

5 Theological exposition

Chapter 4 examined the role of the caliph and the learned classes in defining what Islam was to stand for, both theologically and politically. That discussion focused on the role of authority; both within and behind the debates which went on in the early centuries, however, lie the actual doctrines which were to emerge as the central elements of Islamic self-definition in theological terms. Certainly, no other element in the understanding of the formation of Islam has consumed such a great deal of intellectual effort among modern scholars as has the development of theology. Ironically, the resulting picture is one of considerable confusion, perhaps a consequence, once again, of the abundance of late source material, the variety of ways of interpreting the data provided, and the absence of a substantial quantity of texts traceable to the early period itself. Some relatively early works do exist, but the picture they combine to create remains disjointed.

Theological writing is the end result of an attempt at religious self-definition; it attempts to enunciate what is believed within a certain group of people in terms of certain tenets. Within the Near Eastern milieu, various elements emerged among the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam which defined what they held in common and where they differed. The process of defining where Islam was to differ from the other religions and where it was to agree was what the early theological tracts attempted to accomplish. The texts do not do this in an explicit way. They do not set up inter-religious comparisons. Rather, the efforts were conducted under topics which were, to a great extent, already predefined within the general religious milieu and were then enunciated from within each religious perspective.

The emergence of Islamic theological identity

The basic elements of Islamic theology find their expression within the Qur'ān and the *sunna*, and are elaborated to some extent in works such as the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 767). In these contexts, the statements are not theology, of course, but rather simple creedal formulae which have been isolated as being summaries of what Islam stands for. It took several centuries of scholarly reflection to mould this raw material into the mature formulations of Islamic faith. Belief in the oneness of God, in angels, in all the prophets and their scriptures, in the final judgement day, and in God's decree for humanity are often seen to be the core elements of faith for all Muslims; such simple summations arose, however, only after extensive reflection and debate concerning some very basic theological issues in the formative centuries of Islam.

The definition of a Muslim

From the available sources, one prime question emerges which seems to have been of major concern and may well have provided the stimulus towards developed theological writing. This was the issue of determining who was and who was not a Muslim. The later Muslim sources, which provide us with additional data on the origins of this dispute, picture it as first arising within the context of the history of the early Muslim community, in common with the general trend in the sources to put the origins of Islam as back as far as possible. Disputes over succession within the Arab ruling groups appear to have been read and understood by later generations of Muslims in theological terms as well as political ones. At stake was whether 'Alī, the fourth leader of the Arabs after Muḥammad, had the responsibility for avenging the death of his assassinated predecessor 'Uthmān; the clan of 'Uthmān, led by Mu'āwiya, championed the claims of its kinsman, suggesting that 'Alī had lost rightful claim to rule because of his failure to follow up on this obligation. Civil war erupted and Mu'āwiya and the Umayyad dynasty eventually took over. From today's perspective, there seems to be little reason to dispute the basic historico-political events. Muslim theological sources, however, see far more in these events and view them as paradigms for the discussion of issues of religious self-definition; they use these earlier events for discussion of the theological disputes which were, in fact, taking place at least a century after the fact. From a historical perspective, it is worth noting that the use of military force in trying to decide

the issues concerning ʿUthmān and ʿAlī indicates immediately that there certainly was a great deal at stake at this time, and the issue really was far more involved than the question concerning the death of ʿUthmān. In the later reading of these historical events, the notions of piety and the “rightful” (i.e. moral) assassination of an “unjust” ruler become the operative elements.

What emerges from the sources is a picture of a variety of groups, each going under a name which is often provided with a connection back to the times of ʿAlī and ʿUthmān, each taking its own position on what constitutes the definition of membership within the emergent Muslim community. The reasons for being concerned with this question were likely to have been of both a practical and a legal nature, over and above being the result of polemical discourse with Jews and Christians in the Near Eastern milieu.

The Khawārij

The Khawārij (or Kharijites) held a strict, activist position: all those who fall short of the total adherence to the Islamic precepts are unbelievers. Any of those who might happen to slip are thus rendered targets for the Islamic *jihād* against all non-believers; membership in the community, at the very least, provided protection from such attacks. In origin the group may have been involved in even more basic discussions over the sources of authority in the community. Their slogan is said to have been *lā ḥukma illā li-llāhi*, “there is no judgement except that of God,” which would suggest that they held that only God, through His expression in the Qurʾān, has made binding laws for humanity. At least in part, therefore, the Khawārij may be pictured as the scripturalist party who rejected those who attempted to supplement the single source of authority in the community with a notion of the *sunna*. For the Khawārij, this *sunna* was not a part of the divine revelation and therefore had no particular status in the framework of Islamic law; it was, in fact, like the authority of the caliph himself, part of a human endeavour which had no place alongside the divine word. It may well be, then, that they are to be identified as a pietistic group in the context of emergent Islam, facing off against the asserted power and authority of the caliph and his *sunna*.¹ Later, however, a part of the ammunition of the Khawārij against other groups was sought in *ḥadīth* reports (that is, the *sunna* of Muḥammad), which they saw as equating certain actions, for example, adultery, as taking one out of the category of “believer.”²

This activist position proved disruptive to the early Muslim community, and the legacy of the movement and its theological and moral position has lingered until today. The Khawārij were, in many ways, a marginal group when viewed within the overall context of Islamic history. As a group their significance faded. However, the tendency displayed in their thought has always provided a tension in Islam. Their demands for judgement of adherence to Islam – always varying in their intensity and their precise theological motivation, certainly – provided a constant threat to the unity of the community, yet those threats were enunciated under the guise of a demand for that very unity which was considered possible only with a strict implementation of a single code of Islam. Such approaches to Islam have become prominent at times of community stress. A threat from the outside to the integrity of the Muslim community has, throughout history, provided the stimulus for a retreat to a more closely defined conception of Islam and a greater call for a judgement upon fellow Muslims as to the acceptability of their practice of Islam.³

The Murji'a

The Murji'a adopted a conservative position, preserving the status quo. They argued that those who appeared not to be following the outward precepts of Islam must still be accepted as Muslims; only God truly knows their religious state. A profession of faith along with an inward assent to Islam was all that was required to confirm community membership; faith (*īmān*) is “of the heart and of the tongue.” The position starts with the emblem of theological identity implied by the questions concerning ‘Alī and ‘Uthmān. Were these two men guilty of sin? Were their assassinations justified? The Murji'a are pictured in the sources as holding that the decisions on these questions must be left to God. As a theological position, this stance holds that “works” – consisting of all human actions – are not a part of faith; that is, as long as a person professes belief in Islam (through the single “act” of confession of faith), then that person is a Muslim. The actual performance of the ritual acts of Islam is not a criterion for membership in the community. This position was supported in the view of the Murji'a by the notion that in the Qur'ān God called those who had confessed their faith (and that alone) “believers.” According to Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767), good works will be rewarded primarily in the hereafter:

Whoever obeys God in all the laws, according to us, is of the people of paradise. Whoever leaves both faith and works is an infidel, of the people of the fire. However, whoever believes but is guilty of some breach of the law is a believing sinner, and God will do as He wishes with that person: punish the person if He wills, or forgive the person if He wills.⁴

In the here and now, it was frequently argued that any increase in faith as manifested in pious works was really only an increase in conviction on the part of the individual. The whole doctrine thus had a practical result in terms of the ease of conversion to Islam, as may be seen especially in the case of the spread among the Turks in central Asia in the eleventh century of the later theological school of al-Māturīdī which followed Abū Ḥanīfa's legal teachings.⁵

Abū Ḥanīfa is generally pictured as the major early enunciator of the Murji'a position; certainly, his name has become associated with documents which are seen as coming from the Murji'a in their details. One such document is *al-Fiqh al-Akbar*,⁶ another the *Risāla* ("letter") to 'Uthmān al-Battī.⁷ These documents, and others from the same school of thought, seem to have the preservation of the unity of the Muslim community as their central concern, as is suggested by the tolerant nature of the definition of faith according to the Murji'a.

The Traditionalists

A group generally termed the Traditionalists (often calling themselves, as do other groups, *ahl al-sunna*, "the people of the *sunna*"; the name "Traditionalist" refers to the use of *ḥadīth* materials in preference to the independent powers of reason)⁸ are generally connected to the figure of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) in the early period. Their stance represents yet another position on this question of faith, essentially arguing that there are degrees of "being Muslim." Works do count towards one's status in the community, although one can still be a believer and commit sin – there are, therefore, what may be termed "degrees of faith." This position is enunciated in works ascribed to Ibn Ḥanbal and to Abū 'Ubayd (d. 838), and is also found embodied in the books of *ḥadīth*; it becomes the position of the later theological school of al-Ash'arī and thus of the majority form of Islam. Ibn Ḥanbal is said to have summarized his position as "faith consists in verbal assent, deeds and intention and adherence to the *sunna*. Faith increases and decreases."⁹

Abū ‘Ubayd was a scholar with broad intellectual interests who “contributed pioneer studies of major significance, and in all of them he displayed a degree of erudition and reached a level of achievement which won the acclaim of contemporary scholars.”¹⁰ Theologically, he argued that faith is submission to God through intention, statement of belief, and works all combined. Such faith varies by degrees, beginning with the basic confession of faith and then building from there; whoever makes the first step is entitled to be called a Muslim (and thus, in practical terms, the doctrine has the same consequences as that of the Murji’a) but perfection of faith is something to be reached through works. One can be termed a believer on the basis of the statement of faith but there are ranks among the believers in accordance with the extent to which such people conform to the requirements of the religious system of Islam. The Muslim who commits a grave sin, therefore, is still to be termed a believer but is not as good a believer as someone who has not committed a sin; such a person is not a believer in the full definition of that term.¹¹

The Qadariyya

A fourth position in the overall debate became associated with some people from within a group known as the Qadariyya (for example, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, d. 728); here, as with the Murji’a, a person who professes faith in Islam is considered a member of the community, but those who can be observed not following the requirements of Islam are to be considered neither believers nor unbelievers, but somewhere in between – they are hypocrites. The end result in practical terms is, once again, the same as with the Murji’a, but the claim is being made that it is, in fact, possible to have an opinion about the status of a believer’s adherence to Islam. The position does not distinguish, however, between levels of faith as does that of the Traditionalists.

The problem of free will and predestination

The Qadariyya were centrally involved in another theological dispute, one which is generally understood to have provided them with their name. The Qadariyya are those who discussed the issue of *qadar*, the preordination of events in the world by God. This group held to the position of the free will of humanity and was opposed in this matter by those often said to be more closely aligned to the political powers of the day. That is, the Qadariyya were on the more revolutionary

wing of the theological groupings; their espousal of free will was frequently connected to those agitating for a new political order which was opposed to the ruling Umayyad caliphs who had appropriated both political and theological authority under the guise of having been appointed by God (and thus destined to fulfil this function).¹² If individuals were accountable for their actions, then so were governments, according to the argument of the Qadariyya. The Murji'a are frequently pictured as those most supportive of the ruling powers, for their doctrine of faith as a personal concern did not facilitate judgments being made on people as to their status in the faith (beyond the actual statement of faith), whether that person be a peasant or the ruler.

The *Risāla* (often translated "Treatise" in this instance) of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī is generally seen as one of the earliest documents concerned with the argument for free will, although both the ascription of an early date to the text and its status as one of the earliest texts have been questioned.¹³ Al-Ḥasan argues in the treatise for the position of the individual's free will on the basis of the Qur'ān; any suggestion made in the Qur'ān that predestination is to be supported (as his opponents suggested) is to be countered by an interpretation of the passage in the light of other statements. Most obvious in this regard, statements such as Qur'ān 13/27, "God sends anyone He wishes astray" (implying that the individual's fate is in the hands of God alone and there is nothing that can be done about it) are to be interpreted in the light of other statements such as Qur'ān 14/27, "God sends wrongdoers astray," where, it is asserted, the people are *already* astray (they are already "wrongdoers," by the act of their own free will) before God confirms them in their "fate." This became the standard interpretative tool of all those who argued for the free-will position in Islam. From a more positive angle, the argument also ran that God says in Qur'ān 51/56, "I have only created jinn and people so they may worship Me," meaning that all people must be free to worship God, for God would not command them to do something and then prevent them from doing it.

The Mu'tazila and the role of reason

Out of the political protest party of the Qadariyya there appears to have developed a group known as the Mu'tazila. Clearly, this party adopted the theological stance of the Qadariyya. Most importantly, though, the Mu'tazila are generally credited with the perfection of the art of theological speculation in Islam in the form of *kalām* –

the dialectical style of discussion where objections are put forth and then the response, in the form “If they say . . . , it is said to them. . . .” While this style of discussion originated neither with the Mu‘tazila nor even within Islam itself,¹⁴ it was through this means that this group argued their position, one which was based around the dual principle of the justice and unity of God. Working from this starting point, all the implications were systematically laid out on the basis of the use of reason in the argumentation. While the Qur’ān had its place in the discussions, it was not so much a source when used by the Mu‘tazila as a testimony to the veracity of the claims which they were making. The basic assumptions of the Greek philosophical system (as understood and transmitted through Christian scholars) formed the fundamental element underlying the whole position; it was argued that reason, and not only traditional sources, could be used as a source of reliable knowledge for human beings. The Mu‘tazila were the first to introduce the Greek mode of reasoning and argumentation into the Islamic religious discussions, changing the face of Muslim theology for all time as a result. Greek philosophical learning remained a discipline in and by itself among Muslims (as will be explored in Chapter 10), being developed by people such as al-Kindī (d. c.870), al-Farābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037). The subject (known in Arabic as *falsafa*) was one which aroused the ire of many traditionalists and remained, for the most part, a rival to theology as a discipline, except in the hands of the Mu‘tazila who used its tools to their advantage.

The justice of God

The notion of the justice of God, something demanded of the divinity by Greek logic, led to extensive discussions concerning the nature of the divinity and His relationship to humanity. “Justice” for the Mu‘tazila was equated with “good,” such that it was not possible to conceive that God would be unjust or evil. The basic Muslim principle that God will reward the true believers after death and punish the unbelieving wrongdoers is then connected to this. God must be just in assessing this punishment or reward, and therefore humanity must have a fair chance to perform on the side of good or evil. Any sense of predestination must be removed from the Qur’ān, therefore, by reinterpretation. Al-Khayyāt (d. c.912), the earliest author of the Mu‘tazila from whom we have a complete text directly, speaks, for example, of the Quranic notion of God “sealing hearts”:

[the idea of “sealing”] is not that He prevents people from doing what He orders them to do – He is above that! – rather, it refers to the name, the judgment and the testimony [concerning an act]. Do you not notice that He said [in Qur’ān 4/155] “because of . . . their disbelief”? Thus He sealed their hearts because of what was in them of disbelief.¹⁵

The power to act given by God to humanity carries with it the power to decide which action to undertake; individuals must therefore be fully responsible for their own fate. Evil deeds must originate in individual actions and have nothing to do with God, a problem which the doctrine of predestination seems to create. However, unjust acts do seem to occur in nature – death of young infants, death through natural disasters and so forth. This theological problem was faced in a variety of ways by members of the Mu‘tazila. Some said, for example, that while God could have created a perfect world where such things did not happen, He chose not to. All this is, for the Mu‘tazila, a necessary consequence of the doctrine of the justice of God.

The created Qur’ān

The Mu‘tazila had their moment of political support under the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Ma’mūn (ruled 813–33) with the institution of the *miḥna* serving as an inquest body investigating the creedal stance of leading figures at the time, as discussed in the previous chapter. Here the figure of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal looms large for his role in resisting the creed of the Mu‘tazila. A crucial issue at this time arose from the notion that the Qur’ān was the word of God; the resultant discussion concerned whether the scripture was, therefore, created “in time” or uncreated and thus existent from eternity. The argument, it is worth noting, was not a new one within the Judaeo-Christian world, as may be witnessed by ideas of the “pre-existent Torah” and Jesus as the Logos who “was with God at the beginning.”¹⁶ The Mu‘tazila championed the notion of the created Qur’ān as a part of their understanding of the inherent free will of humanity, often pointing to Abū Lahab and his being condemned to hell in *sūra* 111. The Qur’ān must have been created at the time of its revelation, they argued, for otherwise the fate of Abū Lahab would have been established beforehand, thus removing his freedom to determine his own fate. This issue was also related to the reality of God’s speech. Some took God’s speaking to mean that He spoke as humans speak, with the organs of speech, a point which was then rejected as impinging upon God’s “otherness.”

For a Traditionalist such as Ibn Ḥanbal, the reality of God's actually speaking must be so, because such is stated in the Qur'ān.¹⁷ In the beginning, it was this element which seems to have been crucial in the development of the argument and only later did the argument turn to one of the emergence of the Qur'ān "in time," as was the issue in the *miḥna*.

The unity of God

The debate over the created Qur'ān relates to the other important element of Mu'tazilī thought, the concept of the unity of God, *tawḥīd*. Polemic with Christianity and Manichaeism appears to have been part of the reason for the emphasis within Mu'tazilī thought on this doctrine, and the use of the Greek mode of reasoning by protagonists from these other two religions may well account for the introduction of rationalism into Islam as well, occurring initially within this polemical framework. Al-Khayyāṭ's work paints the portrait of a real threat posed by the radical dualism of the Manichaeans, although it is likely that the Christian Trinity was a far more important topic of discussion. The position adopted by most of the Mu'tazila was that God can only be described in negatives. Any attempt to ascribe positive attributes to God was seen as impinging upon His unity, for such would suggest that He could be divided into a series of eternal aspects. The closest that one may come to saying something positive about God would be to say that God is "knowing," but this "knowing" occurs not by an attribute of God, but rather by and through God Himself in His essence. Once again, the parallels in these arguments to Christian discussions over the nature of Jesus in his relationship to the Father cannot be overlooked.¹⁸

An implication of this position on the unity of God was the emphasis on de-anthropomorphization of the divinity especially as He is described in the Qur'ān. Any suggestion that God might have a "face" (Qur'ān 2/272, 6/52, etc.) or be "sitting upon a throne" (Qur'ān 2/255, etc.) in reality was to be rejected and taken as a metaphorical statement; no reference to the human form could be applied to God in its usual meaning. God's "face" was to be understood as His "essence," according to al-Khayyāṭ, for example. Thus, the discussion conducted during the *miḥna* over the status of the Qur'ān was not limited only to the matter of free will. For the Mu'tazila at least, both major aspects of their doctrine, unity and justice were encapsulated in the idea of a created Qur'ān; an eternal Qur'ān would suggest an attribute of God (speech) which existed separately (in the concept of the "heavenly

tablet”) alongside God, impinging thereby on His unity, as well as suggesting the predestination of events.

The fall of the Mu‘tazila

The role of reason for the Mu‘tazila was such that the main principles of the conduct of life – the principles of good and evil – were seen to be discoverable by any rational human. Revelation is necessary only in order to supplement what reason can discover, especially in such matters as the ritual law of Islam. For example, ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025), one of the last major medieval Mu‘tazilī thinkers, suggests that the eating of meat would not be allowed in Islam if it were not for the fact that scripture supports the practice; reason, therefore, cannot be seen to provide necessarily the full delineation of the law and scripture must provide the additional pointers needed.¹⁹ Revelation also serves to motivate people with its emphasis on the promise and the threat of the afterlife; the Mu‘tazila recognized that humanity was in need of guidance and that, in its “natural state,” it would not follow the dictates of reason.

This view of the role of reason is significant in terms of the ultimate fate of the Mu‘tazila, for it implied that the legal scholars of Islam had, in fact, no particular claim to sole possession of the right interpretation of all Muslim dogma. For the Mu‘tazila, all humans are, in theory, capable of making the correct decision on issues of faith and law because of their God-given intellect. There is, therefore, implicit in this stance an anti-jurist bias that may well have proven to be a part of the cause of their ultimate downfall. Agitation by the scholarly elite whose job it was to provide the interpretation of the law is likely to have brought about the eventual political action, by the caliph al-Qādir in the years 1017 and 1041, of demanding a profession of faith which rejected the Mu‘tazilī stance. This finally put a stop to the movement (at least until more recent times when it re-emerged in the guise of modernism).²⁰

In the eleventh century, however, the Buwayhids, the rulers in Baghdad, were backing politically the remnants of the supporters of the fourth caliph, ‘Alī, known as the Shī‘a; the desire of the majority of the Muslims at the time (known as the Sunnīs) to present a united front against this pressure was probably part of the reason for this final move against the Mu‘tazila (whose theology had already influenced the Shī‘a by this time and was probably perceived as a threat by the Sunnīs for that reason also.)²¹ So, the eventual downfall of

the Muʿtazila was undoubtedly a result of political circumstances of the time as much as their doctrine.

Al-Ashʿarī

Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 935) emerged out of the context of the Muʿtazila in the tenth century to enunciate a theological position which may be characterized as midway between the scripturalism of the Traditionalists and the audacious rationalism of the Muʿtazila; this was a position which was to last as the most significant statement of Islamic theology. In his book *al-Ibāna*, for example, he uses *kalām*-style argumentation, setting up questions to be posed to his opponents who are stipulated to be especially the members of the Muʿtazila who “interpret the Qurʾān according to their opinions with an interpretation for which God has neither revealed authority nor shown proof.”²² To the questions which he poses in his arguments, he responds: “If they say ‘yes’, then it follows that . . . or if they say ‘no’, then it follows that . . .,” with the arguments being pursued to the point of logical contradiction or contradiction with the twin sources of authority in Islam, the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth*.

Al-Ashʿarī’s method was based upon extensive use of the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth* in order to formulate his rational arguments. He fully supported the position of predestination, God being pictured in the Qurʾān clearly as all-powerful and all-knowing; that God should not know and not be in control of what people were doing is clearly a problem if the free-will position is embraced. For al-Ashʿarī, God creates the power for people to act at the moment of action (God being the only one who actually has the power to create), yet the individual is responsible for all he or she does. This responsibility is referred to as *kasb*, “acquisition” – that is, that people “acquire” the ramifications of their actions, perhaps to be thought of as similar to the workings of the “conscience” in modern terminology. Says al-Ashʿarī: “No human act can occur without His willing it, because that would imply that it occurred out of carelessness and neglect or out of weakness and inadequacy on His part to effect what He wills.”²³

God’s attributes are real for al-Ashʿarī because the Qurʾān clearly states them and so it must be meaningful to speak of God’s hand and God’s face; de-anthropomorphization was one of the central elements of Muʿtazilī thought which al-Ashʿarī denounced, for he saw it as a symbol of rationalist excesses and wilful ignorance of the sense of the Quranic text. Still, he did not wish to deny that reason indicates that speaking of these attributes of God would seem problematic when

put in conjunction with an infinite God. His solution was to speak of the reality of the attributes but that these are not attributes in the same way that humans have such. God does have a hand, but we just “do not know how” this is to be conceived. The phrase *bilā kayf*, “without knowing how,” became a key term in Ash‘arī theology, to be used whenever reason and the Qur‘ān or *ḥadīth* met head-on in conflict.

Al-Ash‘arī saw the Qur‘ān as the eternal and uncreated word of God, precisely because it was the word of God and, therefore, must partake in the character of His attributes. Those attributes (most importantly knowing, powerful, living, hearing, seeing, speech, and will)²⁴ are all strongly affirmed by al-Ash‘arī who argued that if God does not have these attributes in reality, then He is somehow deficient and that, of course, cannot be the case. For example, al-Ash‘arī states:

one who is living, if he be not knowing, is qualified by some contrary of knowledge such as ignorance, doubt or other defects. . . . But if He had been ever qualified by some contrary of knowledge, it would have been impossible for Him ever to know. For if the contrary of knowledge had been eternal, it would have been impossible for it to cease to be; and if it had been impossible for it to cease to be, it would have been impossible for Him to have made works of wisdom. Hence, since God has made such works, and since they prove that He is knowing, it is true and certain that God has always been knowing, since it is clearly impossible for Him to have been ever qualified by some contrary of knowledge.²⁵

Al-Māturīdī

Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944) was another of the tenth-century theologians whose influence at the time seems to have been significant in the emergence of Sunnī Islam. Living in Transoxiana, he attacked the doctrines of the Mu‘tazila and set down the foundations of his theological system. Like al-Ash‘arī, al-Māturīdī followed a middle path between Traditionalism and rationalism, forging an Islam which saw the written sources of the faith dominate but which found a place for the activities of the human mind.²⁶

Only a few texts have come down to us from al-Māturīdī and his school, but one of the most important, his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, is available in Arabic.²⁷ The work commences by declaring that unconditional following of the teaching of another person is not valid. God has given humanity intelligence so that all may think and that gift

must be used. This, of course, is a doctrine held in common with the Muʿtazila. Reason leads to knowledge, as do the senses and transmissions from the past, either from authoritative sources or from prophets. Reason must be used to judge the information provided by the other sources of knowledge. Reason also allowed knowledge of God before prophets were sent, a position contrary to al-Ashʿarī who held that prophets were necessary and belief was not incumbent upon those who had not been reached by God's messengers. Following this in al-Māturīdī's work come arguments concerning the temporality of the world, the necessary and eternal existence of God, and that God is the creator of the world. This is all demonstrated using rational proof. Likewise, the oneness of God is proven and the matter of His attributes dealt with such that what the text of the Qurʾān says about God must be believed, although we cannot know "how" God is to be conceived of as "sitting" on His throne, for example; this suggests a greater tendency towards interpretation of such matters than in al-Ashʿarī. Al-Māturīdī supports the idea of the free will of humanity, although God is, in fact, the only creator and He creates the actions of His creation; using the same notion as al-Ashʿarī of individuals "acquiring" their actions, al-Māturīdī suggests that this acquisition is connected to the choice or intention which precedes an act. This is to be distinguished from al-Ashʿarī's sense of acquisition being the contemporaneous coming into the possession of the capacity to act at the time of the action. Evil deeds, while predetermined by God, are the actions of the individual as a consequence of the choice and intention to do such acts.

Al-Māturīdī was the inheritor and perpetuator of the position of the Murjiʿa on the question of faith. Only two states exist: having faith or not having faith. The essence of faith is in the belief in one's heart but there must be some practical consequence of this within Islam.

For a century after the death of al-Māturīdī, his teaching does not seem to have been of much importance, for some 150 years not drawing the attention of even Ashʿarī opponents. The reason for this neglect undoubtedly lies in the fact of al-Māturīdī's residency in Samarqand, and thus his being well away from the centre of Islamic intellectual activity; his doctrines appear to have remained of local concern to the community in that region, with little external note taken of the development. The position of al-Māturīdī is generally presented as being an outgrowth of Abū Ḥanīfa's stance, which had already spread to Samarqand by al-Māturīdī's time. Abū Ḥanīfa's position as eponym of the Ḥanafī legal school allowed al-Māturīdī's later followers to argue for the acceptance of their theological stance

in areas outside Samarqand which were already dominated by the Ḥanafī legal school; they argued this on the basis of the previous relationship between the two allegiances.

The spread and the eventual success of the school were a result of the conversion of Turks in central Asia to Islam of this Ḥanafī–Māturīdī persuasion. The liberal theological implications of Ḥanafī juridical requirements – such that faith is present in the individual even if all religious duties are ignored – is thought to have allowed for the gradual conversion of these nomadic peoples. With the expansion of the Turks, starting in the Seljuk period, adherence to the ideas of the Māturīdī school came to the attention of other groups in the Islamic community. The theological position of later Māturīdī school is represented, for example, in the *‘aqīda* or creed of al-Nasafī (d. 1142), which has proven popular throughout the Muslim world, attracting many commentaries and elaborations even from the followers of al-Ash‘arī.²⁸ In form, the creed presents what had become the classical sequence of argumentation, starting with the enumeration of the sources of knowledge and moving through discussion of God and His attributes and His nature, belief, and the communication from God via messengers, to be concluded by a discussion of life in the world. The whole theological position is thereby argued to be one cohesive whole, leading its reader from simple observations on how we know things to the compelling implication that, therefore, the Muslim way of life is the true and divinely desired one.

The role of theological writing

Theological writing became an art in Islam, although, as will become clear in the next chapter, it never had the place of honour in the community which legal discussions held. To some extent certainly, this is because the theological enterprise was dedicated more to the theoretical than the practical aspects of Muslim life. Islam is, to a great extent, predicated upon the idea of responding to the call from God through action; thus, the most crucial and relevant discipline to the vast majority of Muslims has been the one which guides human behaviour – Islamic law – rather than theology, with its dedication to the realm of human thought. Theology did provide some of the intellectual basis for the enunciation of the distinction between Islam on the one side, and Judaism, Christianity, and a multitude of other “lesser” religions on the other; it was, therefore, a crucial element in the formation of Islam as an independent and individual mode of existence within which a religious way of life could be led.