

Power, Orthodoxy, and Salvation in Classical Islamic Theology¹

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1 The Study of Classical Islamic Theology at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century

To attempt, as I do in the pages that follow, a sketch of the state-of-the-art in the academic study of classical Islamic theology at the dawn of the twenty-first century is a daunting task. Although in Western contexts, it remains the conclave of a rather small number of researchers, the field has grown to remarkable proportions. Specialists are armed to the teeth with technical and historical particulars. Therefore any survey, including the present one, must by definition be selective and incomplete. However, I believe that if scholars of Islam want to overcome what has recently been characterised as their “ghettoized” position within the broader field of the study of religion (Elias 2010a, 2), they ought to welcome meta-critical reflections on the genealogy and current configuration of the discipline within which they operate. It is in this spirit that I offer the following thoughts, building upon my own recent readings in scholarship on classical Islamic theology.

At the beginning, a brief reflection on the terms of the debate. In the area of Islamic theology, the use of the term “classical” tends to delegitimise theological activity in what Marshal Hodgson called “the Later Middle Period” of Islamic history (1258 to ca. 1500), as well as theological developments that occurred during the time of the so-called “gunpowder empires” of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals. Before these centuries of intense theological activity are better understood and thus a bridge has been built between the early centuries and modern times, synthetic definitions of what counts as “classical” (i.e. definitive) theology in Islam ought best be avoided. One should note, however, that scholars of Islamic theology are beginning to fill the gaps in our knowledge about the intellectual history of these later centuries.

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The very notion of “Islamic theology” is fraught with difficulties, and we may legitimately ask whether the signifier “theology” as we commonly apply it to the Islamic tradition adequately captures its signified. The first axe that one has to grind in this regard is that scholarship on Islamic theology has traditionally focused on, and continues to emphasise, the study of the internal dynamics and development of Islamic theological doctrines. In fact, it may be averred that much of this scholarship is marked by an affinity to the “history of ideas” approach connected with the name of the American philosopher Arthur Lovejoy. Lovejoy, who is commonly seen as the founder of this school of thought, proposed to study “unit-ideas” – these correspond, roughly, to overarching “concepts,” or “themes” of human thought – that is, how they develop over time and enter into changing relationships with other “unit-ideas” (Lovejoy 1965 [1936], 3-23).

His detractors argue that Lovejoy treats these “unit-ideas” as if they operate outside of the minds of the people who debate them, as if they exist in a parallel, eternal and unadulterated universe. In Lovejoy’s perspective, as Quentin Skinner puts it, “ideas get up to do battle on their own behalf” (Skinner 2002, 62). However, as Skinner emphasises, “we’re not dealing with ‘perennial’ debates but with particularistic, ideological speech-acts” (83-84). The “history of ideas” approach, in other words, downplays the importance of context, it fails to grasp what ideas mean for actual people in real-life situations. “The only history of ideas to be written,” writes Skinner, “are histories of their uses in argument” (86).

The Hegelian-Marxian controversy that underlies the debate between Lovejoy and Skinner continues to pose a challenge for students of classical Islamic theology until today. Recent decades have witnessed vigorous efforts to reconceptualise the academic study of religion by critically examining its alleged “Protestant bias,” that is, by freeing it from its nostalgic insistence on the primacy of mind over body, ideal essences over actual things, text over context, and individual inwards religiosity over communal outwards forms of the religious life (McCutcheon 1997; Molendijk and Pels 1998; Hart 1999). Robert Orsi has claimed that the lingering scholarly commitment to such “Protestant” ideas about what constitutes “true” or “good” religion results in a situation where “all the complex dynamism of religion is stripped away, its boundary-blurring and border-crossing propensities eliminated” (Orsi 1998, 209-210). If students and scholars of Islam want to remain in conversation with colleagues studying other religious traditions, they are well advised to take the call for a less text-immanent and more deeply contextualised reading of the classical sources seriously. This is not to deny the importance of textual studies, but rather to stress the need for analysis that proceeds

in a text-*cum*-context mode, and that, in addition, is willing to question assumptions about what kind of texts deserve to be studied.

It would be unfair, however, to accuse the Western study of Islamic theology as a whole of detached idealism. Calls for more contextualised approaches have been both plentiful and vigorous. Mohamed Arkoun, for example, has repeatedly pointed out that there is no pure unadulterated intellectual history in Islam. Rather, as Arkoun maintains, writers are always the product of their age (Arkoun 1970, 59). The divine is always communicated through the lens of a specific spatial-temporal environment: "There is no way to find the absolute outside the social, political condition of human beings and the medium of language" (Arkoun 1988, 81). As far as the study of classical Islamic theology is concerned, however, there may still be some lessons to be learned from colleagues who write about contemporary Islamic theology, and who often do so with a keen eye for the political and social embeddedness of theological expressions.

The lack of contextualisation is not the only thing that strikes one as problematic with regard to what continues to be the dominant paradigm in the study of Islamic theology. The field on the whole privileges a particular conception of *which* ideas are worthy of study, namely, those ideas that fall under the rubric of *kalām*. However, in order for us to develop an understanding of the full gamut of theological expressions in Islam, I believe we must not only give attention to systematic and formalist reasoning about God and His relation to creation, the traditional province of *kalām*, but include areas such as religious mythology, apocalypticism, and eschatological thought, in short, the religious imagination in Islam. The Islamic tradition is often seen as impoverished when it comes to mythology or the religious imagination. However, it is difficult to decide whether this assessment has resulted from the partial blindness of Western observers or from any actual lack of such fields of religious expression in Islamic traditions. Islamic theology, in my view, is far richer than the traditional focus on *kalām* allows us to see.

How broadly, then, should we conceive the term "Islamic theology"? When one hears Islam debated in public one sometimes gets the impression that Islamic theology is simply *everything* in Islam that has to do with God, including, notably, the area of shari'a law. Never mind that scholars continue to dispute whether shari'a is better understood as a "divine law" or a "jurists' law" resulting from the human endeavour, known as *fiqh*, to interpret and develop a limited set of basic legal norms. Fear of Muslim "theocracies," as it turns out, is really a fear of "fiqhocracy," a fear that drowns out the crucial distinction between divine perfection and human fallibility in interpreting

the divine. The broad meaning of “Islamic theology” that underlies such perceptions is arguably far too vague to be of much use.

A more promising way of approaching a definition is to look at the terminology used by classical Muslim thinkers themselves. Immediately, this serves to demonstrate some of the limitations of the *kalām*-centred approach. The literal meaning of *‘ilm al-kalām* is not “theology” but “knowledge of rational-dialectic speech.” *Kalām* might be described as speculative, argumentative discourse about God and His relationship to the universe from the moment of its creation to the end of time. Influenced as it was by Hellenistic thought, in particular logic, *kalām* suffered a number of debilitating blows during its history. The first was dealt by the rise of Ash‘arism in the tenth century, the school of thought that came to dominate *kalām* but which in fact did much to circumscribe and limit its scope; the second by Sunni-Jama‘i traditionalism, which rejected *kalām* altogether, instead emphasising the need to rely on revealed rather than speculative knowledge. In consequence, *kalām* never came to occupy as central a position in Islamic higher learning as the theological disciplines did in the university curricula of premodern Europe. In Islam, this spot in the limelight was awarded to the legal sciences. *Kalām*, by comparison, remained a marginal discipline. This is also reflected by how it has been studied in the West. For much of its history, the Western study of classical Islamic theology, in the sense of *kalām*, was the province of lone giants cutting paths through a jungle thicket.

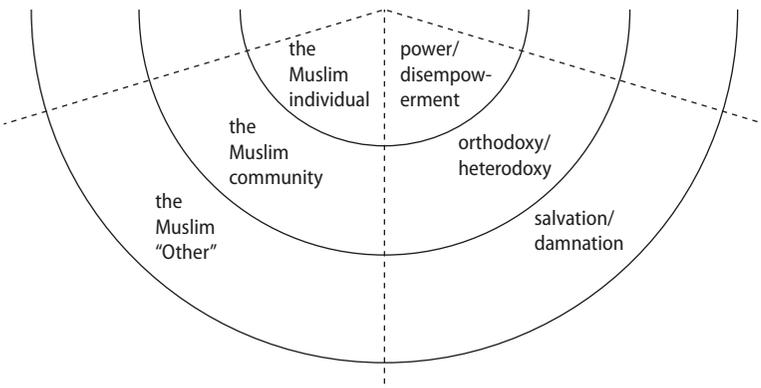
‘Ilm al-kalām, however, is not the only area of Islamic religious thought that deserves to be measured against the term “theology.” Al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* (The revivification of the sciences of religiosity) heralds a shift in, and broadening of, how Muslim thinking about God and His relation to the universe was conceived in classical times. The word *dīn*, for al-Ghazali, indicates the inwards dimension of faith (Rahman 1979, 106) – “religiosity,” as we might say nowadays. This understanding of *dīn* predates al-Ghazali: for the Mu‘tazili *mutakallim* ‘Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025), *dīn* did not have to do with works, but with “the subjective religious behaviour ... with which man accepts works and the need to perform them” (Van Ess 2011a, 1267). However, al-Ghazali may be credited for foregrounding *dīn* as the key concept in religious knowledge. The “sciences of religiosity” (*‘ulūm al-dīn*), for al-Ghazali, include more than the knowledge about God *sub specie aeternitatis*. While the forty volumes of the “Revivification of the Sciences of Religiosity” do feature *kalām*-style discussions in several places, their scope is much broader, covering aspects of religious practice, political and social ideals, personal piety, and spirituality. Also mythology and eschatology play important roles. The fortieth and last volume is devoted

entirely to the afterlife and is filled with a plethora of traditions that engage the religious imagination. It seems to me that this broader understanding of “Islamic theology” as the “sciences of religiosity,” rather than the narrow identification with *kalām*, should guide scholars in defining the contours of the field they study, particularly if they want to do justice to the centuries that intervened between al-Ghazali and the advent of “modern” Islamic theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the following, I shall try to outline how, in my view, scholars of classical Islamic theology writing in recent decades have probed and, in some instances, expanded the contours of their field. I do this with the aim of bringing to light some of the issues that drive the study of Islamic classical theology in particular, but also Islamic studies more generally speaking. I shall not proceed along epistemological (rationalism-traditionalism), historical (formative-classical-modern), or school lines (Sunni-Shi‘i-Ibadi or Mu‘tazili-Ash‘ari-Maturidi-Imami, etc.), as survey works of Islamic theology usually do. Instead, I zoom in on three themes: power, community, and salvation. In choosing these themes, I take my clue from the recent rise of a literature devoted to meta-critical reflection about the analytical categories that scholars in cultural studies invoke in their work, a phenomenon that appears to have spilled over from literary studies and anthropology to the study of religion, and most recently, to Islamic studies (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 1990; Taylor 1998; Elias 2010b).

The three themes chosen here also offer the advantage of a natural progression through three concentric circles, circles that stake out a fairly comprehensive bird eye’s view of the field (see figure 1). In the context of

Figure 1 Thematic approach to Islamic theology



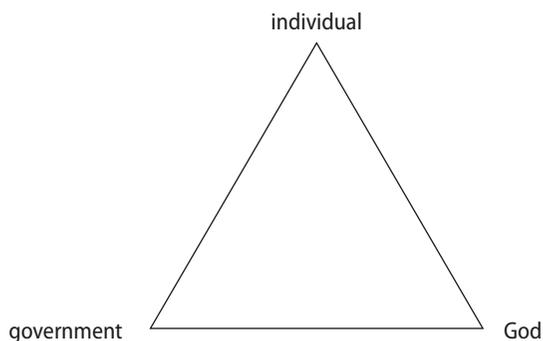
the notion of power I will discuss how scholars have evaluated the degree to which Islamic theology preserves individual agency as against the power of God and of the state, thereby defending the notion of free and independent thought and action. In the context of the notion of community I will focus on how scholars have reflected on the formation of the Muslim *umma*, in particular in regard to the question of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Islamic theology. Finally, in the context of the notion of salvation, I shall discuss how scholars have viewed Islamic theology's attitude towards the non-Muslim "Other" of Islam.

2 God's Power and Individual Empowerment

In order to evaluate the margin of individual freedom and power offered by Muslim theology, one must examine how it pictures the individual in relation to both God and to (divinely sanctioned) government (see figure 2).

Here I propose to look at this triangle of powers through the lens of al-Ghazali, the famous Iraqi jurist-*cum*-theologian-*cum*-mystic who died in 1111. The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a veritable flurry of studies devoted to al-Ghazali, even if scholarship on al-Ghazali was copious in the 1990s and indeed before. Al-Ghazali is as good a yardstick as any to measure the current "state of the art" in the field of classical Islamic theology. The year 2011 marked the 900th anniversary of al-Ghazali's death, and his unabated popularity found expression in numerous scholarly meetings devoted to his legacy.

Figure 2 Triangle of powers



As early as the nineteenth century, Western Orientalists identified al-Ghazali as the linchpin on which hinged a whole spectrum of promises and threats inherent in Islamic thought, whether real or imagined. On the one hand, al-Ghazali was, and continues to be, a tremendously popular figure, a source of enduring fascination. His biography is dramatically cut in half by an existential epistemological crisis, much in the vein of Augustine and Descartes, suffered at the height of a brilliant academic career as a professor in Baghdad, the old capital of Islam. This crisis captured the imagination of generations of Western students of Islam. Although not the first one to do so in the history of Islam (cf. Massignon 1954 [1922], 246), the fact that al-Ghazali wrote an autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (The rescuer from error), seemed to many to offer a unique opportunity to grasp classical Islam through the lens of an outstanding individual, an iconoclast and virtuoso in all the major branches of Islamic knowledge, a synthetic thinker who created a new orthodoxy: *tout court*, as in the title of William Montgomery Watt's still definitive study, *Muslim Intellectual* (1963).

On the other hand, scholars thought for a long time that al-Ghazali had severely undermined philosophical inquiry in Islam by writing an influential refutation of the Persian philosopher Avicenna (d. 1037), the *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (The incoherence of the philosophers), in which he declared the philosophers heretics for their three views that (1) the world is eternal, not created by God in time; (2) there is no physical resurrection of bodies; and (3) God knows only universals and not particulars. With the *Tahafut*, generations of students of Islam in the West were taught, al-Ghazali single-handedly dealt a *coup de grâce* to the spirit of free inquiry and the belief in natural laws in Islam. This view was not held by Western Orientalists alone. The Pakistani scholar of Islam Fazlur Rahman, for example, called al-Ghazali's perceived denial of causality a "folly," going so far as to blame Islam's problems with modernity on this doctrine (Rahman 1982, 27, 152).

These hackneyed perceptions of al-Ghazali as a maverick luminary and as the angel of the death of philosophical inquiry in Islam are revisited in a number of studies that have appeared over the last ten years or so. In the 1990s, Richard Franck argued that al-Ghazali *did* in fact accept natural causes, that his cosmology was, in other words, philosophical or Avicennian, rather than traditionally Islamic (Franck 1994). Michael Marmura, on the other hand, has insisted on al-Ghazali's conformity to Islamic "orthodoxy," that is, Ash'arism, the dominant theological school in al-Ghazali's time. Ash'arism's tenets included occasionalism, the belief that the all-powerful God creates every event and every human action in a process of *creatio*

continua. Like the other Ash'arites, al-Ghazali would have denied secondary or natural causes (Marmura 1995, 2002).

In a study of al-Ghazali's cosmology, published in 2009, Frank Griffel has reopened this debate and proposed a new solution. Griffel's view is that al-Ghazali philosophised the Ash'arite doctrine of causality while remaining faithful to its basic premises. Earlier Ash'arites held an ambiguous view of the human capacity to act, a view that is epitomised by the theory of "acquisition" or "appropriation" (*kasb/iktisāb*). According to this theory, God creates human actions but gives humans a temporary "power-to-act" (*qudra muḥdatha*) by virtue of which they "acquire" or "appropriate" an action. Al-Ghazali, according to Griffel, does not simply follow this line of reasoning, but moves God's influence one level back. For al-Ghazali, suggests Griffel, God is not a puppetmaster who "plays" the individual who, in consequence, remains largely passive and predetermined in his or her actions. Rather, God acts as the teacher of the puppetmaster, while the puppetmaster himself is the individual's accumulated knowledge and desire (Griffel 2009, 216-219). This does not make it unthinkable that at a certain moment, the puppetmaster's teacher will take the strings of the puppet into his own hands. However, as Griffel emphasises, in al-Ghazali's view God has never done so, and he never will (276). In this way, a world in which secondary, natural causes are fully operational is safeguarded. According to Griffel, al-Ghazali does not eliminate philosophical inquiry from Islamic thought; to the contrary, he fully naturalises it.

It has been suggested that Griffel is somewhat "over-emphatic" in his reading of al-Ghazali (Janos 2010, 120), and that there remains an unresolvable tension between belief in an all-powerful God and in human autonomy in al-Ghazali's cosmology. Overall, Griffel seems rather keen to stress that al-Ghazali was a perfectly consistent thinker. In other words, according to Griffel, al-Ghazali does not hover *between* philosophy and theology because he does not want to commit himself. Rather, we simply must dig deep enough to uncover the underlying unity of al-Ghazali's thought. Griffel suggests that failure to discover this unity is more likely to stem from a failure to properly understand al-Ghazali's writings rather than from an inconsistency in his system (Griffel 2009, 286).

Other scholars of al-Ghazali have preferred to draw attention to the different registers of al-Ghazali's thought rather than to stress that the various strands of reasoning that run through his work are ultimately reconcilable in a harmonious whole. This is the approach taken by Martin Whittingham's 2007 study of al-Ghazali's theory of scriptural interpretation. Whittingham examines al-Ghazali's understanding of "allegorical"

or “non-literal” interpretation of scripture (*taʿwīl*). This is relevant in the context of the discussion about individual empowerment in relation to God, because non-literal interpretation widens the margin for individual opinion about scriptural meaning.

Whittingham identifies at least three different positions, scattered over his writings, that al-Ghazali takes in regard to the issue of *taʿwīl*. In *Faysal al-Taʿfriqa* (The decisive criterion), a work surveying the confessional varieties in Islam, al-Ghazali recommends tolerance vis-à-vis *taʿwīl*, but he also erects clear boundaries: *taʿwīl* is only permitted if the impossibility of a literal understanding is logically proven (Whittingham 2007, 27). However, in al-Ghazali’s legal works, this tolerance is less obvious, and al-Ghazali’s concern to seal off the law against the more interpretively inclined schools of law takes precedence (36). Finally, in al-Ghazali’s esoteric works, *taʿwīl* emerges as a parallel method of deriving meaning from scripture, a method which stands on par with the literalist approach: texts have both exoteric and esoteric meanings (64). Whittingham makes only a limited effort to account for the difference of positions adopted by al-Ghazali; he maintains that, despite all the differences, “a core of genuine views is identifiable” (25).

Averroes, one of al-Ghazali’s earliest critics, quipped that al-Ghazali was “an Ashʿari with the Ashʿarites, a Sufi with the Sufis, and a philosopher with the philosophers.” In light of the many testimonies to this effect, Griffel’s outright denial of inconsistency in al-Ghazali’s work seems rather surprising. Whittingham on the other hand acknowledges al-Ghazali’s split-personality syndrome but largely refuses to pass judgement on it. This is markedly different from the position taken by Ebrahim Moosa, who is the author of what must count as the most imaginative interpretation of al-Ghazali to have appeared since the turn of the millennium.

Moosa’s *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (2005) proposes to investigate the possible contribution that al-Ghazali can make to the contemporary Muslim understanding of “subjectivity and citizenship” (Moosa 2005, 25). Moosa’s work is therefore not purely a historical study but self-consciously agenda-driven, as opposed to the other authors discussed so far. Predictably, reviewers have taken issue with this (Knysh 2007, 295). For Moosa, al-Ghazali can serve as an “exemplar” for Muslims today to overcome what Moosa sees as their greatest contemporary predicament, namely, “authoritarianism.” In al-Ghazali’s tendency to straddle discourses and change registers, Moosa sees the sure signs of a genius; it is al-Ghazali’s “signature” that he is torn over the “in between-ness of being” in a “poly-centric world” (Moosa 2005, 30). Moosa’s book is the first full-fledged postmodern reading of al-Ghazali, a reading in which al-Ghazali emerges as a figure haunted by the experience

of de-centralisation, but ultimately successful in creating a dynamic, creative, and empowered subjectivity.

3 The Individual and Government

However, other readings of al-Ghazali's hybridity, to use a term dear to postmodernist theory, remain possible. For example, Omid Safi, in a book published in 2006, steers a different course, although he is admittedly more interested in al-Ghazali's political than in his theological writings. Safi examines the question of how al-Ghazali analysed the individual's position vis-à-vis the government. In Safi's account, al-Ghazali appears as an opportunist and careerist, as someone willing to adjust his views in function of changing political circumstances. Before his crisis, Safi suggests, al-Ghazali upheld justice and spirituality as a general requirement for rulers. In his later political writings, however, he would have caved in to the view that also unjust or even brutal rulers were justified in their actions as long as they managed to maintain order and see to it that the shari'a was implemented. As Safi points out, al-Ghazali states that the sultan, that is, the ruler who rules on the strength of power not of virtue or piety, is "God's shadow on earth." In a particularly sinister twist, the sultan *must* enact punishments and spread fear lest people rise against him and social unrest ensues (Safi 2006, 105-124).

In fact, upon closer examination, al-Ghazali's view of the ruling powers of his day is in some respects similar to how he conceives of the ultimate power, that is, God. In the "Revivification of the Sciences of Religiosity," his celebrated opus magnum, al-Ghazali laments the moral corruption of his day, one syndrome of which is that the Muslim *umma* is divided into many sects. In this kind of situation, he avers, the prospect of God's punishment in the hereafter has a more significant function to fulfil than hope in His mercy. Al-Ghazali states that "the dominance of fear [of hell over hope of paradise] is the higher good, because disobedience and self-deceit are the more dominant over the creature" (al-Ghazali 1962, 45). In consequence, he warns his readers that "your coming unto it [hell] is certain, while your salvation therefrom is no more than conjecture," and he urges his reader to "fill up your heart ... with the dread of that destination" (al-Ghazali 1989, 220). Al-Ghazali, in the passages just quoted, instrumentalises fear. For al-Ghazali, the spectre of God's violent retribution in the hereafter is a good thing because it functions to maintain social harmony and cohesion in this world.

This, in a nutshell, is also how al-Ghazali justified the ruler's exercise of violence. In a situation of moral laxity and social strife, the ruler is commended for inspiring terror through acts of violence. In fact, according to al-Ghazali, it is a crucial requirement for a good government to spread fear. The structure of al-Ghazali's argument about God's justice and punishment, in other words, is analogous to his argument about the need for a strong government (Lange 2011, 148). This is one of the more worrying legacies of al-Ghazali, a legacy in which the individual appears as largely disempowered, and which does not sit well with the interpretations offered by either Griffel or Moosa.

It is possible to disagree with Safi's interpretation. There are questions surrounding the authenticity of certain of al-Ghazali's political writings, and when one disputes this authenticity, his political thought appears in a different light (Crone 1987; Hillenbrand 1988). Our knowledge about al-Ghazali's own involvement with rulers has grown with the increasingly detailed information that scholars have collected to reconstruct his biography. Griffel's appears to be the most comprehensive account to date. Though Griffel does not dwell on the possibility that al-Ghazali was complicit in legitimising the despotic absolutism of the rulers of his time, what is clear, in the biography that Griffel traces, is that al-Ghazali tried, for a time, to disentangle himself from the institutions of worldly power. He even took a solemn vow following his crisis that he would never again let himself be paid by the government or go to see the sultan. He broke both vows later on in his life, but whether this happened by coercion or not remains a matter of debate.

So, in sum, to what extent was al-Ghazali an "independent" thinker, and to what extent did he defend individual agency and freedom of thought and action against the powers-that-be? How anti-authoritarian is his thought? Different answers to these questions, I would suggest, remain possible, as the recent literature on al-Ghazali demonstrates. There are, no doubt, anti-authoritarian strands in his thought. Modern-day Salafis tend not to like al-Ghazali, if only because al-Ghazali was not exactly keen on hadith. Al-Ghazali probably would have disliked the modern-day finger-wagging "hadith-hurlers," as Khaled Abou El Fadl has called them (Abou El Fadl 2001, xi). Al-Ghazali also rejected interpretations of scripture that were, according to his standard, too literal. At the same time, al-Ghazali was elitist (and thus in no way atypical in his time), allowing a free interpretation of scripture only to the very few, and only within strictly defined boundaries. His political theology was ambiguous, to say the least.

One strength of recent studies of al-Ghazali is that they tend to be based on a broad selection of his writings, and therefore achieve a more

comprehensive vision of the man. Rather than seeing al-Ghazali's cosmology or his political thought in isolation, scholars are working towards a situation where the above-sketched triangle of powers moves into sight. However, to fit all strands of al-Ghazali's thought into one coherent picture seems almost an impossible task, and it does not matter whether one suggests that al-Ghazali was a peripatetic philosopher dressed up as a Muslim or that he was a postmodern *bricoleur*. As historians, we may have to live with al-Ghazali's elusiveness, and content ourselves with pointing a finger to the promises and problems that this elusiveness entails.

4 Community and Orthodoxy

Moving on from conceptualisations of the autonomy of the individual, let us take a look at recent scholarship on "classical" definitions of the religiously constituted community of Muslims, the *umma*. Who, according to these definitions, was "in" and who was "out"? How strictly or how flexibly did Muslim theologians draw the line between these two groups? What did they consider Islamically acceptable, or "orthodox," and what, for them, was "heresy" and "unbelief"?

One problem with such questions is that they tend to seduce scholars of Islam to take sides and subscribe to one particular definition of orthodoxy. However, the adequacy of the term "orthodoxy" in the academic study of Islam has been vigorously contested. This discussion is hardly a dead horse; there seems to be no general agreement among scholars that "orthodoxy" is a term that fits Islam awkwardly and that should therefore better be avoided. Scholars of Islamic law, for example, continue to use the term quite liberally. In the latest, third edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (henceforth *EI3*), for example, one reads about the opposition of "orthodox *'ulamā'*" to the *'aqīqa*, the rituals associated with welcoming a newborn into the community, including the shaving of hair, application of ointments, and other related practices. Here, the term "orthodoxy" seems to refer to the teachings of the four established (Sunni) schools of law as opposed to local custom, or *'urf* (*EI3*: s.v. *'Aqīqa*).

However, also in entries dealing with aspects of Islamic theology, *EI3* authors regularly use the term, and they generally do so without offering further explanation. For example, a governor of the 'Abbasids in Khurasan, in the ninth century, is said to have uphold "Sunni orthodoxy" (*EI3*: s.v. *'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir*); al-Ash'ari (d. 935) is labelled an "orthodox theologian" (*EI3*: s.v. *Agnosticism*); the Mughal emperor Babur (d. 1530), one learns,

was raised “an orthodox Sunnī Muslim” (*EI3*: s.v. Bābur). More examples could be given. There is, as far as I can see, only one instance in which the term “orthodox” is used in inverted commas: the Sufi ‘Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani (d. 1131), the *EI3* tells us, positioned himself at a distance from the “‘orthodox’ establishment” (*EI3*: s.v. ‘Ayn al-Qudāt). While such use of inverted commas indicates a more complex picture, it gestures to the problems inherent in the term but does little to solve them.

This comes as a bit of a surprise. After all, the awareness among Western scholars of Islam that “orthodoxy” is a term that can only be applied to Islam with difficulty can be traced several decades back. In Bernard Lewis’ classical formulation (Lewis 1953, 58), published more than half a century ago, he writes:

In the absence of an apostolic tradition and of a supreme pontiff, orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Islam could at first sight be determined only by making the teachings of one school the touchstone for the rejection of the others. The difficulties and absurdities of such a standard are well summarised by Ghazali. Is Baqillani a heretic for disagreeing with Ash‘ari, or Ash‘ari for disagreeing with Baqillani? Why should truth be the prerogative of one rather than the other? Does truth go by precedence? Then do not the Mu‘tazilites take precedence of Ash‘ari? Because of greater virtue and knowledge? In what scales and with what measures shall the degrees of virtue be measured, so that the superiority of one or another theologian may be established?

Despite such critical remarks, the label “orthodoxy” continued to be invoked by scholars of Islam in the 1950s and 1960s. This was often done with a negative connotation, pitching it against the “free-spirited” philosophical movement in Islam (Rahman 1979, 120). In the 1970s, both William Montgomery Watt and Marshal Hodgson again raised a flag and warned against the use of the term “orthodoxy” in the study of Islamic theology (Watt 1973, 5-6; Hodgson 1974, 67). However, the first full-blown attack on the adequacy of the terms “orthodoxy” and its antonym, “heresy,” for the study of Islam was formulated by Alexander Knysh in 1993, perhaps in reaction to the continued use of the term, and particularly of the dichotomy between Islamic philosophy and “orthodoxy” (Bello 1989).

Knysh begins by noting that Western historians of Islam have often pitched what they perceived to be “orthodox” Islam against “heterodox tendencies.” But neither of these terms is easily attributed to only one particular Muslim theological school or movement. Ash‘arism is often considered the

“orthodox” version of Islamic theology; but for many centuries, it had many passionate detractors, especially those ‘ulama’ who found it too speculative, too tainted with *kalām*-style argumentation based on Greek logic. As the story has it, Al-Ash‘ari once boasted to the Hanbali preacher and scholar Al-Barbahari (d. 941) that he had refuted the Mu‘tazila, the Zoroastrians, and the Christians. Reportedly, Al-Barbahari retorted that he did not know what these groups taught: he only knew what Ahmad b. Hanbal had taught (Knysh 1993, 61). Knysh also points out that there are examples of Ash‘arites who, in their spiritual life, were Sufis.

Knysh further notes that some have identified the movement of the *ahl al-hadīth*, the “hadith folk,” as constituting an orthodox stream within Sunni Islam. Western scholars refer to this group sometimes as “traditionists,” because of the value it gave to “traditions,” that is, hadiths. From here it is perhaps not far-fetched to see in the members of this group Islamic “orthodoxy.” But Marshal Hodgson pointed out that the label “traditionists” is unfortunate: it suggests that the hadith folk were somehow naturally aligned with tradition in the general sense of the word, more so than, say, the Ash‘arites or the Mu‘tazila. However, one might just as well insist that theological dispute, logic and *ijtihād* was, from the earliest times, part of the tradition of Islam. The hadith folk can hardly claim a monopoly on the term. What is more, many of their theological positions were rejected as too extreme. Take as an example their tendency to accept anthropomorphism, a stance that their detractors called *tajsīm*, “bestowing a body [onto God].” Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), in the view of many a paragon of Islamic “orthodoxy,” advocated that God descends to the lowest heaven, as is stated in the canonical hadith, in the same way in which Ibn Taymiyya, as he once demonstrated during a sermon, stepped down from the pulpit, the *minbar*. In consequence, he was viewed by his less anthropomorphically-minded contemporaries as a man “with a kink in his head”; people wondered, as Donald Little put it flippantly in a well-known study, “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?” (1975).

In sum, according to Knysh, instead of “orthodoxy,” what we have in medieval Islam is “a perpetual collision of individual opinions over an invariant set of theological problems that eventually leads to a transient consensus that already contains the seed of future disagreement” (Knysh 1993, 57). Knysh suggests that the superimposition on medieval Islam of the concepts of “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy” inevitably leads to a loss of nuance; internal divisions are glossed over rather than given full appreciation. As he warns his readers, “Eurocentric interpretive categories, when uncritically superimposed on Islamic realities, may produce serious distortions” (62).

What we must do instead is to seek to understand Muslim theologians “on their own terms.” Here, Knysh gives the two examples of Al-Shahrastani (d. 1153) and of Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1240), the former a famous heresiographer, the latter arguably the most influential Sufi theorist of the later Islamic Middle Ages. Both Al-Shahrastani and Ibn ‘Arabi wrote about the many different schools of thought in Islamic theology, and both had a remarkably inclusive view of who could claim to be a Muslim, who was in, and who was out. Knysh accepts that it is possible to speak of limited or, as he puts it, “spontaneous orthodoxies,” orthodoxies that arise in particular periods and regions of the Islamic world as a particular “blend of ‘orthodox’ ideas” (65). Remarkably, although he succeeds in showing the conceptual problems and pitfalls of the term “orthodoxy,” Knysh does not recommend that scholars should stop using it altogether. The reason he provides for this is that it would “seriously complicate the Western discourse on Muslim societies” (66).

Picking up on Knysh’s lead but pushing his conclusions to their logical conclusion, Brett Wilson has recently attempted to put the term “orthodoxy” to rest once and for all. He notes that, ironically, scholars inspired by the work of Talal Asad have contributed to resuscitating the term in the study of Islam. This, he avers, is a reaction against the relativistic positions of anthropologists who tend to accord *all* local expressions of Islam the same level of “correctness” and thus end up speaking of several “islams” instead of one Islam, or one “orthodoxy” in Islam. To counterbalance such views, Asad describes Islam as a “discursive tradition,” a concept that hinges on the notion that the Islamic tradition, though continuously reworked and renegotiated, has a common bedrock on which it rests, namely, the Qur’an and sunna. Orthodoxy, for Asad, is a “(re)ordering of knowledge that governs the ‘correct’ form of Islamic practices” (Asad 1993, 201). As such – this distinguishes Asad’s approach from earlier, more reified definitions – orthodoxy in Islam must not be seen as a fixed set of beliefs, nor is it embedded in particular institutions of power; rather, it is continuously (re)produced in a dynamic process of teaching on all levels of society, in an ongoing process of relating oneself to the foundational texts and practices of Islam.

Asad’s fluid and dynamic concept of orthodoxy, Wilson argues, avoids some of the earlier essentialist mistakes of Orientalist scholars wishing to pin down Islamic orthodoxy. At the same time, avers Wilson, it is doubtful whether such “further ‘loading’ of a semantically overlaid term” is useful (Wilson 2007, 185). Wilson insists that the term “orthodoxy” has run its course and that scholars should discard it, because the “theological and righteous connotations” of the term are too numerous. These connotations “complicate [the term’s] viability” even “as a purely sociological or

anthropological term" (186). In sum, the concept of "orthodoxy" in Islam has become "more of a stumbling block than a launching pad in our vocabulary, one which instigates more conflicts than it resolves" (185).

The term "orthodoxy" and its viability for the scholarly study of classical Islamic theology is also one of the topics dealt with in Josef van Ess' recent history of the genre of heresiography in Islam, *Der Eine und das andere: Beobachtungen an islamischen häresiographischen Texten* (The one and the other: Observations in Islamic heresiographical texts), a towering work of some 1,500 densely argued pages. Van Ess broadly confirms the picture drawn by Knysh. He takes him by the word that we must understand Muslim debates about orthodoxy on Muslim terms. Indeed, in the third and final part of *Der Eine und das Andere*, Van Ess goes through a list of terms such as *firqa*, *madhhab*, *tāʾifa*, *fiʿa*, *ṣinf*, *milla*, *ahl al-sunna*, *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*, and *takfīr*, all of which belong to the vocabulary of "who is in, who is out," showing in each instance where these terms originate and who uses them for what purpose.

Van Ess begins his book, however, with an analysis of the well-known, though non-canonical hadith about the seventy-three groups (*firaq*) in Islam, of which only one is saved, namely the "saved group" (*al-firqa al-nājiya*), while the seventy-two others go to hellfire. On sixty gripping pages Van Ess shows how different groups in the history of early Islamic theology claimed the one "saved group" for their own purposes. They did this by adding an explanatory ending to the hadith or rewording it in suggestive ways (Van Ess 2011a, 7-64). Towards the end of the Umayyad period, scholars close to the Umayyad caliphs rephrased the hadith to: "This community consists of 73 *firaq*; 72 are lost, they all hate the ruler; saved is the one that is on the side of the ruler." Under the early 'Abbasids, the Hanafī-Murjīʿa broadened the "saved group" to the extreme, by suggesting that it includes all those who believe, that is, the "overwhelming majority" (*al-sawād al-aʿzam*).

This lenient position rubbed many the wrong way, among them the hadith folk. Ibn Hanbal (d. 855) reportedly said that the "saved group" were, of course, no other than the hadith folk themselves; and to get back at the Hanafīs, a version of the hadith was circulated that reads: "My community will split into some 70 groups, but the greatest danger will arise from those among them who judge things according to their own free reasoning [*raʿy*]" – the word *raʿy* being a nod to the Hanafīs, who were known as the "people of free reasoning" (*ahl al-raʿy*). Some, more pessimistic voices, held that the "saved group" were the Companions of the Prophet, and that therefore all following generations were in principle doomed. Van Ess states that this is until today "the most popular solution" (39). But this pessimism could be

mitigated if one interpreted the hadith to mean that the “saved group” goes to paradise *directly*, while all others first have to go through the fire of the Day of Judgement. The Shi‘ites, later also the Isma‘iliyya, claimed to be the “saved group.” Last but not least, there is also an inverted version of the hadith stating that seventy-two *firaq* are saved while only one is doomed. This is a version that, on the surface, looks more tolerant, but it could become a powerful weapon to persecute one particular group. The hadith folk, for example, wanted to recognise the Mu‘tazilites in this solitary “doomed” group. For al-Ghazali in “The Decisive Criterion,” it was the philosophers (55).

Many interesting conclusions result from Van Ess’ analysis of this hadith. For example, he demonstrates that the nostalgic vision of a saved group of Companions of the Prophet is a historically grown position that emerged rather late, no earlier than the late ninth century, and in reaction to the various disappointments suffered by the early Muslim community. Van Ess shows the fluid state of affairs in the early centuries, in which no version of the hadith could impose itself as the authoritative one. Muslim specialists of hadith criticism could do little to change this. As van Ess writes, “the censorship of the expert ... had little impact in medieval Islam; after all, there were no institutions which gave it power; and scholarship’s influence in those days was, as ever, limited” (55).

The second part of Van Ess’ book deals with all the major contributions to the genre of Islamic heresiography: the works of Al-Ash‘ari, Al-Baghdadi, Al-Shahrastani, Ibn Hazm, but also of scores of other, less well-known authors. Van Ess notes that the classical works on the variety of theological positions in Islam are not properly “heresiographical.” Like Al-Ash‘ari’s *Maqalat al-Islamiyyin* (The doctrines of those who follow Islam) or Al-Shahrastani’s *al-Milal wa-l-Nihal* “Confessions and sections), they do not anathematise groups, that is, they do not practice *takfir*. In most cases, they also ignore the hadith about the seventy-two “doomed” sects. The genre is, in other words, doxographical rather than heresiographical: it records the tenets and teachings of various groups without passing judgement about whether they are “in” or “out” of Islam (1201-1206). Van Ess therefore also proposes to replace the term “heresy” in Islam with that of “denomination,” and “heresiography” with “denominationalism” (the German *Konfessionskunde*). The heresiographers’ preferred term for these groups is *milla* (pl. *milal*), which tends to get translated as “sect,” even though a less value-laden translation as “section” would be more appropriate. As Van Ess points out, *milla* is a very generous term, and he suggests that “for a long time *milla* was the most neutral designation for ‘religion’ that existed in any language of the world” (1264).

In the third and final part of his book, Van Ess returns to more synthetic observations. Among other things, he revisits the notion of “orthodoxy” in Islam. He concludes that the term is “perhaps” useful if used in the value-neutral sociological meaning, but only as a “metaphor,” to indicate the “dominant opinion” in a specific spatial-temporal context, a temporary “mainstream position.” Such “orthodoxies” (Van Ess uses the plural repeatedly) usually come with an expiry date; dogmas in Islam did not have the longevity of dogmas promulgated by the Christian Church. As Van Ess puts it, dogmas in Islamic history “occasionally had their great moment; but then they receded quickly behind the scenes of history” (1299).

Whether contemporary orthodoxies will have a longer life, Van Ess does not discuss. He contents himself with noting that the scripturalism of the Egyptian reformers Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935), both of whom called for a return to the original words of revelation, is such a “modern” orthodoxy (1302). However, in an interview given in 2011, Van Ess is a bit more forthcoming. He points out that “with the help of the media it is much easier to convey to people a definitive image of Islam and assert it by supporting it financially,” suggesting that “this reversal began among the late-nineteenth-century reformers we hold in such high regard, such as Muhammad Abduh” (Van Ess 2011b).

These words chime with Norman Calder’s analysis in an article on “The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy,” first published in 2000. Calder diagnoses that twentieth-century Islam has witnessed the triumph of a narrowly conceived scripturalist “orthodoxy,” which rejects the traditional Muslim tolerance of the concepts of community-based reasoning, gnosis, but also (albeit to a lesser degree) of reason and charisma, “a massive, complex, sophisticated heritage, a generous profusion of modes of religious fulfilment” (Calder 2007, 235). However, Van Ess’ evaluation of the contemporary situation, as opposed to that of Calder, is fairly optimistic. He states that “essentially, I’m not worried ... I’m sure that the fundamentalists too will fail to establish an orthodoxy,” adding that the concept of orthodoxy “[i]s simply not there in the religion” (Van Ess 2011b).

5 Islam and the Fate of “Others”

Moving from the discussion of the place of the individual in Islamic classical theology to reviewing recent scholarship on how classical Islamic theology defines the boundary of the Muslim community or *umma*, let us move into the last of the three concentric circles and examine the issue of how classical

Islamic theology views the issue of salvation, particularly with regard to non-Muslims, or the Islamic “Other.”

First of all, let me note with Van Ess that in the history of Islamic theology, critiques against Muslim heretics and apostates have usually been more severe than against practitioners of other faiths. *Takfīr*, the process of declaring someone has left Islam and become an unbeliever, is traditionally the arena of the most bitter theological disputes in Islam (Van Ess 2011a, 1284-1298). By contrast, those who are brought up as non-Muslims are *already* unbelievers, and so they cannot suffer *takfīr*. In consequence, they tend to fall under the radar of Muslim theological reasoning. This is not to deny, however, that the eternal damnation of the unbelievers in hell is usually taken for granted in classical Islamic theology. Or is it?

A recent study by Mohammad Khalil (2012) has tried to cast doubt upon this piece of received wisdom. For a long time, both non-Muslim and Muslim scholars of Islam have been telling us that according to the majority of classical Muslim theologians, Christianity, to give one example, is not a way to salvation. Soteriological pluralism, the idea that members of diverse religious traditions are all equally destined for paradise, according to this view is fundamentally alien to Islam (see, e.g. McAuliffe 1991, 290). Given the foregoing discussion about how difficult it is to establish what may count as Islamic orthodoxy, whether on this particular point or on any other, it comes as no surprise that the classical tradition *does* in fact include voices that speculate about the eventual salvation of unbelievers. In his study, Khalil comes to the conclusion that the matter remained “ultimately unresolved,” despite the fact that numerous theologians claimed there was a broad consensus, or *ijmāʿ*, on the issue (Khalil 2012, 13-14, 22). He observes that it was particularly some of the most prominent and influential theologians in Islamic history, such as al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya, who argued against the idea that all non-Muslims suffer in hell eternally, thereby opposing narrow exclusivism, or “damnationism,” as Khalil labels it (Khalil 2012, 19).

To return to al-Ghazali, in “The Decisive Criterion” he makes a distinction between four different types of unbelievers. Two of these groups are doomed in his view, but two will receive God’s mercy and be admitted into paradise (cf. al-Ghazali 2002, 126). The former two groups are, first, those who commit blasphemy, that is, those who insult the God of Islam and His Prophet Muhammad; second, those who, despite a full understanding of the Islamic message refuse to be convinced of it, out of stubbornness or intellectual laziness. The other two groups, those that will receive God’s mercy, are, first, those who never even heard the name Muhammad and had

no opportunity whatsoever to learn about Islam. The second saved group of unbelievers is formed by those who deny Islam because they have not been provided “with enough incentive” which would have “compelled them to investigate” the issue. That is, they may have some notion about Islam, but in the final analysis, they do not know much about it.

Now, in Khalil’s reading of al-Ghazali, when people in this last group *are* provided an incentive to learn more about Islam, when they *do* start to investigate the issue, and then *still* deny its message, they are *still* considered saved. As long as they engage in discussion and in all respects behave like “sincere truth-seekers,” they will be the recipients of God’s mercy (Khalil 2012, 37). One should add here, however, that this is a generous reading of al-Ghazali and that his typology of the four classes of unbelievers, though not as exclusive as other classical Muslim views of the non-Muslim “other,” is still a far shot from modern sensibilities regarding tolerance and pluralism. However, it does open up a certain space for discussion. At the very least, it corrects the hackneyed idea that according to Islam, non-Muslims are by definition doomed to eternal suffering in hell.

A different angle on the topic was taken by Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, both of whom wrote in the first half of the fourteenth century in Syria, and both of whom are widely hailed as the intellectual forefathers of modern-day Salafism. Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim discuss the question of the duration of hell. Both reject the consensus of the scholars of their time that hellfire is eternal. They suggest that hell will, at some point in the eschatological future, have fulfilled its purpose of cleansing sinners from their sins, including the sin of unbelief. Then hell will disappear, so that only paradise remains. This idea is referred to as *fanā’ al-nār*, the “passing away of the fire.” This means that *all* unbelievers, indeed all sinners will eventually, after a more or less extended period of suffering in hell, be admitted to paradise. In the recent scholarly literature, this position has been described, rather optimistically, as a form of “Islamic universalism,” akin to the soteriological pluralism that Khalil ascribes to al-Ghazali (Hoover 2009, 181-201).

Whether or not “universalism” is the correct term to be used, here is another bit of evidence that the question of salvation of unbelievers in classical Islamic theology is not as one-sided and easily decided as meets the eye. This is also confirmed by a look at the other side of the coin, the question whether Muslims can go to hell: If the unbelievers are not necessarily in hell, can Muslims know for sure that they will go to paradise? Here, too, we are dealing with certain preconceived ideas. Christian polemicists of the Middle Ages liked to justify what they perceived as the ethical superiority

of Christianity over Islam by pointing out that Islam offers an easy way to salvation. Western researchers of Islamic theology, including Ignaz Goldziher in the early twentieth century but also more recent contributors to the debate, have referred to the seemingly “limitless optimism” of “orthodox” Sunni Islam in regard to the salvation prospect of Muslims (Goldziher 1920, 160; Smith and Haddad 2002, 81). The Islamic “straight path” (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*), many may have felt justified to conclude, was exceedingly broad, the requirements for being a Muslim minimal, and hence moral laxity widespread. In Christianity, on the other hand, salvation was difficult, it had to be earned: as one reads in Matthew 7:13, Christians are to “enter through the narrow gate; for the gate and the road that leads to destruction is wide, and there are many who take it.”

Recent scholarship on Islamic soteriology has suggested that the issue needs more nuanced inspection than has been hitherto assumed. In the same way in which scholars of Islamic theology have begun to unearth strands of universalist thought, the Muslim hell is moving into focus as a place not just for the unbelievers, but also for Muslims, or rather, for Muslim sinners. The Qur’an threatens sinners in general, not just unbelievers, with punishment in hell. In the early centuries of Islam, the question of the certainty of salvation for Muslim sinners was discussed controversially, first in the milieu of the Basran ascetics, who denied such certainty and stressed individual accountability (Van Ess 2001, 104-108), then by the theological school of the Mu‘tazila, who insisted that people would be judged by their actions, not just by the outwards profession of faith. They argued that it is not only possible but indeed necessary for God to punish sinners; otherwise He could not be considered just. The ethical rigourism of the Mu‘tazila survived in other schools and in other forms, for example, in Maturidi theology. In contrast to the Ash‘arites, Maturidite theologians came to emphasise that punishment of the grave sinner in hell was rather likely and, in the greater scheme of things, even necessary (Lange 2014, 160-167). This punishment may have been conceived of as temporary and purgative, preparing the sinners for their eventual redemption in paradise. But it was a formidable prospect nonetheless, psychologically speaking.

In sum, there are “universalist” trends in classical Islamic theology that appear to push non-Muslims in the direction of salvation, and there are other trends that seem to push Muslims towards ethical rigourism and accountability for sinful actions in hell. As Khalil notes, “discussions of salvation in Islam have generally been plagued with oversimplifications” (Khalil 2012, 13), but in recent scholarship on classical Islamic theology, a more nuanced picture of Muslim soteriology seems to emerge.

6 Conclusion: Islamic Theology and the Muslim Religious Imagination

By way of conclusion, let me come back to one of the terms I brought up at the beginning of my discussion: the religious imagination, conceived as an integral part of Islamic theology. In the area of Muslim ideas about salvation and the afterlife, scholarship has largely ignored this dimension of Islamic theology. As indicated above, a good deal of attention has been devoted to the works of the *mutakallimūn*, the proponents of *kalām*. When it comes to the afterlife, to eschatology, or “knowledge of the last things,” the *mutakallimūn* have things to say about the big questions: who is saved and who is not, whether hell is eternal or not, and how real the afterlife is, that is, whether its reality is like that experienced in this world, or whether it is a different reality altogether. What the *mutakallimūn* are less interested in is the topography of the hereafter, the particulars of paradise and hell, the rewards and punishments therein, the many detailed descriptions of their flora, fauna, and inhabitants, sometimes excessive and often quite wonderful, in sum: the Muslim eschatological imagination. The modern study of Islamic theology likewise has largely turned a blind eye to this body of ideas and images. And yet, there is a whole other world waiting to be charted and analysed. At least two approaches to this universe of images and ideas can be conceived.

Firstly, the Islamic literature about the afterlife offers rich insights into Islamic theological ethics. The inhabitants of paradise and hell are regularly identified by their virtues and their sins. Some classical manuals in which stories about paradise and hell are collected in fact appear like catechisms of sins and virtues. Examples include the anonymous *Qurrat al-'Uyun* and the *Risalat al-Talkhis* of the Spaniard Ibn Hazm in the eleventh century (Lange 2013). Also the various versions of the Prophet Muhammad's night journey (*isrā'*), not unlike Dante's *Divine Comedy*, abound with moral teachings (Vučovic 2005).

Secondly, the Islamic literature of the afterlife should be taken seriously as a genre that plays with notions of the fantastic and the marvellous, and that therefore deserves to be analysed and evaluated by using the methods and criteria we apply to similar works in other areas of human literary productivity. It might be objected that by this shift of focus one leaves the arena of Islamic theology. However, scholars of Christian theology will not hesitate to apply the tools and insights developed in literary studies to, say, the Gospel, or to Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Process*, and it is not obvious why scholars of Islam should not do the same. Aziz al-Azmeh (1995) and Kamal

Abu-Deeb (2007) are pioneers in this area of investigation. More such studies remain a desideratum, for making Islamic eschatology comprehensible as literature will, I think, help us see in it not only a symbolic expression of doctrinal tenets, that is, statements about ontology and soteriology, but rather, an expression of the Muslim religious imagination, of a creativity and playfulness that engages this-worldly concerns in addition to transcendent ones.

To broaden the study of classical Islamic theology to include such multifaceted uses and functions of Muslim “religiosity” is to develop and support an appreciation for the historical diversity of Muslim opinions about how God relates to the world and how Muslims relate to God, and thus to resist the temptation to see Islam as a monolithic system that provides clear-cut answers to perennial questions. In this way, as one might hope, the scholarly study of Islamic theology will be able to contribute to preserving the memory of diversity in Islamic theological reasoning. As Norman Calder wrote, “[c]ontemporary Muslims are ... offered by their tradition a massive, complex, sophisticated heritage, a generous profusion of religious fulfilment, and any step towards making that heritage smaller must be a bad thing” (Calder 2007, 235).

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