God by which they would see things as they truly are.[186] He makes an analogy to poetry, which suggests some sort of relationship between the poetic and religious experiences. Rāghib recounts

183 al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Iʿtiqādāt*, 109.
184 Ibid, 110-11.
185 Ibid, 111.
186 Ibid.

how an ordinary man once asked a poet, "why do you say that which we do not understand?" to which the poet swiftly retorts, "why do you not understand what has been said?" The burden is therefore shifted to those who cannot see what the religious believer sees. One must also understand, Rāghib adds, that God has placed in all sane human beings a capacity to reflect, and if they are able to purify this tool of discernment they will be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood.[187]

The last claim against religion takes us back to Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and the *Kalīla wa Dimna*, which Rāghib explicitly references here. This particular form of doubt (*shubha*) is none other than that of Burzōy, which Rāghib restates here as the appeal to the contradiction inherent to the existence of opposing religious truth claims. In Rāghib's reconstruction, the exact contention is that since it is impossible for any one person to investigate the matter thoroughly and resolve these opposing positions, one should simply abandon all religions and content him or herself with obtaining success through one's daily labor.[188] Rāghib takes an interesting route to undermine this line of skepticism. He contends that the same kind of doubt should be attached to the enterprise of medicine as well; that the obscurity of medicine in fact exceeds "religious doubt" (*al-shubha al-dīnīyya*), since medicine is primarily based on probability, while the sources of the Shariʿa are based on fundamental truths. More apologetically, he cites the "Imām of the physicians," Hippocrates, who is said to have believed that there was no greater life than one lived in accordance with God's religion, an argumentative move akin to what one often sees religious apologists engaging in today (e.g., pointing to a certain distinguished scientist's theistic beliefs as support for the validity of religion).[189] Rāghib's skeptical view towards the natural sciences is expressed more subtly, however, in a later comment in which he reiterates a common view held at the time, which is that the basic foods, medicines, and weapons that human societies have developed over time could not have come about except by way of inspiration from God (*ilhām*) or through the teachings of prophets. "It is unlikely," he writes,

> that knowledge of the nature of plants and minerals and the benefits of animal organs [could have been obtained through] experiments (*tajārib*), since most people die before gaining even a little knowledge of these things; moreover, the natural inclinations of people differ, such that what one person accepts, another rejects, and thus they benefit and harm one

187 Ibid, 112.
188 Ibid, 110.
189 Ibid, 112.

> another accordingly, and this [remains the case] across time. Therefore, arriving at [the knowledge] of these things by way of experimentation is extremely difficult.[190]

Here Rāghib appears to turn the table on his Burzōyan skeptics: instead of concerning himself principally with their arguments against religion, he makes his own argument in favor of a radical skepticism towards the materialist account of scientific development, which could not have proceeded, in his view, without some sort of divine intervention.

This analytical approach to religion was not, however, exhaustive of the Ashʿarī engagement with dīn: they were also responsible for the popularization of the standard theologically-normative definition of *dīn* as "a divine disposition" (*waḍʿ ilāhī*). Interestingly enough, the earliest instance of the explicit mention of this definition is in the Qurʾanic commentary of Rāghib (only fragments of which still exist), who writes that linguistically speaking, *dīn* means "obedience," but that in conventional scholarly usage (*taʿāruf*), it should be understood as "a divine disposition by which humankind is carried over into eternal bliss."[191] A more common variation of the definition, which we encounter in the famous Qurʾanic exegesis of another Ashʿarī, the Transoxanian theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), is religion as a divine disposition which leads people to what is fundamentally in their benefit.[192] The most popular formulation of this definition, which would be canonized by later authors was that of the philologist and linguist Abū Bakr al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078), who defined *dīn* as "a divine disposition which calls those of sound mind (*aṣḥāb al-ʿuqūl*) to the acceptance of that which the Prophet brought."[193] Jurjānī also follows Rāghib in adding another interesting distinction between *dīn* and *milla*. Although the two are essentially the same (*muttaḥidān bi-l-dhāt*), he explains

190 Ibid, 114.

191 Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Tafsīr al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Basyūnī, 5 vols. (Tanta: Jāmiʿat Ṭanṭa Kulliyat al-Adab, 1420 1999), 2:692. In his major work of ethics, Rāghib makes the same argument for the necessity of a revelatory source for sciences like astronomy and medicine, citing as support for this claim the established view within these fields that the origins of these sciences are to be found in divinely-inspired figures like Hermes Trismegistus or the Prophet Idrīs, idem, *Kitāb al-dharīʿa ilā makārim al-sharīʿa*, ed. Abūʾl-Yazīd al-ʿAjamī (Cairo: Dār al-Ṣaḥwa; Mansura: Dār al-Wafāʾ, 1985), 387.

192 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1420), 29:529; Ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd, *Sharḥ al-arbaʿīn al-nawawiyya fiʾl-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa al-nabawiyya* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Rayyān, 1424/2003), 12; ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn al-Bukhārī, *Kashf al-asrār*, 4 vols. (Istanbul: Shirkat Ṣaḥāfiyah ʿUthmāniyah, 1308/1890), 1:5.

193 Abū Bakr al-Jurjānī, *al-Taʿrīfāt*, ed. Gustav Flügel (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1969), 111.

in terms of conventional usage (*iʿtibār*) they differ. Both maintain some connection to God's law; however, insofar as the Shariʿa is obeyed, it is considered to be the realm of *dīn*, but with respect to its bringing people together, it is to be called *milla*. Similar to what we have seen before, *milla* is here understood to signify the social and communal, rather than the personal element of religion; in other words, the idea of a religious community, not religion as an individual experience. Crucially, however, Muslims understood religion in *both* of these senses.

Ibn Taymiyya on Desire: A Quasi-Naturalistic Account of the Origins of Religion

The preceding inquiry might give the impression that conceptual discussions of religion as a universal human phenomenon were the preserve of rational theologians alone. However, elaborate theories of religion appeared in the writings of even the most ardent opponents of the *mutakallimūn*. The Mamlūk-era provocateur Ibn Taymiyya, to take only their most well-known critic, expounded a theory of religion that far exceeded the complexity of his predecessors. In particular, he diverges from the mainstream (as is typical of this iconoclast) in challenging the "many heirs to the ancient Near Eastern tradition" who "found it impossible to think of religion, morality and culture as something that humans had evolved on their own."[194] As we shall see, Ibn Taymiyya concedes a remarkable level of autonomy to human communities in the formation of their religions.

The Damascene divine's unusual perspective is presented in a short tract devoted to elaborating the principles of desire (*maḥabba*) and aversion (*bughḍ*) in which he digresses into a lengthy discussion on the nature of religion and its proper understanding within Islam. He begins by observing that desire and will (*irāda*) reside at the heart of all religions, whether they be true or false.[195] Religion, moreover, is comprised of both inward and outward actions,

194 Crone, "Post-Colonialism," 6.

195 Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya, *Jāmiʿ al-rasāʾil*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, 2 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-Madanī, 1422/2001), 2:218. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim has also published a standalone edition of the text under the name *Qāʿida fīʾl-maḥabba* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turāth al-Islāmī, n.d.); my citations refer, however, to the first collection of treatises. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), building on the insights of his teacher, makes a similar point in the course of arguing for two aspects of religion (*al-dīn dīnān*), one related to God's legal commandments (*dīn sharʿī jazāʾī*) and the other to His reckoning (*dīn ḥisābī jazāʾī*), both of which taken together comprise "religion" as a category. Similar to Ibn Taymiyya, on Ibn al-Qayyim's understanding it is love that serves as "the source of each of the religions," since God only commands that which He loves; see idem, *Kitāb al-jawāb al-kāfī li-man saʾala ʿaniʾl-dawāʾ al-shāfī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sunnah al-Muḥammadiyya, 1983), 238.

and given that desire and will are "the source of all action and movement in the world,"[196] one can conclude from this that all religious actions are fundamentally motivated by these two drives. Religion, however, produces a more deeply-rooted form of action, one which has the unique ability to engender a comprehensive form of obedience and which subsequently can become a part of a person's habitus (*ṣārat ʿādatan wa khuluqan*). Ibn Taymiyya garners support for this character-based conception of *dīn* in various reports attributed to pre-Islamic Arab poets and early exegetes like Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687) who seemingly used the term in this sense, which implicitly reveals his concern with reviving the earliest and, in his view, purest understanding of Islam.[197]

Ibn Taymiyya regards desire and aversion to be so essential to human nature that he understands it to be the bedrock of all human action and thus the foundation of every cultural practice and behavior. In looking to his broader ethical theory, it becomes clear that for him the dialectic between these two human urges accounts for the entirety of human morality, since people desire whatever benefits them and avoid whatever harms them, and only based on these utilitarian considerations consequently decide what is good and evil.[198] In taking such a position, Ibn Taymiyya drew directly on the Ashʿarīs, who proposed a utilitarian account of ethical norms in order to critique the deontological approach to ethics taken by the Muʿtazila by demonstrating that "the way ethical truths appear to us may not be a reliable indication of the way things are in themselves."[199] Ibn Taymiyya, however, transcends the particulars of this debate by espousing this opinion as a stand-alone and universal observation (unlike the Ashʿarīs who only adopt it polemically), which thus allows him to argue for the need of a divine law to direct human morality.[200] This maverick position within the broader Islamic tradition leads him to an altogether idiosyncratic view of the universality of religious experience, and more specifically, its fundamental origins in the nature of human society. In his mind,

196 Ibid, 193.

197 Ibid, 218.

198 Sophia Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 69.

199 Ibid, 130.

200 His particular view is encapsulated in the following statement from his *Kitāb mufaṣṣal al-iʿtiqād*: "natural constitution is perfected by the natural constitution that is revealed by God [*al-fiṭra mukammala bi'l-fiṭra al-munazzala*]; for the natural constitution knows a given thing in general form [*mujmalan*], and the Sharīʿa particularizes and clarifies it [*tufaṣṣiluhu wa-tubayyinuhu*] and attests what the natural constitution has no independent access to," cited and translated ibid, 96.

> Every social group (*ṭā'ifa min banī ādam*) must have a religion (*dīn*) which unites them, since they are in need of one another, and because no single individual can independently procure benefit and ward off harm. Thus, they are in need of a community (*ijtimāʿ*). When they coalesce, they must share in the acquisition of all of that which is of benefit to them, as [in the case of] the collection of rainwater, which is [done] out of their desire (*maḥabba*) for it; and they must also [share] in warding off that which is of harm to them, as [in the case of] their enemies, which is due to their aversion towards them. They must share in [their] desire for a common thing and [their] aversion towards a common thing, and this is [what one would call] their commonly-shared religion (*dīnuhum al-mushtarak al-ʿāmm*).[201]

On Ibn Taymiyya's understanding, a religion is no more than the shared norms of a community which originate in the unique concerns and sensibilities its members collectively develop over time. Like the political writers we saw above, for him religion is primarily civic religion, though he goes much further than his predecessors in theorizing the phenomenon as a social construct in the sense that it reflects the jointly-constructed worldviews produced within human societies.

Based on this assumption, Ibn Taymiyya offers a quasi-anthropological account of the origins of religion, which aims to describe how religions take the shapes they do. Those things which members of a society come to agree on as necessary for their survival and prosperity are imposed on the individuals of a society and those things which are harmful to its people are made forbidden (*yuḥarrimūhā*). Taken together, these norms become the basis for their religion (*wa dhālik dīnuhum*), which, as he emphasizes, can only come about through the shared agreement (*ittifāq*) of the people. Religion is no more than a contractual affair (*wa huwa al-taʿāhud wa'l-taʿāqud*), mutually assented to by the respective members of each society. This is how someone can distinguish true from false religion, since in the case of the latter the harm will outweigh the good and vice versa.[202] Of course, for Ibn Taymiyya this true religion is none other than Islam, which he defines as the obedience to and worship of God aimed at the transformation of one's character.[203]

He breaks this theory of religion down even further, adding that ultimately all religions, every form of obedience, and any feeling of affection consists

201 Ibn Taymiyya, *Jāmiʿ al-rasā'il*, 221.

202 Ibid, 222.

203 Ibid, 223 and 225.

primarily of two parts: an object of that desire or worship (*maʿbūd*) and the means by which one expresses this reverence (he uses a variety of terms for this, e.g., *sharīʿa*, *minhāj*, *wasīla*, or *ʿibāda*). In other words, religion is nothing more than an elaborate system constructed around the human desire to venerate a desired object. Of course, Ibn Taymiyya is no Durkheimian functionalist and therefore accepts the role of the divine in the production of religion, yet even here he offers a highly original account of how God manifests Himself to the followers of particular religions. On his understanding, centuries of continuous interaction and exchange among the members of a community naturally leads to the emergence of enduring conflicts and particular sensibilities distinct to that group, which God then takes into consideration by disclosing some particular traits of His to that religious community to the exclusion of other communities. God, in a sense, is responsive to the history of a people, bestowing on them a religion suited to the particular problems and concerns they uniquely possess. In Ibn Taymiyya's view, all of these religions still share in the worship of a single God, but it is their knowledge and means of worshipping him that differ.[204] This should certainly not be taken to mean that Ibn Taymiyya affirmed the validity of all religions; in another treatise he clarifies his position (which resembles that of the aforementioned Abū Ḥanīfa), which is that there is one true religion (*dīn wāḥid*) but multiple religious laws (sing. *sharīʿa*) that have historically differed in content. Thus, his point is to be understood only with respect to the historical development of these religious communities, given the fact that they all subsequently deviated unlike Islam. Still, his remains an extremely interesting and idiosyncratic account of how these differences emerged in that there appears to be a dialectic between the community's historical experiences and God's concentrated response.

After having established this sociological account of religious development, Ibn Taymiyya essentializes religion as comprised of four fundamental elements: belief in God, belief in an afterlife, good works, and a religious law. The first three he derives from a verse of the Qurʾan, which mentions each of these with respect to the Jews, Christians, and Sabians. These are, according to Ibn Taymiyya, the source of felicity for every religious community (*milla*). The fourth, however, is something he uniquely adds, which is of particular interest since it serves as the crux of his subsequent argument, one which becomes central to his broader intellectual project. According to Ibn Taymiyya, each of the foundations of religion should remain uniform within a religion, which is why the Qurʾan and Sunnah explicitly denounce disagreement over these matters (here there are a good many verses which work in his favor). This is

204 Ibid, 226-227.

because differences in these matters would necessitate association with God (*shirk*) and therefore negate the purity of the oneness of God.[205]

This conclusion is largely based on the verse of the Qur'an in which God orders the believers not to be like the polytheists who split into various sects. What this results in, on his account, is the complete and utter collapse of the singular truth of Islam. His precise argument is that the division of the community into various groups results in the emergence of a variety of mutually-conflicting opinions on crucial points of religion. This eventually leads, he further contends, to a form of *shirk* (association with God), since the objects and forms of worship have now become multiple (remember his idea that the object and form of worship are the essence of any religion).[206] This lends itself well to Ibn Taymiyya's well-known emphasis on uniformity in the law and criticism of the legal plurality inherent to the *madhhab* system, which was fundamentally aimed at re-establishing "the unity of reference (*marjiʿiyya*) for the *umma*" within the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*.[207] It could be argued, therefore, that much of Ibn Taymiyya's notorious polemics against the established classical tradition was premised on his idiosyncratic understanding of religion as a universal phenomenon. One might say, in fact, that in the case of Ibn Taymiyya we have a clear instance of philosophical naturalism being employed in the service of fundamentalism. I would suspect that the association between these two doctrines would be borne out further through closer studies of other similar figures for whom the "supernatural" beliefs and practices of lay Muslims occasioned their harsh rebuke.

Nevertheless, to return to his complex religious theorization, Ibn Taymiyya also appears to support this quasi-naturalistic explanation of religion by referencing his rather exceptional view of the *fiṭra* (human nature), which asserts that all people were created on the true faith and subsequently deviated from

205 Ibid, 229.

206 In one of his legal opinions, Ibn Taymiyya extends this phenomenon to "the people of the book" as well, who were divided into various religious denominations (*milal shattā*) based on their disagreements over extra-scriptural issues, which only emerged at a period subsequent to the lives of the prophets. In making this point, he is arguing for the position that there is only one universal religion, which therefore leaves no room for disagreement; see idem, *Majmūʿ al-fatāwā*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Ibn Qāsim (et. al.) 37 vols. (Madina: Wizārat al-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya waʾl-Awqāf waʾl-Daʿwa waʾl-Irshād, 1460/2004), 19:109.

207 Basheer M. Nafi, "A Teacher of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb: Muḥammad Ḥayāt al-Sindī and the Revival of *Āṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth's* Methodology," *Islamic Law and Society* 13 (2006): 208-41, at 228. The main work in which Ibn Taymiyya challenges the *madhhab*-based legal structure through a critical historicization of its development is idem, *Rafʿ al-malām ʿan al-aʿimma al-aʿlām*, (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 3rd ed., 1390/1970).

it (a doctrine the Ashʿarīs, for example, would vehemently reject). More specifically, he explains that the hearts of humankind are in a way wired to the devotion of that which is the object of their devotion and worship, just as naturally as they tend towards food and sex. However, the former is a much more vital disposition, since what is at stake is the very soul of the individual. Thus, the soul is not fully actualized without the proper worship of one God alone, which is the original belief rooted in the nature of human beings.[208] In this case, Ibn Taymiyya's doctrine of *fiṭra* fits nicely with his previous understanding of human beings as fundamentally religious creatures, all of which is employed to rationally ground the universal validity of Islamic monotheism.

If it remains uncertain whether Ibn Taymiyya takes a sociological approach to religion, let us consider his concluding comments on the subject. "Each human society," he writes, "must have a religion for the [fulfillment] of the [following] two matters: the need of their souls for a God who is, in Himself, the object of their love and desire and on whose account alone they are aided and harmed, and the need to see to those desires which they cherish and [avoid] those harms which they must prevent." According to Ibn Taymiyya, the nature of this desire is distinctively religious (*al-maḥabba al-dīniyya*) and applies to both true and false religions. Nevertheless, although true religion is inherently human insofar as it responds to these basic human concerns and needs, it is still distinguishable from false religion in one important respect. The objective of a true religion is not simply some worldly advantage (*al-maṣlaḥa al-dunyawiyya*) like the establishment of justice or maintaining orderliness in society. This is, of course, the case for those false religions which deny God and His messenger, like that of the philosophers or the followers of kings, or the people of Noah, Nimrod, and Genghis Khan.[209] The latter, in particular, was even more reprehensible in Ibn Taymiyya's view, since along with his religion he invented all sorts of additional laws and political instruments through which he could conquer and subjugate other peoples.[210] The main flaw of these man-made laws (*nawāmīs*) and religious systems (*diyānāt*) is that they have no concern for the next life, nor a belief in God, and simply command justice and loyalty, which are the basic elements required for a functioning society. Quite remarkably, here Ibn Taymiyya seems to be endorsing the popular modern idea that religion can be (and is indeed often) used as a tool for domination and power, which is a completely unproblematic position in his mind since, devoid of true divine guidance, religion will simply carry out its normal function as

208 Ibn Taymiyya, *Jāmiʿ al-rasāʾil*, 230.
209 Ibid, 231.
210 Ibid, 232.

the projection of a society's inherent desires and fears. Thus, although Ibn Taymiyya naturally defends the confessional view of Islam as the only true religion, his way of getting there is altogether unique and evinces a fascinating quasi-naturalistic account of religion, one which approaches this historical phenomenon of religion from a radically anthropocentric perspective.

Classifying Communities and Creeds: *Religionswissenschaft* in Medieval Islam

A proper study of the concept of religion in Islamic thought must of course concern itself with the vast number of medieval Muslim writings which were dedicated to expounding the beliefs and practices of other religions. Admittedly, the majority of these works were overwhelmingly polemical and apologetic in character, thus distorting the object of their inquiry (though this was surely not unique to Islam, but was common rather to all medieval cultures).[211] Nevertheless, the value of these works in terms of the history of theorizing religion remains considerable, all the more so if we are to accept Paul E. Walker's relevant characterization of the medieval Islamic period as

211 Compare the position of the Dutch scholar of religions, Jacques Waardenburg, who writes that "the defensive position that Muslims were obliged to take at the outset of Islamic history regarding the religions and civilizations which they found in the territories they conquered – especially missionary religions such as Christianity and Manicheism – gave a particular apologetic tendency to Islamic thought," idem, "The Medieval Period: 650-1500," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18-69, at 18. Though this historical point is worthy of consideration, one could also reasonably argue that the rapidity with which Muslims gained power in the broader Near East and the longevity of their hegemonic rule would have made them less concerned about the prospect of mass apostasy in the Muslim community and therefore more willing to eschew apologetics. That this was not the case suggests that they were simply representative of the norms of interreligious discourse in the premodern world, which was that a specific religious community would occasionally engage in apologetics (to continuously affirm their superiority), but would not venture further to actively investigate other cultures and religions in the way we in the West do today. As Bernard Lewis has observed, in following this course "It was the Muslims who were being normal, not the Europeans," the latter of whom represent a striking exception in the history of humanity with regards to the sustained interest in the "Other"; see idem, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 9. Nevertheless, there are exceptions to the rule in the premodern Islamic world, as we will see below in the case of Bīrūnī.

> Three centuries of intense and often litigious elaboration, during which the concept of religion had become the subject of an enormous amount of scholarly speculation … an inventory of what religion included or might include was, by then, remarkably comprehensive. A sophisticated *religionswissenschaft* was thus already in place and Islamic scholars had created a fairly broad concept of what falls within the subject either of religion itself or of thinking about religion and religions.[212]

This unique intellectual development squares well with the historical fact of Islam's rapid expansion within the Near East, Africa, and Asia, which radically increased Muslims' exposure to a variety of different cultures and religions, and in particular, those non-biblical religions which were not mentioned in the Qur'an, extending from Arabia to India.[213] Moreover, as mentioned earlier, a central tenet of Islamic theology held that all religions other than Islam are the manifestation of a single monotheistic truth, a doctrine which would inevitably serve as a source of inspiration for the widespread interest in delineating the tenets and practices of other religions among medieval Muslims. As Frank Griffel has insightfully written, "Islam almost continues – as a monotheist religion – the attitude of ancient polytheism, where there was a broad understanding that all religions worship the same pantheon of gods, albeit by different rites. The pantheon of gods is merely replaced with the understanding that all religions worship the same God."[214] As we will see, this observation will be borne out by the Muslim sources, which often read other religions through the lens of an Islamic worldview.

The sheer breadth of Islamic writings devoted to the comparison of religions has been examined in detail by the French scholar Guy Monnot, who has usefully documented the chronology of these works, cataloguing more than 160 books which include some significant discussion of non-biblical religions (this list does not include those many works on Christianity or Judaism, nor the considerable coverage of other religions in the prolific genre of travelogues and literary anthologies).[215] Most of these texts were penned in the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries, which Monnot understands to be the product of the

212 Paul E. Walker, "Philosophy of Religion in al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Ṭufayl," in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy, and Mysticism in Muslim Thought* (*Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt*), ed. Todd Lawson (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2005), 85-101, at 86.

213 Guy Monnot, *Islam et Religions* (Paris: Maissonneuve et Larose, 1986), 40.

214 Frank Griffel, review of *Der Eine und das Andere: Beobachtungen an islamischen häresiographischen Texten*, by Josef van Ess," *Ilayhiyat Studies* 4 (2013): 139-44, at 140.

215 Ibid, 43-44. The list is on ibid, 50-77.

many refutations written in the wake of the "clash of religions and trends in the interior of the ʿAbbāsid empire." This then wanes in subsequent centuries, particularly as the influence of the Muʿtazila begins to wane and the orthodox Ashʿarīs concern themselves increasingly with heresiographical issues. By the 6th century, "heresiography"[216] loses its polemical function and it is during this period that we begin to see works written in a more academic manner, which is to say with the explicit purpose of describing the world's religions for didactic purposes (though this changes under the Ottomans, as questions of heresy and confessional boundaries become more heavily contested and politicized during the tumultuous 17th century, a point not considered by Monnot given that he does not consider Turkish writings and translations).[217] Of particular interest in Monnot's *tour d'horizon* is his observation that despite the existence of only a few Persian works in this genre, the majority of authors in this tradition were of Persian background, which supports my general thesis of the importance of the Persian conceptual legacy for our understanding of the Muslim reification of religion.[218] In what follows, I conduct an in-depth study of three major medieval Islamic works in this genre, all of which exhibit not only a high degree of religious reification, but also deeply idiosyncratic and complex takes on the concept of religion itself.

216 Josef Van Ess, in his masterful two-volume study of Islamic heresiographical literature, has argued quite convincingly for the inadequacy of the Christian term "heresy" in the context of Islam, given that in the latter, there is no center for orthodoxy as such; see his *Der Eine und das Andere: Beobachtungen an islamischen häresiographischen Texten*, 2 vols. (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 2:1298-1308.

217 On the revival of this genre (primarily through works of translation redaction) and its implications for our understanding of religious fragmentation and confessionalization in the early modern Ottoman (and broader Islamicate) world, see Nir Shafir, "The Road from Damascus: Circulation and the Redefinition of Islam in the Ottoman Empire, 1620-1720," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2016), 69-75 and idem, "How to Read Heresy in the Ottoman World," in *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450-c. 1750*, eds. Tijana Krstiç and Derin Terzioğlu (Boston: Brill, 2020), 196-231.

218 Ibid, 45-46. The lack of Persian works in this genre accounts for why I have focused on Arabic writings to the neglect of the former, despite the fact that the Persian genealogy of religious reification is a central part of my thesis. What accounts for this absence, in my view, is the theological and academic nature of this genre, which naturally implies that the texts produced within this tradition would be written primarily in the scholarly language of Arabic.

Al-ʿĀmirī's Declaration of the Superior Faith: A Precursor of Modern Apologetics?

One of the earliest and most elaborate works of comparative religion in the medieval Islamic context was a polemical tract written by the philosopher of (unsurprisingly) Persian origin, Abū'l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī (381/992), who spent most of his life studying and teaching in Khurāsān. In his *Declaration of the Merits of Islam* (*al-Iʿlām bi-manāqib al-islām*), al-ʿĀmirī set out to expound "the lofty virtues that distinguish Islam, so that the one who examines it comes to the realization that its abolition of all [other] religions is warranted."[219] As a disciple of the Kindīan tradition – his teacher Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934) was a student of Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb b. Isḥāq al-Kindī[220] (d. 256/873) – he was not a full-fledged member of the school of *falāsifa*[221] like his more famous younger contemporary, Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037). He rejects, for instance, those philosophers who believe that knowledge can trump the obligation of religious duties, contending instead that the desire to learn was created within human

219 Abū'l-Ḥasan Muḥammad al-ʿĀmirī, *Kitāb al-iʿlām bi-manāqib al-islām*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Ḥāmid Ghurāb (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-ʿArabī, 1967), 75.

220 It may have also been this intellectual tradition which predisposed him towards writing a work in comparative religion. Al-Balkhī wrote a work entitled *Sharāʾiʿ al-adyān* and al-Kindī was known to have written treatises on the Manicheans and Sabians; see Everett Rowson, *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate: Al-ʿĀmirī's Kitāb al-Amad ʿalā l-abad* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1988), 18.

221 As Everett Rowson has observed, "Where in fact the philosophical tradition notoriously clashed with Islam, as it did for example in maintaining the temporal infinity of the universe and denying the resurrection of the body, he came down unambiguously on the side of Islam," idem, *A Muslim Philosopher*, 18. His attempt to distinguish himself from the widely-criticized *falāsifa* was lost on many in posterity. The famous Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), for instance, gave him the following pejorative label: *ṣāḥib al-falsafa*. He mentions him in the course of an entry on a pious traditionist by the name of Ibn Mihrān, who is said to have died on the same day as al-ʿĀmirī (Wednesday, the 27th of Shawwāl, 381 H.). An ascetic by the name of ʿUmar b. Aḥmed then reveals that one of his trustworthy companions claimed to have seen Ibn Mihrān in a dream on the night of his burial. In the course of the dream he asks Ibn Mihrān, "Oh my teacher, what has God done with you?", to which he replies, "God has raised Abū al-Ḥasan as my indemnity (*bi-izāʾī*) and declared, 'this is your salvation from Hell'," implying, of course, that al-ʿĀmirī was destined for Hell; see Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārīkh al-umam waʾl-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā and Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, 19 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1412/1992), 14:358. Al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) also mention al-ʿĀmirī in their entries on Ibn Mihrān, labeling him as *al-faylasūf*. They mention the same story with minor variations; see al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, 23 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1405/1985), 16:406-07; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya waʾl-nihāya*, ed. ʿAlī Shīrī, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1408/1988), 11:354. Nevertheless, al-ʿĀmirī did indeed consider himself an inheritor of al-Fārābī's philosophic legacy, referring to him throughout the *Declaration* as *al-shaykh al-raʾīs*.

beings precisely for the sake of discovering which acts are virtuous. On the philosophers' understanding, al-ʿĀmirī argues, governance and civilization could presumably endure without due regard being given to the cultivation of virtue in individuals – an absurd position in his mind (though one utterly familiar to us) – since they render the practical faculty (*al-quwwat al-ʿamaliyya*) of human beings superfluous.[222] His particular philosophical platform, therefore, is the expected one that religion is entirely in line with reason, or to use his own language, "that whatever is verified by proof and required by reason cannot conflict nor clash with that which is required by the true religion."[223]

This objective permeates the entirety of his work, which although appearing in the guise of a naïve polemic for Islam, should be understood rather as an extended rational argument for why Islam must be the only true religion. The book was written, it could be argued, as a resolution to the "conundrum that loomed large in the tenth century," which was to preserve the continued validity of "the uniqueness of Islam" in light of the religious plurality present throughout the Muslim world.[224] The exact skeptical stance which he positioned himself against was one of a commitment to the principle of "equivalence of evidence" (*takāfuʾ al-adilla*), which as we have seen in its Burzōyan form, appealed to the damning fact of mutually-conflicting and equally-reasonable claims being put forth by each and every religion as a means of refuting them all. Such a skeptical attitude was clearly present in the scholarly circles of 10th century Baghdad, leading to the emergence of a variety of critical positions, ranging from outright contempt for religion to the resignation to simply following one's ancestral religion devoid of the comfort of certainty.[225]

222 Al-ʿĀmirī, *al-Iʿlām*, 78-79.

223 Ibid, 87.

224 Heck, *Skepticism*, 73.

225 The latter position is adopted by a skeptic whom the teacher of one of al-ʿĀmirī's contemporaries and admirers, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), encountered in his hometown. The renowned logician Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (d. c. 390/1000) narrates how a Sijistānī man experienced the same struggle of faith as Burzōy, finding no rational standard to adjudicate the superiority of one religion over another. Yet unlike Burzōy, the man chooses to cling to the faith of his parents, offering a colorful metaphor for the process which led him to his decision. "My own religion," he writes, "is inviolable because I was born and raised in it. I have absorbed its sweetness and am familiar with the ways of its people. I am like a man who enters a caravanserai to seek cover from the heat of the sun. He takes the room given to him without question. While he is asleep, a cloud takes shape and sends down buckets of rain, and his room begins to leak on all sides. Looking across the courtyard, he sees all the other rooms in the same condition. He also sees how muddy the courtyard has become and concludes that the best thing to do is to stay in his room, leak and all, rather than splatter his legs in the muck of the courtyard. Yes, like him, it is best for me to stay where I am. I was born with a blank mind. My parents introduced

Al-ʿĀmirī understood this trend to be the result of the natural human inclination to fight shy of change when encountering "difference of beliefs," which is what ultimately "leads people to deny all truths." This necessitated, in his mind, that a definitive argument be made for the superiority of Islam over all other religions, hence his reason for writing the *Declaration*. The argument in the book is a simple one: "if Islam (*al-millat al-ḥanīfiyya*) is found to be superior in rank to other religions" – in terms of providing the best means to achieving social and individual welfare – "then one is justified in recognizing the exalted excellence and superior rank of this religion."[226] This is precisely what he sets out to demonstrate in the book. Although the work has been described as a philosophical defense of Islam[227] – a characterization not entirely off the mark – it should be said that it is less an employment of strictly philosophical modes of argumentation (although there is some of this) than an evaluation of the "reasonability" of Islam's superiority in light of the Hellenistic and Persianate socio-political norms dominating the medieval intellectual and cultural landscape, which for al-ʿĀmirī represent "reason" as such. If one were to draw an analogy to our contemporary context, one might say that the thrust of his project resembles the countless modern Muslim polemical tracts, which aim at proving the conformity of Islamic values to Western liberal norms.

The first instance in which al-ʿĀmirī treats religion as a generic human phenomenon is in an early section on the defense of the nobility of the religious sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-milliyya*). At a certain point in his exposition, al-ʿĀmirī feels the need to defend the entire enterprise of religion from the attack of "pseudo-intellectuals" (*al-mutaẓarrifa*)[228] (this is what he calls the skeptics of his time) whose criticism of religion attempted to undermine the epistemological validity of religious knowledge. Their precise argument was that

> there is not a single thing found in any of the religions which is based on [the kind of] knowledge to which reason (*ʿaql*) would require adherence

me to this religion without discussion, and when I examined it, I found it to be much like other religions. It is dearer to me to keep it than abandon it. I would only make the choice to leave it for another that offered a more convincing argument for its truths, but I have not found such a one, and so I stick with what the years have made familiar to me," translated in Heck, *Skepticism*, 76-77.

226 Ibid, 82.

227 Everett Rowson, "al-ʿĀmirī," *EI2*.

228 This terms appears to be a novel usage and likely refers to those whom al-ʿĀmirī later classified under the label "denier of religion" (*mulḥid*), whom he essentially equates with hedonists: that is to say, someone "who loves sensual pleasures, which blind him from reflecting on what will follow [this life], and call him towards letting the soul rein free in whatever his inherent nature desires," idem, *al-Iʿlām*, 166.

> or serious consideration to be given (*iʿtidād*). In reality, they are simply religious customs (*muthul sharʿiyya*) and conventional mores (*awḍāʿ iṣṭilāḥiyya*), which each religious community (*milla*) takes their share of and uses to establish their way of life (*maʿāsh*) and protect themselves from those things which would lead to corruption (*ʿayth*). If they had any reality, they would have had no need for revelation (*tawqīf*), but would have relied entirely on reason, and if that were the case, then they would not have been divided into various sects and divergent parties.[229]

It is interesting in and of itself that such a starkly anti-religious view was circulating during this period to such an extent that al-ʿĀmirī felt compelled to devote multiple pages to its rebuttal. Unfortunately, only minor fragments of this line of skeptical thinking are extant, so one can't be sure of its exact influence;[230] nevertheless, its salience to our inquiry here derives from the understanding of religion presented in the aforementioned passage, which al-ʿĀmirī seems to have been deeply aware of given that he was able to reconstruct their arguments in detail. For these critics, religion is simply the name given to social norms created to ensure the smooth operation of society. It is also worth noting the resemblance of this position to Ibn Taymiyya's understanding of the social construction of religion across different communities; although did not of course adhere to the more extreme rationalist stance in which reason is thought to be exhaustive of all morality and potentially serviceable as a source of communal unity, which is exactly what the skeptics contend that religions cannot claim (given their cultural specificity). The skeptics' emphasis on religion as inherently fissiparous should be a familiar one by now and appears to be a relatively widespread view held by both those supportive and critical of religion.

According to these "pseudo-intellectuals," the best course to follow is the Burzōyan option, which is to "adhere to what is agreed upon as desirable between all sects – like justice, truthfulness, faithfulness, trustworthiness, helping the weak, and aiding the troubled – and to make this one's way of life, leaving aside all other things about which communities wrangle and towards

229 Ibid, 101.

230 Sarah Stroumsa attempts to reconstruct the views of two medieval Islamic "freethinkers," Ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, based on fragments found in a host of Arabic sources, which leads to mixed results, since we are ultimately presented with several inconsistencies in the views of these thinkers: see eadem, *Freethinkers in Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden; Boston; Cologne: Brill, 1999).

which zealotry (*himam*) leads them."[231] This principle is something of a cruder version of the modern liberal Rawlsian notion of an "overlapping consensus" – the assumption here being that there exists a universal set of secular ethical positions to which we can all assent. Al-ʿĀmirī of course rejects this claim, but what is interesting is how he goes about doing so. His first argument against the skeptics appeals to the universal dismissal of this view: one cannot find a place in which these two positions would be favored in any region of the world; in fact, everywhere people detest and fight against them.[232] He contends that this is so because there is nothing further from reason than believing in a God who does not tell us what and what not to do, leaving us to our own devices to remain on this earth for but a few years "with all its sadness and sorrow, toil and trouble," only to then simply vanish for all eternity.[233] It is this presumption of the existence of a universal attitude towards religion which serves as a basis for his understanding of religion as a distinctly universal phenomenon.

Thus, in responding to the skeptics' claim that religious knowledge is simply the accumulation of cultural conventions, al-ʿĀmirī attempts to demonstrate instead that all religions are different manifestations of the same universal phenomenon. He begins by submitting the following premise: "the primary pillars (*arkān al-uwal*) of all religions can be divided into four parts: beliefs (*iʿtiqādāt*), rituals (*ʿibādāt*), social regulations (*muʿāmalāt*), and prohibitions (*mazājir*)."[234] This urge to deconstruct religion into its basic elements is something that we have seen time and again, though it is remarkable that in each of these instances each author offered their own unique take on what they perceived to be a matter of sociological and philosophical (and not only theological) analysis. In al-ʿĀmirī's conception of religion, emphasis is attached to the natural human need (both at a societal and individual level) for the fundamental features of religious life, which is based on the fact that

> their essences (*māʾiyyāt*, i.e., of humans) are also rational (*ʿaqliyya*), and its removal (*irtifāʿ*) is not possible as long as the lower world is built upon human nature (*maʿmūran biʾl-jibillat al-insiyya*). What I mean by this

231 Al-ʿĀmirī, *al-Iʿlām*, 101.

232 Al-ʿĀmirī generally adheres to the principle of "the bigger, the better." He rationally grounds this position in a later discussion on what makes some things preferable to others in which he mentions, in passing, that the idea of "communal consensus" (*ijmāʿ al-umma*) and "the mainstream" (*al-sawād al-aʿẓam*) stems from the soul being drawn to that which is large and overwhelming, ibid, 110.

233 Ibid, 102.

234 Ibid.

> is that pure reason (*al-ʿaql al-ṣarīḥ*)[235] will not allow intelligent people (*dhawīʾl-albāb*) to abandon the devotion of oneself to a master (*taʿabbud al-mawlā*), [the maintenance of] good relations with one another, and the prohibition of bad men from doing evil. Moreover, that which reason does not allow to be abandoned and neglected must be affirmed and adhered to; however, our partial intellects are limited from knowing their qualities (*kayfiyyāt*) and their quantities (*kamiyyāt*). Therefore, this deficiency puts us in need of one who possesses the creation and the command, and particularly so when the forms and grades of communal welfare (*maṣāliḥ*) change according to the shifting constitutions of different ages (*taghayyur ṭibāʿ al-qurūn*).[236]

Religion, according to al-ʿĀmirī, emerges out of the desire of all human beings to revere some object, construct moral societies, and secure themselves from immorality and criminality. He uses this broader sociological observation to make the more specific philosophical argument that God is the only entity who possesses the kind of knowledge which would facilitate each of these ends, since reason is fundamentally incapable of thoroughly apprehending these matters. He also displays a subtle understanding of historical change in suggesting that religions differ according to the time in which they emerge, given the shifting nature of human society itself (this can, however, be squared with the widely-held idea of the existence of different *sharāʿi*ʾ across the various religious communities, as we saw with Ibn Taymiyya). Beyond the mere reification of religion, al-ʿĀmirī here develops an entire philosophical and sociological account which roots the phenomenon of religion in human nature.

In response to the claim that someone can simply live their life according to the agreed-upon principles common to all religions, he retorts that this position is patently false. Following on from this logic, one must also concede that all religions agree that any person who neither engages in any act of worship, nor conducts himself by any of the moral codes known to man, will be ruined in this life and the next, therefore undermining the central commitment of the skeptics. Here he relies on the structural similarity among all religions (as we saw as well with Rāghib and Ibn Taymiyya) to argue for a common basis to all

235 "Pure reason" is an integral part of al-ʿĀmirī's epistemology, which he employs as well in the specifically Islamic context of deriving *fiqh* rulings, wherein he offers the following, rather iconoclastic reflection: "Nor should he (the jurist) contest what pure reason requires out of love for following previous opinions (*taqlīd*), especially to one whose infallibility has not been witnessed. For the truth is not known by the man, but rather by itself…," ibid, 122.

236 Ibid.

the world's religions. He concludes by asserting that reason does not require abandoning all the things which people disagree over; rather, it requires us to search for the truth amidst them all. This idea lends itself well to the explicit aim of his book, which is to demonstrate to the sincere seeker that in terms of ritual, morality, and other aspects of religious life, Islam is far superior to its rivals. In a way, our narrative comes full circle with al-ʿĀmirī, whose argument serves as a response to the skeptical stance first popularized by Burzōy.

A few pages later, al-ʿĀmirī advances evidence in support of the claim of the superiority of religious knowledge over all other forms of knowledge (this is another instance in which he diverges from the *falāsifa*). It is his second argument here that is of particular interest to us, since it touches on a generic understanding of religion. According to al-ʿĀmirī, unlike secular knowledge, religious knowledge is beneficial to everyone:[237] "No religion (*dīn min al-adyān*) will ever be established for the benefit of the few; rather, it will forever be aimed at [obtaining] universal benefit (*al-maṣlaḥa al-kulliyya*) for all. The need for that which benefits people at large is greater than for that whose benefit is limited to a single person."[238] The distinctly communal and universal focus of religion is profoundly different, on al-ʿĀmirī's understanding, from the more individualistic enterprise of secular learning. He supports this conception by castigating the Caliph Muʿāwiya, who after conquering Sicily was said to have acquired a set of luxurious idols, which he then had sold off to India.[239] The point being made here is that Muʿāwiya should be condemned for weighing a particular benefit (in this case a boon to the treasury: *tawaffur bayt al-māl*) over a religious consideration, which in this case was the curtailment of the spread of idolatry.

In his fourth chapter, which serves as a sort of introduction to his methodology for comparative religions, al-ʿĀmirī harks back to the four-part structural

237 For a defense and detailed exposition of the utility and validity of describing this division of knowledge in terms of a distinction between the religious and secular, see chapter four of my forthcoming dissertation, "Beyond the Divine Command: Aspects of the Secular in Premodern Islamic Thought," (Harvard University, 2021).

238 Al-ʿĀmirī, *al-Iʿlām*, 105.

239 This event took place in the year 53/672. The Persian polymath Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048) takes a more conciliatory approach towards Muʿāwiya's action, attributing it to his particular (and entirely legitimate) understanding of idolatry as not entirely abhorrent. According to this understanding, the original impetus for idol worship stems from the timeless human need to remember (*tadhkīr*) those who have passed and console (*tasliya*) those who live on. It is only at a later point, Bīrūnī argues, that idolatry became an increasingly depraved phenomenon (more on this below): see Bīrūnī, *Kitāb Abī l-Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī fī taḥqīq mā li-l-Hind*, ed. Eduard Sachau (London: Trübner, 1887), 60.

classification of religion into beliefs, worship, social behaviors, and prohibitions, designating them as the very "axis of religion" (*madār al-dīn*). He writes further that

> it is not difficult for the intelligent person, upon a little reflection, to realize that the six religions in possession of lands and kingdoms – which are mentioned in (God) the Exalted's words: 'Indeed, those who believe, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and those who associate with God; God will judge between them on the Day of Judgement'[240] – must also possess a belief in something to which [the adherents'] efforts lead, a mode of worship by way of which obedience may be established and organized, rules of social conduct (*awḍāʿ al-muʿāmalāt*) which may bring order to their way of life, and designated punishments (*rusūm fī'l-mazājir*) through which they are protected from calamities and evils.[241]

Here al-ʿĀmirī presents his generic definition of religion, which essentially comes down to the shared elements found among all the major religions of the world. Of interest here is the fact that he derives these six directly from the Qur'an, which again suggests that the Qur'an lent itself easily to the reification of religion through verses like these.[242] His understanding of religion is a nuanced one: it is not defined by a belief in God per se (as we've seen before), but rather any form of belief and devotion towards a certain object (*shay'*) – one could presumably include capitalism (the object being money) or liberalism (the object being human autonomy) under his definition of religion. It is also, al-ʿĀmirī explains, the moral codes by which societies are normatively structured, and the laws which are required to ensure the security of a people. Like the political and ethical writers examined earlier, his is a very functionalist understanding of religion, which blends well with his philosophical leanings and indeed the entire aim of his book.

240 Q. 22:17.

241 Al-ʿĀmirī, *al-Iʿlām*, 123-24.

242 This observation is supported by al-ʿĀmirī's discussion of communal rituals (*al-ʿibāda al-mushtaraka*) (which in the case of Muslims is the Greater Pilgrimage), which he regards to be a phenomenon common to all religions. Here the relevant verse is "To each community We have designated rites which they perform" (Q. 22:67), which according to him "means that each of the six religions contains a grand act of ritual worship (*mutaʿabbad muʿaẓẓam*) which has been decreed for its people …," ibid, 149.

It is in his actual comparative religious work that al-ʿĀmirī is at his weakest, which should come as no surprise given its apologetic nature.[243] He sets up his framework for comparison by locating those things which are common to all religions, yet in doing so, he essentially follows the normative Sunni model of five pillars and six articles of belief and extends it to all the religions. In the case of prayer, Islam strikes the right balance in terms of quantity, not requiring too much prayer like Christian monks, nor too little like the Zoroastrians. In terms of quality, it is likewise superior to the rest in combining speech and action, prostration and bowing, something no other religion has achieved.[244] In these sections, he often begins by remarking that things like fasting or belief in God are "shared among the six religions,"[245] which illustrates that for him there are universal features common to all religions, which is precisely what justifies the common label attached to them, namely "religion."

Curiously, al-ʿĀmirī even incorporates *jihād* – articulated here as the "protection of the religious community" (*ḥirāsat al-milla*) – as a shared element present among all six religions of the world, for "if the adherents of a religion do not carry out the defense of their religion through the sword, then their enemies would ruin them, and chaos would emerge on land and sea, and the monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques would be destroyed."[246] Given his functionalist understanding of religion, it makes sense that he would deem the protection of religious hegemony to be an innate impulse shared across all of the world's civilizations. He follows this up, however, with a noteworthy remark, which illustrates an almost modern understanding of religion (mostly by its critics) as being uniquely conducive to violence. Religious violence, al-ʿĀmirī contends, is central to the very "foundation of the world" (*asās al-ʿālam*). This is why it has been said that "war is only right for three [kinds of

243 In case one might consider my usage of "comparative religions" to be anachronistic (particularly in light of the popular view in Religious Studies that considers the idea to be a modern Western invention), let us take al-ʿĀmirī at his own word, particularly towards the end of his chapter on rituals, in which he states that "we have concluded the comparison between Islam and other religions (*al-muqābala bayn al-islām wa sāʾir al-adyān*)," ibid, 150.

244 Ibid, 131-32.

245 Ibid, 134. At some points al-ʿĀmirī does admit when a certain practice might be absent in a religious tradition. For example, in his section on charity he explains that it is a ritual act shared among all religions except for Christianity: see ibid, 145. Of course, for Christians charity was in fact a virtuous deed, but what he seems to be referring to is the prescribed practice of giving a fixed rate of one's wealth, which was not present in Christianity.

246 Ibid, 147. The "monasteries, churches …" bit refers to Q. 22:40. He places this discussion in the same section as other rituals of worship since he refers to *jihād* here with the intriguing formulation of the "sovereign form of worship" (*al-ʿibādat al-mulkiyya*).

people]: the one endowed with understanding of his religion, the one who is zealous in its (religion's) sanctity, or the one who is enraged by the shame of its weakness."[247]

Why such high regard for religious warfare in particular? Beyond the natural association of religion and conquest in Islam, al-ʿĀmirī clarifies that religious warfare is the result of the human capacity to seek truth (*al-quwwat al-tamyīziyya*), as opposed to those wars which result from partisanship (*taʿaṣṣub*) and anger alone, or the desire to dominate and acquire wealth.[248] A common view promoted in our own time would raise the objection that religious warfare is simply a cover for these more base concerns. Al-ʿĀmirī seems somewhat aware of this rejoinder, and in an almost modern apologetic tone asserts that some wrongful acts do in fact take place in religious wars from time to time, but given that the true founding of the Islamic state was based on the Prophetic example, the religion itself should not be blamed for this, in the same way that Anūshīrwān the Just (Chosroes I, r. 531-79) is not blamed for the tyrannical rule of Yazdegerd III.[249] We know that this particular critique of religion was already present in the medieval Islamic world at least a century prior to al-ʿĀmirī in the city of Rayy,[250] which suggests that the idea continued to circulate, spurring on the development of this particular line of apologetics.

247 This view appears to conflict with the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet in which he warns his followers that "The destruction wreaked upon a flock of sheep to whom two ravenous wolves have been set free is no greater than [the destruction produced by] a man's desire for wealth and [the desire to protect] his religion's honor," Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *al-zuhd ʿan rasūlillāh ṣallallāh ʿalayh wa sallam* 43.

248 Al-ʿĀmirī, *al-Iʿlām*, 156.

249 Ibid, 158. Another Persian, the Seljūk-era physician, Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marvazī, seems to have had less trouble with the idea that the violent aspects of Islamic doctrine could be utilized for more secular motivations. In a section on the conversion of the Rūs to Islam from his *Ṭabāʾiʿ al-ḥayawān*, he mentions that they first converted to Christianity around the year 300. Upon having done so, however, the Christian religion forced them to sheathe their swords (*aghmad al-dīn suyūfahum*), which then affected their livelihood since they were warriors by profession. They then "desired to become Muslim so that raids and holy war would become lawful for them …". The ruler of Khwārazm became elated upon hearing the news of their desired conversion and sent a few emissaries to teach them the "laws of Islam" (*sharāʾiʿ al-islām*) and initiate their conversion. Marvazī appears to have had no qualms with this. V. Minorsky, *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marvazī on China, the Turks and India* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), 23 (Arabic text) (English translation on 36). As Minorsky rightly notes in his commentary, the effeminizing effects of Christianity (as well as Manichaeism) was a common trope rehearsed by medieval Muslim authors (ibid, 119).

250 I am referring here to the famous (Abū Bakr al-) Rāzī vs. (Abū Ḥātim al-) Rāzī debate, which took place around 920 or 930 in the city of Rayy. At a couple of points in the debate, the former Rāzī castigates the role religion has played in the promotion of bloodshed

The resemblance of al-ʿĀmirī's work to modern Islamic discourse is striking and merits further comment, since it brings the important idea of reification discussed above into broader relief. One aspect of this emerges in his chapter on Islam's superiority to other religions in its more equitable dealings with commoners (*raʿāya*). In a section describing how Islam tends to the care of the needy more than any other religion, he focuses on Islam's unique protection of women, whom he considers to be deficient in terms of physique (*tarkīb*). He claims that "there is no religion which curbs violations against them and calls to dealing with them compassionately more than this religion (i.e. Islam)."[251] This idea has become a well-known staple of modern Islamic apologetics, which makes its appearance here a remarkably early attestation of this view in the medieval world. Al-ʿĀmirī goes on to emphasize the significance Islam attaches to care for the old, the poor, orphans, and others, which one might presume was not especially unordinary. But what stands out in these more sociologically-inflected sections is his repeated reference back to the Qurʾan. Like many modern Muslims, for al-ʿĀmirī the Qurʾan is seen as more omnipresent and dominating in the degree to which it orients and directs Muslim society. Islam is akin to the ideology of the entire state and society.

Remember that al-ʿĀmirī's purpose in writing the book was to prove that Islam is the soundest and most reasonable religion, which in his context meant its conformity with Greco-Sassanian socio-political norms.[252] In the above-mentioned section, he applies a hierarchical Persian-inspired principle of relative social relations to Islam, which is essentially the idea that each elite is inferior to his superior in the same way that each inferior person is an elite with respect to those who are below him. If a religion were true (*al-dīn al-ḥaqīqī*), he contends, it would conform to this picture (*ʿalā hādhihiʾl-ṣūra yajrī*).[253] To support this connection in the case of Islam, he mentions the famous *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad in which he warns his followers that "each of you is a guardian and each of you will be asked about your wards"

around the world: on this, see L. E. Goodman, "Rāzī vs. Rāzī – Philosophy in the *Majlis*," in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, eds. H. Lazarus-Yafeh (et al.), (Weisbaden: Harrasowitz, 1999), 84-107, at 85f.

251 Al-ʿĀmirī, *al-Iʿlām*, 164.

252 His great admiration for ancient Persian civilization (which by this time was *du jour* for medieval Muslims) is particularly discernable in an interesting chapter on the alleged progress Islam initiated among two specific ethnicities (*ajyāl*): the Persians and the Arabs. While the pre-Islamic Arabs were deeply immersed in sin, ignorance, and partisanship, it was the Persians who "during the days of Chosroes, were endowed with laudable buildings, transmitted customs (*al-ādāb al-manqūla*), and a genuine concern for preserving the rules of civilization (*rusūm al-ʿimāra*)," ibid, 174.

253 Ibid, 165.

(*kullukum rāʿin wa kullukum masʾūl ʿan raʿiyyatih*), which has generally been understood as referring to the mutual obligations among family members. Al-ʿĀmirī, however, interprets the tradition as supporting the broader Persian hierarchical conception of society (an unusual, but not entirely unreasonable extrapolation), which supports the reading above of his use of scriptural sources towards the novel end of supporting certain intellectual norms arising out of his Greco-Sassanian-inspired cultural milieu.

Al-ʿĀmirī cites some more *ḥadīth*s in support of this sociological polemic, but these are again taken entirely out of their original contexts, which was initially to demonstrate the importance of ensuring that the most religious people lead the congregational prayers.[254] The point here is not that he misinterprets these traditions (for his is no less legitimate on account of its novelty), but rather that within the context of religious apologetics, he begins to use Islamic scriptural sources to support the reigning extra-Islamic norms of his time. This bears a marked resemblance to modern Islamic discourse, which has often resorted to demonstrating Islam's support for Western liberal norms like equality and freedom through similar means. Following Smith's idea that reification is a product of apologetics, it appears to me that al-ʿĀmirī's work illustrates exactly how this process takes place. In attempting to demonstrate Islam's truth within the context of inter-religious polemics, the religion – viewed increasingly as the ideological basis for a political community – is forced to affirm the reigning socio-cultural norms and is thereby reified. This reification is manifest throughout al-ʿĀmirī's work as evidenced by his frequent use of terms like *islāmiyyūn* (lit. "the Islamic peoples") and *ahl al-islām* ("the people of Islam") to refer to the Muslim community.[255] Indeed, the placing of Islam in the very title in a non-adjectival manner is something quite unusual in the medieval context, though rampant throughout modern Islamic writings, as Smith has perceptively noted.[256]

Al-ʿĀmirī ends his book by addressing four specific issues that "the critics of the religion of Islam" (*al-ṭāʿinūn ʿalā dīn al-islām*) bring up in order to cast doubt on its veracity.[257] The first is one that should be familiar to the modern reader: the problem of Islam and violence. If Islam were truly a religion of mercy, why has it been spread by the sword rather than the tongue?[258] This charge is one that became increasingly popular during the colonial period and

254 Ibid.
255 See ibid, 131-133, 135, 140-142, 180-182.
256 Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 115-117.
257 Al-ʿĀmirī, *al-Iʿlām*, 185.
258 Ibid, 186.

again lends support to al-ʿĀmirī's resemblance to modern reificationist tendencies. It is also another interesting layer of attack lodged by medieval skeptics, which goes to show that our understanding of the premodern critique of religion in the Islamic world is seriously lacking.[259] Nevertheless, it is the second issue that is of most interest to us here, because it is in al-ʿĀmirī's response to it that the Persian philosopher outlines a general theory of how religions lend themselves well to disagreement. The charge is similar to the one he dealt with briefly in his debate with the *mutaẓarrifa* discussed above: given that the divisions within the Muslim community have led to the emergence of deep animosity and viciousness between the various factions – to the extent that they kill each another (and even each other's children!) – how can one accept Islam as a religion of truth?[260] In response, al-ʿĀmirī attributes the problem of violence in Islam to the religion's imperial success, which created new enemies among the conquered populations. It was they who feigned conversion and created divisions within Islam, thus placing all the blame of religious violence on the disunity inherent to territorial expansion. He also makes the broader apologetic point, however, that disagreement is endemic to all religions and not just Islam. He describes this as "the various ways in which disagreements (*ikhtilāfāt*) emerge within the realm of religion (*bāb al-diyānāt*), even if they conform to the truth."[261]

The first way in which a religious community can become divided and stray from the truth is through the intellectual misguidance of a particular person. For example, someone might produce a faulty syllogism, which rests on unverified premises, and then produce a false conclusion, which then spreads among the people until it becomes a part of their religious doctrine (*yaʿtaqiduhā dīnan*) – a wishfully philosophic and rather unrealistic view of how ideas actually circulate. His second point seems to serve as an account of the development of heresies (although he does not make this intention explicit). People by their very nature, al-ʿĀmirī contends, incline towards strange and rare ideas which would not normally come to one's mind. Out of the seeming profundity of the idea (on account of its rarity), they come to cling to it zealously. This

259 We do in fact know of Christian polemics against Islam from very early on which adopted a similar line of argumentation, i.e., that any religion which uses worldly success and conquest to spread its faith (i.e., Islam) is human rather than divine in origin (unlike Christianity): see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 543-44. It would only have been natural for religious skeptics to employ inter-religious polemical arguments like this one for their own purposes.

260 Ibid, 186.

261 Ibid, 194.

is why heterodoxies emerge and develop such a strong following.[262] His third claim is simply that people are simpletons and the masses are condemned to always following foolish ideas.[263] The argument here is that even a true religion cannot forego the problem of human intellectual deficiency, hence the violence that arises over these conflicting ideas should not be charged to the religion itself, but rather to humankind's general feeble-mindedness and inclination towards groupthink. The fourth way this division takes place is through the spreading of false reports about specific scholars or religious leaders on account of professional jealousies or partisan behavior, which the followers then internalize as a part of their own religion.[264] Al-ʿĀmirī reiterates that "these are the ways that harm can pass on collectively throughout the religions and creeds, and these are not confined to the religion of Islam, rather they extend to them all."[265] Far from a normative account of Islamic heresiography, here al-ʿĀmirī engages in a universal inquiry into the problem of religious division as such, offering a highly original theory of the origins of sectarianism.

Al-ʿĀmirī's discourse on religion in the *Declaration* supports Smith's important insight regarding the connection between polemics and reification. His work serves as an important precedent to modern Islamic apologetic discourse, which suggests that the medieval divergence from modern Islam lies more in the change in context – that is, the emergence of a new enemy in the form of the secular West and the expansion of a literate public – and less with the reification of religion itself, which seems not to have been so novel at all.[266] Additionally, as I hope to have shown, this medieval work also contains a sophisticated analysis of religion intended to curtail the influence of particular skeptical trends and groups living during his time, which should force us to view it and other similar writings as a contribution to the historical study of religion at large.

A More Objective Approach to the Study of Religion: The Case of Shahrastānī's Kitāb al-milal

Having examined a more polemical work within the Islamic canon of comparative religion, it would do well to look at what one might regard as a more objective study of the world's religions. Described by one scholar as the "high

262 Ibid.
263 Ibid, 194-95.
264 Ibid, 195.
265 Ibid.
266 Nevertheless, the increasing understanding of Islam as a political system or ideology and the novel usage of "Islamic" as a descriptor for all things ranging from economics to music is, I think, something which appears to be unique to modernity.

point of Muslim histories of religion,"[267] the *Book of Religions and Creeds* (*Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal*) was an exceedingly popular reference work[268] written by the Persian theologian, Abū'l-Fatḥ Muḥammad al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), in the post-heresiographical period mentioned above, during which Muslims increasingly adopted an academic approach to the history of religions, albeit one still inflected by heresiographical language and classification schemas. He completed the book in 521/1127-28 and dedicated it to one of Sanjar's (r. 1118-1157) viziers, which may have been the reason for his appointment as the director (*nā'ib*) of the Seljuk ruler's chancery. Having obtained his scholarly training and professional success in the Sunni scholarly milieu of the Seljuk empire, his early works (like the *Book of Religions*) evince a strong commitment to Sunni Ashʿarī thought, although it is now fairly certain that Shahrastānī held covert Ismāʿīlī Shiʿi sympathies throughout his life, much of which comes out more explicitly in his later writings as he moved away from the strongholds of Sunni political authority.[269] This sort of craftiness in navigating multiple Islamic confessions may have had something to do with his uniquely nonpartisan appraisal of the world's religions and the sects of Islam, to say nothing of his Ismāʿīlī philosophical outlook, which would have given Shahrastānī a certain rational impartiality in assessing the external elements of the various religions and sects.

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267 Guy Monnot, "al-Shahrastānī," *EI2*. A. J. Arberry was severely critical of Shahrastānī's work, and in particular, his dependence on prior sources without giving due acknowledgement. In his view, it was "little more than a farrago of quotations from older writers, loosely arranged and inconsequently strung together without the slightest acknowledgement," idem, "Shahrastānī on Pre-Islamic Arabia," in *Essays and Studies Presented to Stanley Arthur Cook*, ed. J. Winston Thomas (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1950), 33. Although I don't agree with this harsh assessment, one might consider the more academically transparent approach of the author of an earlier history of religions written in Persian in 484-85/1091-92 who offers the following disclaimer at the beginning of his book: "We have mentioned most of the names of those scholars (*ustādān*), as well as the titles of their works. We have quoted our authorities so that whoever looks at our book does not attribute to us anything that displeases him after it has been said," Abū'l al-Maʿālī, *Bayān al-adyān*, ed. Jaʿfar Vāʿiẓi (Tehran: Iqbāl, 1389 [1969]), 121.

268 Its popularity is attested to by the numerous manuscripts found in libraries all over the world: see Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 16. It was also translated into Ottoman Turkish by several Ottoman scholars beginning from the 1040s/1630s and generally stands out among the crowd of heresiographies of the time for being used primarily as a reference, rather than a polemical work, see Shafir, "How to Read Heresy," 215 and 221.

269 Frank Griffel, "Ismāʿilite Critique of Ibn Sīnā: Al-Shahrastānī's (d. 1153) *Wrestling Match with the Philosophers*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 210-32, at 212-14.

This emphasis on objectivity is mentioned in the preface to the book, in which one finds not only an outline of his methodology in studying the world religions, but also a personal reflection on his own enduring interest in the discipline. Far from a polemical treatise, he presents his project as a fair account of the subject. He writes:

> Since God acquainted me with the study (*muṭāla'a*) of the doctrines (*maqālāt*) of those people of the world who possess religions (*dīyānāt*) and are part of religious communities (*milal*), and those who are followers of arbitrary and human doctrines (*ahl al-ahwā' wa'l-niḥal*) – as well as the knowledge of their sources (*maṣādir*) and origins (*mawārid*), and a swift apprehension of and familiarity with them and their errors – I set out to collect [all of] these in a summary exposition (*mukhtaṣar*) which could encompass them – which is to say the entirety of what religious people practice (*tadīn bih al-mutadayyinūn*) and believe (*intaḥal*) – as a lesson (*'ibra*) for those who reflect and as a reflection (*istibṣār*) for those who consider it.[270]

Shahrastānī's desire to write an objective study on religion can also be gleaned from the methodology he follows in reconstructing the views of the sects within Islam. "I have made it a condition upon myself," he discloses, "that I will transmit the views (*madhhab*) of each sect according to what I have found in their books, without any partisanship or favor towards them, without distinguishing the true from the false, and vice-versa …"[271] Even if one were to deny the actual objectivity of his analysis in the book, it is still significant in itself that there appears in his work an explicit intention to adjudicate fairly among the sects and religions, since it indicates an implicit assumption that religion can be studied as a human phenomenon outside of one's own confessional leanings.

This analytic attitude towards religion stems from an underlying assumption made by Shahrastānī, which is that the existence of religious difference across time and space is as natural as the diverse geographic and ethnic background

270 Muḥammad al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa'l-niḥal*, ed. Muḥammad b. Fatḥ Allāh Badrān (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlū al-Miṣriyyah, 1375/1956. 2nd ed.), 19. I have in a few instances consulted the excellent French translation by Jean Jolivet and Guy Monnot, *Livre des Religion et des Sectes I* (Louvain: Peeters and UNESCO, 1986), but my references throughout will be to the Badrān edition on which my translations directly rely.

271 Ibid, 23. One might also note here that his reference to the religions of "the people of the world" (*ahl al-'ālam*) problematizes the aforementioned theory of the uniquely Western invention of "world religions"; see note 73 above.

of the human species. Thus, alongside the division of the world into different climes and ethnic communities (*umam*), he mentions another division along the lines of "views (*ārā'*) and beliefs (*madhāhib*)," the exposition of which is his "purpose in writing this book."[272] This emphasis on religious identity, as opposed to ethnic or regional identity, illustrates the strong significance given to the category of religion in Islamic thought by this period.[273] At the most fundamental level, the world is divided between those who affirm and those who reject religion, or in Shahrastānī's language, "the people of religions and religious communities" and "the followers of arbitrary and human doctrines." The former are comprised of Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, while the latter encompasses the philosophers, the materialists (*dahriyyah*), the Sabians, star- and idol-worshippers, and the Brahmins.[274] Towards the end of his preface, he provides further, more specific distinctions, which shed light on the criterion he employs in classifying the various religions.

Ultimately, these have to do with the status which scripture and law hold within each of the respective religious traditions, which reveals in a way what Shahrastānī deems to be essential to the phenomenon of religion. For him, the non-religions are of two types: those that have "rules and regulations" (*ḥudūd wa aḥkām*) but lack a scripture, like the Sabians, and those that have neither, like the ancient philosophers and polytheists. The measure of the "religiousness" of a religion, then, on Shahrastānī's account, is the extent to which it possesses a book and a set of rules that its people must follow; a fairly straightforward essentialization of religion, and one that many believers today would perhaps resonate with. Nevertheless, his is not a neat classification; thus, among the groups that he considers to be proper religions, there are those who have "a revealed book which has been verified" (*kitāb munazzal muḥaqqaq*), like the Jews and Christians, as well as those who have books lacking authentication (*shubhat kitāb*), like the Zoroastrians and Manicheans.[275] This latter category is one picked up and transplanted from the Islamic legal tradition

272 Ibid, 20.

273 Kātib Çelebī (d. 1067/1657) makes this point quite explicitly in his major encyclopedia, *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, stating that just as some divide the world and categorize human difference according to climes or ethnic communities, the heresiographers do so according to the views and beliefs (*al-ārā' wa'l-madhāhib*) which people adopt: see Shafir, "How to Read Heresy," 223.

274 Ibid.

275 Ibid, 42.

(although he appears to be the first to include the Manicheans in this category and to identify this book with the scrolls of the Prophet Abraham).[276]

Shahrastānī likely derives this specific category from an earlier work of heresiology, *The Difference Between the Sects and the Clarification of the Saved Sect* (*al-Farq bayn al-firaq wa bayān al-firqa al-nājiya*), written by the mathematician and religious scholar, Abū Manṣūr al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037-38). Commensurate with his more legalistic approach to religion, Baghdādī discusses the divinely-imposed boundaries between Muslims and polytheists (specifically those who worship idols, people, angels, stars, and fire). On this point, he cites a difference of opinion over the question of whether the poll-tax (*jizya*) can be imposed on them. The founder of his own legal school, al-Shāfiʿī, deemed it forbidden, "since it is only permitted to accept the poll-tax from the People of the Book, or those who have an unconfirmed book (*shubhat kitāb*)."[277] Here Baghdādī is referring to al-Shāfiʿī's minority opinion regarding

276 Later in the book, Shahrastānī attributes this lack of Zoroastrian reliability in scriptural matters to the disappearance of the famous Qur'anic "scrolls of Abraham" (*ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm*), which are said to have been lifted to the heavens on account of the innovations of the Zoroastrians, ibid, 189. This likely stems from his belief, attested to in a section specifically devoted to the Zoroastrians, that "all of the Persian kings followed the religion of Abraham (*millat Ibrāhīm*)," which consequently implied that their subjects too were practitioners of the Abrahamic faith, given the well-known principle that the subjects of an empire "follow the religions of their kings" (*ʿalā adyān mulūkihim*), ibid, 210. The latter axiom is an interesting example of the fusion of religion and politics in Islamic thought. Though used explicitly in the sense of "religion" here, the more common understanding of this proverb (which often used the term *dīn* rather than *adyān*) was that a king's personal habits (not necessarily his *religion*) influence the culture and norms of his society. The Iraqi Shiʿa historian Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqā (d. 709/1309), for instance, takes it to mean that, at a general level, people come to love and despise things based on the king's own preferences. He shrewdly observes in this regard how the standards of dress, speech, social norms, and customs have all changed drastically from the rule of the Caliphs up until the current age, despite the fact that the early pious rulers would have condemned the way things are now. This is part of "the characteristics of empire (*khawāṣṣ al-dawla*) and the secrets of the kings," which is that they always have and will always continue to set the cultural standards in their societies; Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqā, *al-Fakhrī fī'l-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya wa'l-duwal al-islāmiyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Muḥammad Māyū (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam al-ʿArabī, 1418/1997), 32. The fluidity between the specific meaning of religion and the broader idea of the culture and practices of a particular kingdom illustrates, in my view, that religion was understood (especially in political writings like Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqa's) as civic religion, which is to say the shared beliefs, rituals, symbols, and practices of a political community.

277 ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayn al-firaq*, ed. Muḥammad ʿUthmān al-Khisht (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Sīnā, 1988), 305. According to Baghdādī, both Mālik and Abū Ḥanīfa allowed it, albeit with some qualifications: the former exempted those who are Qurashī, and the latter those who are Arab.

the classification of Zoroastrians as *ahl al-kitāb* (as opposed to simply *ahl al-dhimma*). This was not al-Shāfiʿī's own terminology, but that of his successors, who viewed his approach to the Zoroastrian question as one that was ambivalent at best (although it seems that al-Shāfiʿī did in fact lean towards the view of the Zoroastrians having had their own book).[278] The standard position in the school, however, was that the Zoroastrians forgot and changed their book. Still, the term became standardized in Shāfiʿī discussions on inter-religious social interaction (e.g., the permissibility of intermarriage and eating meat slaughtered by practitioners of other faiths). Māwardī provides us with more insight into the exact meaning of the phrase, which is that there is "an occurrence of doubt (*wuqūʿ al-shakk*) in the [existence] of their books,"[279] therefore indicating that their blood must be spared. A generation later, the Shāfiʿī commentator Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrāzī (d. 476/1083) provided more clarification on this ruling: "As for their blood being spared, this is because they have an uncertain book and uncertainty in blood requires that it be spared."[280] What this brief digression into an Islamic legal discussion reveal is that scripture played a central role in the medieval definition of religion and that, furthermore, this act of definition had significant political implications.

The importance of scripture within medieval Muslim understandings of religion seems to have stemmed from their strict adherence to a theistic worldview in which God directly intervenes in history in order to guide humanity. Consequently, those who did not acknowledge a book outlining the message of God were considered to be beyond the pale of religion proper. This was an analytical distinction foremost, but one also expressing a stronger normative claim, which was that there was a moral distinction to be made between those who acknowledge God's rule and those for whom "man is the measure

278 Yohanan Friedmann makes the observation that in three of his works, al-Shāfiʿī unambiguously promotes the view of the existence of a Zoroastrian book. He consequently argues that the attribution by later Shāfiʿī scholars of different views to al-Shāfiʿī (e.g., that the Zoroastrians had no book, or that there was doubt regarding its existence) was one that emerged out of pressure to conform to the consensus of other schools (a not too uncommon phenomenon in Islamic legal history), according to which they were not to be counted among the "people of the book." For a comprehensive discussion of this issue, see Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 72-76.

279 Māwardī, *al-Ḥāwī al-kabīr*, eds. ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwad and ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd, 19 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1419/1999), 14:153.

280 Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrāzī, *al-Muhadhdhab fī fiqh al-imām al-Shāfiʿī*, ed. Muḥammad al-Zuḥaylī, 6 vols. (Beirut: al-Dār al-Shāmiyya), 2:443.

of all things."[281] For Shahrastānī, this was based on a fundamental truth about human existence, which is that "when a man believes in something (*iʿtaqad ʿaqdan*) or expresses an opinion (*qāla qawlan*), he either learns it from someone else (*mustafīd min ghayrih*) or follows his own judgement (*mustabidd bi-raʾyih*)." The former position is "submissive" (*muslim*) and "obedient" (*muṭīʿ*), for *dīn* itself means "obedience" (*ṭāʿa*), and therefore the obedient and submissive man is called "religious" (*mutadayyin*). Those who follow their own whims, on the other hand, are called innovators (*muḥdith*) and heretics (*mubtadiʿ*). Their heresy also stems from their denial of prophecy, which leads them to establishing nothing more than "rational boundaries (*ḥudūd ʿaqliyya*) to such an extent required for them to live in harmony with one another."[282] What is essential to the phenomenon of religion, therefore, is the acknowledgement of the inability of human reason to direct our ethical lives and the concomitant acceptance of the guidance of God and His prophets.

Shahrastānī complicates this binary classification, however, in a passage that betrays his more philosophical leanings. His argument is that a person who follows a religious tradition may also be an uncritical follower of authority (*muqallid*), since he simply believes in what the majority deem to be true.[283] He might attach himself to the false beliefs of his fathers and his teachers, without evaluating the veracity of their claims. In that case, he is not a true *mustafīd*, since he obtains no benefit (*fāʾida*) from his religious belief, nor does he gain any true knowledge in his submission to these religious authorities. His belief is ultimately empty of any real insight and conviction. In the same instance, there may be someone who rejects the religious traditions of his age, but still comes to an understanding of the truth by means of proper logical analysis and demonstration by way of the middle syllogism (*istinbāṭ*), which unveils the ultimate realities of the known world.

His language here is deeply Avicennan[284] (and indeed Ghazālian, since the emphasis on *istidlāl* over *taqlīd* became a hallmark of later Ashʿarī thought)[285] and although we know that he found much to be wrong with Avicenna's

281 This of course being the famous statement of the Greek Sophist, Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490-420 BC).

282 Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal*, 42.

283 Ibid, 42.

284 For the meaning of *istinbāṭ* and *taqlīd* in the context of Avicenna's thought, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 214-19.

285 I am grateful to Khaled El-Rouayheb for pointing this out to me.

metaphysics,[286] one does discern in Shahrastānī a general suspicion, reminiscent of the great philosopher, towards communal religiosity and its ability to distort the truth, especially if we take into consideration the former's concession that it can be obtained through extra-scriptural rational means.[287] Moreover, this philosophical stance would have been quite in line with Shahrastānī's Ismāʿīlī background. Shahrastānī even grounds this rational path to truth in a verse of the Qur'an, which states that "those who draw correct conclusions from it (*yastanbiṭūnahu minhum*) would have known about it,"[288] which in its classical context was understood as referring to the circulation of news about war and peace in the Muslim community, not the rational method of deduction, though this poses no problem for Shahrastānī. It must be mentioned, however, that Shahrastānī's brief digression here comes off more as a provocative comment than a clear outline of his own views, since he merely asks the reader to "consider" and "not neglect" this fundamental point regarding religion.

Shahrastānī begins the first chapter of his book by defining his terms. For *dīn*, he combines the various linguistic meanings of obedience, judgement, and reckoning into a single definition: "the religious person (*mutadayyin*) is he who is an obedient submitter, someone who confirms the remuneration and reckoning of the Day of Summoning and Return." This is clearly a theologically-inflected rendering of *dīn*, but one that makes sense in light of the groups he associates with religion (all of whom would generally attest to these beliefs). He defines *milla* by first rehashing the common view held by medieval Muslims that humans are required by their very nature to establish societies in order to sustain their mutual livelihood. It is the "shape of society (*ṣūrat al-ijtimāʿ*) according to this form (*hayʾa*)" that is called a *milla*, which resembles the sociologically-laden conceptions of religion we saw earlier. The particular way by which one arrives at this form is what is referred to as the *minhāj*, the *shirʿa*, or the *sunna* of a people.[289] The emphasis on the formation of societies in his understanding of religion indicates that for Shahrastānī religion is a universal phenomenon, which serves a socio-cultural purpose for the various inhabitants of the world and indeed partially accounts for its existence (as Ibn Taymiyya also argued). He goes on to give a more normative framing of the development of each of these terms, which of course concludes with

286 Shahrastānī wrote a refutation of Avicenna's metaphysics, which has been translated by Wilferd Madelung: see idem, *Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).

287 Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal*, 43.

288 Q. 4:83.

289 Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal*, 44.

the ending of prophecy with Muhammad.[290] This does, in some way, reveal that his approach and classification of the world's religions was inflected by the Qur'anic narrative. Yet on balance, his schemata and analysis seems to be derived mostly from his reading of history and a fairly objective account of the doctrines and histories of each religion.

Shahrastānī's understanding of religion is also subtly revealed in a brief comment he makes on the sources of division in the Muslim community. According to him, "the greatest disagreement (*khilāf*) within the community is the disagreement over the Imāmate, for the sword has not been drawn in [the history of] Islam across the ages over a precept of religion (*qāʿida dīniyya*), like that which has been drawn over the Imamate."[291] In saying this Shahrastānī expresses his pro-Shiʿi stance regarding the conflict over the Imamate, seeing it as a fundamentally religious, not civil issue.[292] Even though his is a theologically-inspired view, it does lead him to an understanding of the recurrent sectarian violence in Islamic history as a primarily religious problem. This point can be brought into sharper relief if we consider the criticism of Shahrastānī's view by Ibn Taymiyya, who goes to great lengths to romanticize the early history of Islam as an ideal age free from religious strife; that is, before the rebellion of the zealous Khawārij. For Ibn Taymiyya, Shahrastānī's position was "one of the greatest errors, for indeed – and to God belongs all praise – the sword was not drawn against the Caliphate of Abū Bakr, nor ʿUmar, nor ʿUthmān, nor was there a conflict over the Imamate among the Muslims during their time, let alone [one with] the sword, nor was the sword drawn among them over any religious matter (*shayʾ min al-dīn*)."[293] He goes on to say

290 Ibid, 44-45.

291 Ibid, 30.

292 On the whole, Shahrastānī provides copious amount of details on the Shiʿi view of the Imāmate in his *Book of Religions*, yet in the spirit of objectivity, refrains from offering his own opinion on the issue. His support for the Shiʿi doctrine of the Imāmate is, nevertheless, openly on display in his *Summa Philosophiae* (*Nihāyat al-iqdām fī ʿilm al-kalām*). For a comparison of his discussions of the Imāmate in these two works, see Siti Syamsiyatum, "Al-Shahrastānī and the Shīʿī Doctrine of Imāma: An Analysis of the Views Expressed in his al-Milal wa al-Niḥal and Nihāyat al-Iqdām fī ʿIlm al-Kalām," (Unpublished Master's thesis, McGill University, 1998). The author does, however, miss Shahrastānī's support for the Shiʿi conception of the Imāmate in his *Book of Religions* as noted above.

293 Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj al-sunnat al-nabawiyyah fī naqḍ kalām al-shīʿat al-qadariyya*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Jāmiʿat al-Imām Muḥammad b. Saʿūd al-Islāmiyya, 1406/1986), 6:324. Ibn Taymiyya's problem with Shahrastānī is ultimately one of religious epistemological disagreement Shahrastānī's source-material for Islamic history is flawed insofar as he foregoes the *ḥadīth* tradition. Ibn Taymiyya criticizes Shahrastānī for having "no knowledge of the *ḥadīth* and the traditions (*āthār*) of the Companions and the Followers. Consequently, in this book of his, he has reported that

that "according to the majority of the scholars, the fighting [during the time of ʿAlī] was one of sedition (*fitna*), and according to a majority of them, it is in the category of the fighting of blameworthy and unjust people, and [sedition] is fighting based on a sincere interpretation (*taʾwīl*) allowing obedience to someone other than the Imam, not a fundamental of religion (*qāʿida dīniyya*)."[294] What we have here, then, is a distinct theological position being taken on a vital religio-political question, one which assumes a certain understanding of the relationship between religion and violence, a complex issue which continues to ignite intense public debate.

An Unusually Sympathetic Account of Hinduism in the Medieval World

If Shahrastānī's study remains marred by a concern for identifying heresy, one can find an even more objective account of religion (perhaps the most objective of the medieval period) a century earlier in the extraordinary study of the Hindus by the Persian scholar, Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048). The *Verification of the Reasonable and Unreasonable Reports Regarding India* (*Kitāb fī taḥqīq mā li-l-Hind min maqūla aw mardhūla*) was the product of a painstaking investigation of Hindu beliefs and customs, the information for which Bīrūnī likely obtained during his time serving as an interrogator of prisoners in northwestern India on the expeditions of the Ghaznavid sultan, Maḥmūd (r. 998-1030).[295] Despite this proximity to the war campaigns, his was a work far removed from the *ghāzī* (warrior) attitude of absolute contempt for the Indian infidels. His purpose, instead, was to further Muslim understanding of the Hindus in order to facilitate a more robust and fruitful cross-cultural interaction. He sheds light on his intentions in the introduction to the book, in which he recounts an encounter with his teacher, Abū Sahl al-Tiflīsī (about whom nothing is known), who was in the midst of criticizing a book which he considered to have grossly misrepresented the doctrines of the Muʿtazila when Bīrūnī chimed in and informed his teacher that this was, in fact, a problem common to the study of religion as a whole. In his view,

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which has been transmitted from the disagreements of the non-Muslims and Muslims, yet he does not report the views of the Companions, the Followers, and the distinguished Imams of the Muslims in the foundations [of the religion], since he, and others like him among the rational theologians (*ahl al-kalām*), do not know any of this; instead, they report that which has been discussed in the books of theological doctrines, and these books are full of many lies, of the category (*jins*) of that which is [found] within [the books of] history."

294 Ibid, 328.

295 Michio Yano, "al-Bīrūnī," *EI3*.

> those who set out to report [the views of] their opponents and adversaries are rarely free from [following] this method (*ṭarīqa*). This is most apparent with regards to [reporting] the positions (*madhāhib*) which comprise a single religion (*dīn*) or sect (*niḥla*), due to their proximity to and association with them. It is subtler in the case of [reporting] on the varied religious communities, particularly with regards to those foundational and ancillary [issues] upon which they do not overlap, which is due to their distance from them and the concealment of the means by which they could become acquainted with them. In our view, the current books on the doctrines and practices of the philosophies and religions are fully entrenched in this [way of thinking]. He who does not comprehend the reality of the situation (*ḥaqīqat al-ḥāl*) [i.e., of the religions and philosophies], extracts from them that which makes no sense to its adherents (*ightaraf minhā mā lā yufīduh ʿinda ahlih*). The [true] scholar of their positions does not shy away from sympathizing with what is virtuous in them, and strives to be lax with regards to their vices. He who truly comprehends the reality of the situation exerts his utmost effort to obtain [the truth] from the lore and legends he listens to, distracts himself with, and takes delight in, but which he would never accept nor believe.[296]

Bīrūnī was clearly aware of the difficulties which one can potentially encounter when attempting to facilitate interreligious understanding. In his view, it is only the sympathetic observer, one who attempts to understand the other as they understand themselves (though without sacrificing the skill of critically sifting tall tales from facts) who can truly comprehend a religion other than his or her own.[297] It is precisely for this reason that Bīrūnī draws almost entirely on the indigenous Hindu sources (rather than medieval Arabic works) in his

296 Abū Rayḥan al-Bīrūnī, *Kitāb Abī l-Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī fī taḥqīq mā li-l-Hind*, ed. Eduard Sachau (London: Trübner, 1887), 3. All of my citations to Bīrūnī are based on the original Arabic text edited by Sachau. The latter's translation into English, although laudable and important for its time, strays far from the text and in many instances distorts the meaning of the original.

297 Compare the remarks of a contemporary historian of Christianity: "I take 'seeing things their way' to be more or less synonymous with understanding religious people on their own terms, or with reconstructing the way in which they viewed themselves and their world, or with depicting them in a manner in which they would have recognized themselves," Brad Gregory, "Can We 'See Things Their Way'? Should We Try," in *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, eds. Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad Gregory (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), 24-45, at 25.

reconstruction of their religion, something totally unheard of in the medieval world.[298]

Another participant in the gathering mentions the current discourse on Hindu religions and beliefs, which presents Bīrūnī with the opportunity to critically assess the existing literature on the topic. His overall evaluation is that

> most of the discussion regarding these [Hindu religions and doctrines] recorded in the books is fabricated (*manḥūl*). Everyone then narrates it, takes it, and blends it from another, without critically examining and reviewing their opinions (*ghayr muhadhdhib ʿalā raʾyihim*). Consequently, I have not found anyone who has written on [their] doctrines (*maqālāt*) [writing with the] intention of simply narrating [their views] without bias except Abūʾl-ʿAbbās al-Irānshahrī. He had no connection to any of the religions; instead, he invented and propagated a religion of which he was the lone [adherent]. He gives an excellent account of the Jews and Christians and what is contained within the Torah and Bible. He even goes so far as to mention the Manicheans and what their books [contain] with respect to extinct religions (*al-milal al-munqariḍa*). But when he reaches the sects of the Hindus and the Buddhists (*Suymanīyya*), his arrow misses the mark and he [continues] to steer off course towards the end of his book by [discussing] the book of Zurqān, the contents of which he wholly transmits; [however], as for that which he does not take from it, it is as if he hears it from the commoners of these two groups.[299]

Unfortunately, the work of this curious Irānshahrī figure (who appears as a sort of freethinker who approaches his subject from an appropriate distance) is no longer extant; nevertheless, this academic book review of sorts hints at the existence of a considerable discourse of *religionswissenschaft* in the medieval Islamic world, stemming in part from the considerable diversity of the religious landscape of the medieval Islamic world (including skeptics) and the readily available reified religious discourse, which we outlined above. Indeed, it appears that Bīrūnī unconsciously reified the Hindus in a way that they themselves might not have recognized, given that we now know that Hindus did not have a term for "religion" as we do today. In this sense, Bīrūnī is not entirely unlike the modern Western anthropologist who imposes his or her modern notions on the subject population in an attempt to better represent their views

298 On this, see Mario Kozah, *The Birth of Indology as an Islamic Science: Al-Bīrūnī's Treatise on Yoga Psychology* (Boston: Brill, 2016) 30-31.

299 Ibid, 4.

for his or her intended audience. Indeed, as Mario Kozah astutely remarks in his comprehensive study of Bīrūnī's engagement with Hinduism, the work in question "may very well be the very first systematization of 'Indian' beliefs into one 'Indian religion', as al-Bīrūnī calls it, preceding by almost 900 years the definitions of Hinduism by nineteenth-century European orientalist."[300]

As it so happens, Bīrūnī was in fact writing for a Muslim scholarly elite eager to learn more about their Hindu counterparts. Thus, following Bīrūnī's critical appraisal of the current literature on Hinduism, his teacher embarked on an examination of the books mentioned by his student only to find the same lamentable state of affairs. He subsequently urged his student to fill this lacuna "so that it may be a source of assistance for those who want to contest them (*munāqaḍatahum*) (i.e. the Hindus), and as a store of information for those who want to associate with them (*mukhālaṭatahum*)." In line with his teacher's recommendation, Bīrūnī ends his preface by reiterating his stance as a neutral observer aspiring to report the subjects' views as they are, even if they transgress pious Muslim sensibilities. Unlike the previous works we've seen, his work was not intended to provide ammunition for polemical argumentation, but rather to simply report information (*ḥikāya*) regarding the Hindu religion and culture.

Bīrūnī begins his first chapter by noting the immense gap between Islam and Hinduism. "They completely differ from us in terms of religion" (*yubāyinūnā bi'l-diyāna mubāyana kulliyya*), he asserts, to the extent that if you encounter a belief in one of the religions, you would find its opposite in the other.[301] He finds a more likely companion for the Hindus in the ancient Greeks, the two of whom he frequently compares throughout the book. He clearly finds the former more contaminated by popular religion, since the Greeks had at least a few bright minds, who in his view provided them with a strong scientific capacity, something which is in complete shambles in India due to the contamination of various false beliefs among the masses.[302] Nevertheless, he demonstrates an astonishing level of open-mindedness towards the Hindus, especially for his time. In a section outlining Hindu beliefs, he cites their own texts to make the case that they are ultimately monotheists. He finds a considerable degree of camaraderie with the educated scholars of the Hindus whom he consistently distinguishes from the rabble who adopt abominable beliefs and practices. For Bīrūnī, the vulgarity of the commoner's faith is something shared across all

300 Kozah, *The Birth of Indology*, 1.
301 Ibid, 10.
302 Ibid, 12-13.

religions (*sā'ir al-milal*).[303] Although he presents this idea from a normative perspective (being an elite religious scholar himself), his general point maps on well to what we now refer to as a distinction between elite and popular religion, a modern academic categorization which has in recent years become the subject of considerable debate.

Towards this end, Bīrūnī even argues that if someone were to bring a portrait of Muhammad to the Kaʿbah, Muslims would treat it as if it were his true embodiment. This leads him to propose an altogether unique origins theory for idolatry: the earliest idols, he contends, were simply the relics of revered men of religion like the prophets. This early signification was then disregarded and veneration began to be directed towards the objects themselves, which subsequently transformed the worship of idols into a deeply-rooted custom within various human societies. He mentions, in this regard, a position that is essentially the reverse of the usual monotheistic stance on idolatry, which is that at the beginning of time the entirety of the world consisted of a single community of idol-worshippers.[304] Although we don't quite know for sure whether this was Bīrūnī's own view, it is striking to find such an evolutionary account of religion at this time.

Bīrūnī also possesses a subtle awareness of the conceptual differences between the various religions of the world. He notes, for example, how some words "are considered abominable by one religion but not another" (*yasmuj fī dīn dūn dīn*).[305] He even essentializes the different religions by distinguishing them based on their most fundamental beliefs, those without which one would not be considered a part of that community. In his view, the marker (*shiʿār*) of Islam is the testimony to the oneness of God (*shahāda*); Christianity's sign (*ʿalam*) is the trinity; Judaism's symbol is the Sabbath; and the Hindu's are distinguished primarily by their unique doctrine of the transmigration of the soul (*tanāsukh*).[306] His reflection on these differences in some instances leads to original insights into the distinctiveness of Islam among the world's religions. In his chapter on the Hindu astronomers' views of the earth and the heavens, for instance, he begins by noting that their understanding of scripture differs from that of Muslims at the most rudimentary level. The Qur'an, unlike previous scriptures, does not speak about scientific subjects (*lam yanṭiq fī hādha-l-bāb*), nor on any other matter which "would require

303 Ibid, 15.
304 Ibid, 53-54.
305 Ibid, 17.
306 Ibid, 24.

erratic interpretations in order to harmonize it with that which is known by necessity."[307] The Qur'an "only speaks of those matters," he contends, "which are necessary to its exact and precise [purpose] (*al-ashyā' al-ḍarūriyya maʿahā ḥadhwa'l-qudhdha bi'l-qudhdha*), free from ambiguity. Nor does it contain any issue upon which there is disagreement, or which is impossible to obtain, like the case of historical writings." Compare this, he says, to the religious books of the Hindus, which discuss the shape of the world in a way which contradicts reality (*tanṭiq kulluhā fī hay'at al-ʿālam bi-mā yunāfī al-ḥaqq al-wāḍiḥ ʿinda munajjimīhim*). This is what leads the Hindus, Bīrūnī avers, to elevate the status of astronomy and astronomers in a way unlike other religions; the point being that their religion is premised on specific scientific claims, which Bīrūnī clearly finds to be absurd.[308] In taking this position, Bīrūnī presents a remarkably explicit rejection of the possibility of a scientific reading of the Qur'an, an approach which has become a mainstay of modernist Muslim scriptural interpretation. For Bīrūnī, religion is a fundamentally different matter than science, something which Islam, the true religion that it is, implicitly acknowledges.

Bīrūnī continues his discussion of the nature of the relationship between religion and science through a brief aside on one of the most well-regarded astronomers of the Hindus, Brahmagupta (d. c. 665). Bīrūnī expresses his utter shock at the astronomer's bizarre position on the occurrence of eclipses, which attributes this celestial occurrence to a mysterious magical head biting off a portion of the sun. Brahmagupta gleans this opinion from the various Hindu scriptures, a methodological choice which seems to bother Bīrūnī. As a fellow religious scientist, he decides to interrogate Brahmagupta's inconsistency on this matter. In the case of the eclipse, Bīrūnī contends, Brahmagupta orders others to adopt the bizarre view of the religious books, yet he continues to conduct all sorts of astronomical computations based on the methods of the so-called heretics (i.e. the Yavanas or the Greeks). In lieu of this double standard, Bīrūnī suggests that when Hindus are ordered to do some act of worship upon the rising of the sun, they should simply understand the timing of the act as the chosen temporal location for its performance, not the reason for the act itself (*al-fiʿl li-ajlih*), in the same way that Muslims pray at specific times of the sun's movements, which they take to be no more than an indicator of the time for prayer.

307 This passage is translated and discussed in Ahmad Dallal, "Science and the Qur'ān," in Encyclopaedia of the *Qur'ān*, consulted online on 16 March 2021 <http://dx.doi.org.yale.idm.oclc.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00375.

308 Ibid, 132.

Bīrūnī's close study of a fundamentally different culture seems to have also engendered in him an exceptionally subtle understanding of the nature of religion. In a later chapter of his book, he discusses the many sacred ponds that can be found throughout the region of India, which serve as holy sites for the Hindus. This leads him to some fascinating observations regarding the relationship between religion and culture, which is meant to assist the reader in making sense of the strong effect these sites have on the believers who frequent them (essentially the goal of the contemporary anthropologist). He starts by noting that just as civilized people (*mutamaddinīn*) require an implicit hierarchy (*tafāḍul*) in their societies, so as to ensure that its members remain in need of one another for the completion of various activities, God has created the world according to different characteristics, climates, and resources. It is those things like the occurrence of natural disasters or the resources fixed within a land that lead people to establish communities in certain places and not others. This kind of knowledge and practice, Bīrūnī claims, is based on the normative conventions of the entire human race (*bi-sabab al-rusūm al-jāriya*). Religious commandments (*al-awāmir al-sharʿiyya*), on the other hand, have a stronger hold on people than these man-made customs and are more deeply-rooted in human nature. While human conventions are investigated and explored (*maṭlūba*) and accordingly passed on or abandoned, religious commandments are stable and rarely interrogated (*matrūka ghayr maṭlūba*); therefore, most people adhere to them in a "blind fashion" (*taqlīdan*). People are not able to challenge their own religious beliefs just as those who live on a dying patch of land cannot consider leaving their home due to their deep love for it and the general difficulty of moving. Thus, the emergence of holiness in an area, which is a fundamentally "religious matter" (*amr millī*), works in a similar way, insofar as something is obtained within the heart of the believer which can never be removed. Thus for the Hindus, there are many "places revered for religious reasons" (*mawāḍiʿ tuʿaẓẓam min jihat al-diyāna*) like the city of Benares to which the ascetics attach themselves in a similar way as the "holy neighbors" (*mujāwirūn*) in Mecca attend to the Kaʿbah. In noting the similarity of Islam and Hinduism in this regard, Bīrūnī is adopting what appears to be a non-confessional and objective stance on the phenomenon of religion and the way it functions sociologically. In this instance, what is particularly striking is his distinction of human customs as prone to change and development, as opposed to religious conventions, which given their strong hold on the mind are unusually inveterate and resistant to change.

The originality and curiosity towards other religions that we find in Bīrūnī was of course exceptional for its time. He seems not to have initiated any tradition of comparative religion in the more serious academic mode in which he

wrote. Nevertheless, my objective in outlining his thought was only to indicate the extent to which it was possible for him to discuss religion in the abstract, which was not only a product of his own brilliant intellectual capacity, but also the several centuries of conceptual and social development in which religion became a standard category of analysis for medieval Muslims.

Conclusion

I began this article by first placing the historical emergence of Islam within the religiously diverse and complex world of the Late Antique Near East. Needless to say, Muslims were not simply passive inheritors of the social and conceptual developments which occurred therein: as the dominant force within region for the subsequent millennium, they further developed and refined their understanding of religion across a diverse set of genres and towards a whole range of intellectual, social, and political ends. We have seen, for instance, how long before the advent of modern secularism Muslims encouraged the deliberate functionalization of religion as an object of politics for the purposes of further entrenching their political hegemony. As the beneficiaries of uninterrupted imperial rule, they also engaged in the study of the "Other," classifying their non-Muslim subjects and enemies in light of a preconceived schema predicated on a certain monotheistic universalism and driven by a general feeling of superiority.

In these two regards, the resemblance to modern colonial discourses on religion is certainly striking. Nevertheless, there remain significant divergences between the modern project of "religion" in the West vis-à-vis its colonial subjects and the Islamic discourse on religion as I have presented it. For one, the role of religion in the secular state works almost as an inverse to the marriage of religion and politics in medieval Islam, insofar as the former aims to regulate and curb the authority of religion, while the latter vested political legitimacy precisely in the preservation of religious norms. Furthermore, the enterprise of comparative religion played a much larger and much more significant role in the development of the Western humanistic sciences (and accordingly the governance of European colonies) than it did in the development of knowledge and the administration of conquered territories in the Islamic past. Admittedly, there is a straightforward explanation for the latter: namely, that the advances of modern technology have made it possible for the modern state to intrude into the lives of its subjects in a way far surpassing what premodern regimes were able to achieve in terms of social control. Nevertheless, one would be remiss not to mention the radically novel understandings of race, science, and

history which have informed the Western understanding of the religious and civilizational other, and therefore the modern colonial enterprise. It is in light of these crucial differences that one must make sure not to conflate the project of the Western construction and projection of a particular understanding of religion on a global scale with the reification of religion in premodern Islam. Nevertheless, there are significant conceptual and even functional overlaps which can no longer be dismissed.

What I have attempted to show in the foregoing is that far from being absent in premodern Islam, the idea of religion was of deep importance to medieval Muslims and that for more than a millennium prior to the advent of the modern West, Muslims were the historical actors most zealous in their efforts to develop and refine humanity's understanding of this all-elusive phenomenon. This is an important story to tell in and of itself, but what does it imply with respect to the question of the utility of the term "religion"? Of course, we should not concede the validity and analytical utility of a concept simply because it existed historically. There are good theological, academic, and humanistic reasons to be critical of the concept of "religion," especially in light of the role it plays in perpetuating uneven power relations. My objective is not to downplay the importance of this particular aspect of the academic discourse on "religion." I only wish to suggest that a better to transcend the current distorted understanding of religion, particularly as it functions across the hotly-contested Islam-West divide, is to bring the historically Islamic understanding of religion into conversation with current theoretical debates surrounding the idea of religion. In this regard, my findings reveal that premodern Muslims could indeed possess a highly reified understanding of religion without necessarily adopting many of the elements embedded in the modern conception of religion, which implies that what is uniquely modern about "religion" is not the reification of the term itself, but rather a whole range of other social, political, and intellectual developments which have radically transformed the conceptual contours and functional purposes of religion. In light of this fact, one might further argue that given the analytical utility of the concept for both scholarly and lay purposes, and its existence across a much vaster swath of time and space than has been hitherto acknowledged (namely, outside the modern West), the term "religion" need not be completely abandoned, as some would call for, but can instead be potentially redeemed and continuously fine-tuned through the discursive academic process of critique and debate to which we as scholars place our deepest faith (even if only implicitly by our daily practices).

Some may counter that my findings serve precisely to undermine any meaningful resemblance between religion and *dīn*. As Karamustafa concludes in his valuable study of the matter,

> With a rich and long history, Islamic *dīn* is certainly a powerful reminder that "religion" is not a naturally universal category. At the very least, close scrutiny of *dīn* leads to a serious reconsideration of the legitimacy of characterizing Islam as a "religion." Indeed, it is clear that "religion," in any of the specific forms it took in Western history, is not an automatically suitable category to use in describing Islam.

There is certainly something to Karamustafa's cautionary note. The diverse understandings of *dīn* and the multiple purposes to which it was employed across space and time only seem to reinforce the fact that there is no singular understanding of the concept and that there are many ways in which it clearly diverges from what we moderns would today call "religion." Nevertheless, the demarcation of *dīn* as a distinct realm of life, comprised primarily of rituals and beliefs which disseminate a specific worldview to its adherents, is quite straightforwardly analogous to the common understanding of "religion" today. This is precisely why one can accurately and usefully translate *dīn* as "religion" in a variety of contexts (as I've thoroughly demonstrated above), and why it serves as a much better translation than alternatives like "law" and "tradition," as Lena Salaymeh has recently proposed based on a distinctly post-colonial and polemical line of argumentation, rather than an engagement with the indigenous Muslim sources themselves.[309] That both *dīn* and religion can mean different things to different people is simply to acknowledge the fundamental fact that every human concept is prone to diverse understandings. One could soundly argue, for example, that the understanding of divinity instantiated in the "Yahweh" of the Old Testament is not entirely the same as that which appears in the *Kyrios* or *Theos* of the New Testament, a conception which is itself in some ways distinct from the "Allah" of the Qurʾan. Yet one must of course admit that there is a considerable degree of family resemblance among the three (despite their theological differences), which should allow for a meaningful comparison to be undertaken between the triad and possibly

309 See Lena Salaymeh, "The Eurocentrism of Secularism," West Windows, September 14, 2020, https://www.uni-erfurt.de/philosophische-fakultaet/forschung/forschungsgruppen/was-ist-westlich-am-westen/west-windows/26-the-eurocentrism-of-secularism. Indeed, as I've shown above, the legal aspect of religion (as represented by the term sharīʿa) was frequently distinguished from the broader category of *dīn qua* religion. As for the word "tradition," it remains unclear to me how such a vague concept, which likely has less of a one-to-one correspondence with any term in the Islamic lexicon than "religion," somehow retains more heuristic value than the latter. More demonstrably, however, the preceding historical analysis should have fundamentally established that the closest counterpart to dīn in our vocabulary is "religion," and certainly not "law" or "tradition."

even a common English translation in "God." Indeed, the Western concept of "religion" itself admits a wide range of understandings: to take only the most illustrative example of Protestantism, what once began as an effort to define religion as an internal affair has now, at least within the United States, become an increasingly political ambition to bring religious ideals to bear on public discourse. That such variety exists, whether within the West or within premodern Islam, does not in itself negate the conceptual validity of the idea of religion, but points instead to its inherent fecundity and immense social utility in terms of facilitating the endless contestation over the correct understanding of this complex human phenomenon.

This leaves the important question, however, of whether we as scholars should conceive of Islam as a "religion." There are undoubtedly pitfalls to such an approach, particularly in the potential for the term to smuggle a uniquely Christian understanding of the phenomenon into our analyses of Islam, which would force the latter to be understood only with respect to the conception of religion presumed by the former. Nevertheless, it is clear that Muslims historically understood Islam as *dīn qua* religion (especially in their comparative inquiries), which leads me to think that to understand Islam as a "religion" is not in itself an entirely baseless assumption, nor a purely Western conceptual imposition, as many scholars would like to think. Instead, I would venture to say that one can accurately describe Islam as a religion whilst maintaining that Muslim understandings of Islam assume a different conception of this phenomenon than their modern Western counterparts. In fact, this leads me to suggest a further conjectural comment pertaining specifically to the field of Islamic Studies, which should not be taken as a hard conclusion, but simply a potential implication of some of the findings in this article.

Having been born in an environment of immense religious pluralism, and having been influenced from very early on by the dual sources of the Qur'an and the Late Antique heritage – both of which were deeply inflected by a language of religious reification – it seems that Islamic civilization was uniquely positioned to produce a rich and robust intellectual discourse surrounding the idea of religion in a way unlike any other civilization prior to the modern West. Indeed, this article has shown this to be the case. This leads us, however, to a further issue regarding the character of Islamic civilization, which has presented a particular problem of classification in the Western academy insofar as it is distinguished by a religious, rather than a regional or ethnic label (such as "Western" or "Chinese"). Relatedly, one might note the highly peculiar case of the modern Islamic world, in which resistance to Western secularization has often (though not invariably) been more resilient than it has elsewhere in former colonized societies. One wonders, then, whether the pride of place

given to religion in the study of Islamic civilization is connected to the story I have told above: that its emergence in a historically rare period of the reification of religion is what contributed to its distinctively religious character, and that this may possibly help us in understanding what unites this broad chunk of human civilization across time and space under a specifically religious label in the minds of those in and outside of it.

This is not to say that premodern Islamic life was exceptionally religious, since as I have shown elsewhere,[310] there was a clearly distinguishable secular domain of life which was produced precisely by the very widespread acknowledgement of a distinct realm of religion in Islam. What it does mean, however, is that the relationship between religion and other non-religious domains of life would have been understood in the Islamic past in ways quite different to that of other civilizations, though this is simply to state the obvious fact that human societies are exceedingly diverse. Nevertheless, despite this apparent variety, they still all remain united by their fundamental humanity, and it is in light of this commonality that we should not be surprised when we encounter spaces in which some semblance of a shared conceptual language emerges, especially with respect to an issue as universal as how we are to make sense of that ineffable connection to the transcendent (or to put it in more secular terms, an immaterial sense of meaning), a seemingly universal intuition which incessantly resurfaces throughout the story of humankind, whether under the guise of "religion" or *dīn*.

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310 See note nine and my forthcoming dissertation, *Beyond the Divine Command: Aspects of the Secular in Premodern Islam*.