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THEOLOGY AND ITS PRINCIPLES

Hermeneutics and Epistemology

THE RELATIONSHIP—the contradiction—between faith and knowledge has always preoccupied Christianity. One believes things one cannot prove. "Credibile est quia ineptum est," said Tertullian of the incarnation: it is believable because it is absurd. And he added, "certum est quia impossibile," it is certain because it is impossible. Of course, we must take into consideration the fact that the Roman Church Father was a rhetorician and not a philosopher. The famous *credo quia absurdum* does not appear in the sources before Kierkegaard, who was the first to introduce the cult of the unknowable, which was taken up by Albert Camus and existentialism. But it is clear that where the incarnation was concerned, Muslims always had the impression that their Christian brothers were clinging to an illusion. Christianity speaks of the "mysteries" of faith; Islam has noth-

ing like that. For Saint Paul, reason belongs to the realm of the "flesh"; for Muslims, reason, *ʿaql*, has always been the chief faculty granted human beings by God. Of course, this was not the independent reason characteristic of the Enlightenment period, but rather an intelligence subject to the will of God and to the order established by him. Still, that divine gift was accepted and appreciated everywhere, even among ascetics and mystics. Al-Hārith al-Muḥasibī, who supplies one of the first definitions of intelligence, bases his psychological analysis on it, an analysis that has earned the admiration of Sufis even in our own time.² Only the application of intelligence was subject to debate. Al-Muḥasibī did not like disputations (*munazarat*); conversely, they were the driving force of the Muʿtazilites' activities.

Let us acknowledge that some theologians doubted the validity of the methods employed by reason. Sometimes they went so far as to cultivate a sort of irrationalism. The first to be catalogued in the sources were Sufis—but also, surprisingly, Muʿtazilites. They belonged to the *sūfiyyat al-Muʿtazila* I have already mentioned, and their social criticism was directed at the theologians themselves, at their intellectual arrogance. This arrogance overlooked the fact that fundamentally no theological speculations

could surpass the simple faith of the masses. How does one know what one knows? they asked, especially given that arguments for and against a particular assertion often contradict each other. All proofs have the same value—this is the famous equivalence among proofs (*ṭikāfuʿ al-ḥillī*), which Abū Hayyān al-Tawḥidī still refers to with some sympathy. The term, and the practice associated with it, seem to have originated in the *ισοθενεια τῶν λογῶν* of Greek skepticism, whose apogee was marked by the figure of the "archheretic" Ibn al-Rāwandī.³ But that wave of anti-intellectualism was not representative. The *sūfiyyat al-Muʿtazila* vanished without a trace, and Ibn al-Rāwandī, despite the emphatic rebuttal directed at him over several generations, did not exert any influence. Essentially, Muslims had their own methods and relied on those.

The Muʿtazilites were convinced that Wāsil b. ʿAtāʾ had already developed a short "discourse on method." A summary of it, consisting of only a few sentences, was preserved by Qadī ʿAbd al-Jabbār and, with a few variants, by his contemporary Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī in his *Kitāb al-Awāʾil*.⁴ We cannot rule out the possibility that the text is fiction, a projection derived from a later position, and in certain places it

seems to have been reworked, but these revisions themselves lead us to think that fundamentally it is an authentic kernel of a discussion held in the early days of Muslim theology.⁵ Wāsil begins with the criterion for truth. In the first place, truth is truthfulness. It is presented in the form of trustworthy propositions. Any proposition is worthy of trust when it is uttered by several people who could not have agreed on it in advance. After that, one is obliged to weigh the content of the sentence recognized as true: it may be either general or particular. That distinction was derived from the legal exegesis of the Koran, and hence of a text for which the question of trust did not arise, at least not for a Muslim. For that reason, Wāsil added a remark on abrogation (*naskh*), a procedure that at the time concerned only scripture. His text defines it in a way that would henceforth be considered a given and which might have already been in use beforehand—namely, that only verses that are legal in nature can be abrogated, not those which speak of the world beyond or of the historical past.⁶ The passage of this text that would later become the most important comes at the end: it is a brief enumeration of sources of knowledge. Among these, Wāsil lists the Koran first, inasmuch as it is precise in meaning (*mubkam*) and not ambiguous (*mutash.ihih*;

compare sura 3:7). Next, he lists the propositions or reports (*akhb.ā*) that according to the criterion mentioned above have the value of argument. And finally, he lists "sound" reason—that is, judgments not based simply on something given in advance but obtained independently through personal reflection. Wāsil says simply, *bi' aql salim*. He does not specify the procedure as being "argument" (or "reflection"), *nazar* (as later theologians would say), or *ijtihad*, independent reasoning (as the jurists would have said). In the enumeration in question, those two realms were not yet separate.

The list—assuming it is in fact that old—influenced both theologians and jurists. Among the Mu'tazilites, for example, al-Jāhiz borrowed from it and reformulated it; among the jurists, Shāfi'ī is our best witness.⁷ He never cites Wāsil, of course: but when Shāfi'ī came to Baghdad to make his career, he could no longer ignore the Mu'tazilites, the *ahl al-kalam*, as he called them in his treatises. The chief disciple he acquired in the capital, Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Shāfi'ī, was a student of Abū 'l-Hudhayl and followed Mu'tazilite doctrine. As an employee of Ibn Abī Duwād, he played an active role in the inquisition, the *mihna*.⁸ We cannot overlook Shāfi'ī, because the list marks the beginning of the concept of

usūl al-fiqh (the foundations of jurisprudence), which he is generally considered to have originated. What Wāsil and Shāfi'ī had in common was that they disregarded consensus, *ijmā'*; Shāfi'ī moved away from his predecessor in his definition of *khābir*.⁹ For Wāsil, *khābir* designates any proposition received from another person, whereas Shāfi'ī, as a jurist, is interested in the *khābir* only as hadith and sunna.¹⁰ Later, al-Jāhiz maintained a position between the two. He knew that hadith was indispensable for jurists, but as a Mu'tazilite he did not like it. In place of *khābir*, which in the meantime had become too ambiguous, he spoke of a "sunna accepted by all," *al-sunna al-mujma' 'alayhā*. Although he introduced the notion of *ijmā'*, consensus, with that expression, he did so only verbally, without granting it the status of an independent notion.

In the end, theology used other criteria. The Koran never constituted its central evidence. Muslims were living in a pluralist society, and non-Muslims could not be persuaded by quotations drawn from Koranic revelation. Theology had an apologetic task, among other roles, and that task could be performed only through reason. And the way to deal with the Koran, the way to apply the hermeneutics of commentary

(*tafsīr*) to it, was well known. Several Mu'tazilite theologians wrote commentaries on the holy book, especially those belonging to the generation preceding al-Ash'ari. Al-Jubbā'ī and Abū 'l-Qasim al-Balkhī did so, as did his contemporary Abū Muslim al-Isfahānī, but, even earlier, so did al-Asamm, and before him 'Amr b. 'Ubayd, who collected Hasan al-Basri's courses in exegesis.¹¹ From the beginning, the method was realistic, sober, and entirely exempt from the fanciful allegories of Origen, for example. The desire was to reconstruct the historical situation of the revelation, the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, or to take into account the precise implications of a rule extracted from the law. The practical approach can be explained, on one hand, by the desire to organize an entire complex society in accordance with the commandments of God and, on the other, by the fact that Muslims had only one book of scripture and not two like the Christians. The Church Fathers were always confronted with the problem of submitting the Old Testament to the demands of the New. Muslims, by contrast, though they respected the Bible, did not read it: it was "abrogated" and set aside for the "people of the Book," that is, for those who did not want to accept the new version brought forth by the Prophet.

There were two words for what Muslims were do-

ing: *tafsir* and *ta'wil*. Both were in the Koran; scripture had reflected upon itself.¹³ Koranic metalanguage was possible because the community knew the procedure from the past. *Tafsir* was derived from the Aramaic *pishrā* and the Hebrew *pēsher*.¹³ *Ta'wil* was a different case: the word was of Arabic origin but was determined by its Koranic context. The line from sura 37, where the notion is developed, says that "no one knows its exegesis except God" [translation modified]: that is, no one knows how to interpret the ambiguous and complicated passages (*mutashabihāt*) previously mentioned. This could be understood as a warning: Anyone trying to interpret them will fall into heresy. As a result, the word acquired a negative connotation: *ta'wilāt* was equated with *bida'* (innovations) or *abwā'* (aberrations, vagaries).¹⁴ But that was not always the case. Al-Maturīdī called his commentary of the Koran *Ta'wilāt ahl al-sunna* (The interpretations of the people of the sunna). Later, interpretation was associated with the allegorical speculations of people such as the Ismailis, who sought a hidden meaning (*bātin*) in the Koran. The Shiites always had a certain predilection for exegetical "secrets"; they were ill used by historical reality and sought to justify their utopian ideas.

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Hadith was different. The Mu'tazilites were scripturalists, like the Kharijites; in their view, the tradition of the Prophet could only introduce chaos into the sacred text. In fact, hadith, the "oral Torah" (*tōrā shel be-pe*), so to speak, was not canonically fixed: it was part of an oral tradition teeming with contradictions. Dirar b. 'Amr, and al-Nazzām after him, collected striking examples of them.¹⁵ It was Ibn Qutayba who finally managed to resolve the contradictions in his treatise *Differences among the Hadith* (*Ta'wil mukhtalif al-hadith*). Unlike the Koran, hadith always suffered from a lack of reliability. The "tradition of the Prophet" (*sunna al-nabi*) did enjoy enormous success later on, but it owed its victory to its pure and unavoidable necessity. The theologians, who did not need the tradition as much as the jurists, continued to require that the criteria of truth be applied to it. As we have seen, Wāsil had asked that those reporting a saying not come to a prior agreement with one another. Abū 'l-Hudhayl had introduced a numerical postulate: The number of witnesses guaranteed certainty. Quantity was thus transformed into quality. But he immediately recognized the inadequacy of that rule. The number had to be specified, and no one could do that without being challenged. The solution could only be an act of will.

Abū 'l-Hudhayl decided on twenty people. As evidence, he simply modified a Koranic verse that spoke of jihad rather than of knowledge: "If there are twenty steadfast men among you, they shall vanquish two hundred."¹⁶ That analogy was extremely weak, being founded on an arbitrarily chosen resemblance, a *qiyās al-shabāh*, as the jurists would have said. Above all, a hadith cannot be transmitted by just any multitude; it is a sacred text and belongs to the tradition of the *umma*. The twenty people must therefore be Muslims, "friends of God," or, as Abū 'l-Hudhayl seems to have said, "candidates for paradise" (*min abl al-janna*). We do not know whether he thought he would find these "candidates" among his contemporaries or in the generation of the Companions of the Prophet; the sources are too vague to allow us to determine that. But the profound skepticism in his words is obvious. He spoke of certainty, and for him the only things that were certain were truths such as the existence of God, prophecy, and the experience of the senses. Words alone would never be capable of achieving certainty; they could only be probable. Regarding that probability, Abū 'l-Hudhayl was much more generous: four people were sufficient. That placed the question within the domain of jurists. He

may have been thinking of the four witnesses required in cases of adultery.¹⁷

The advocates of hadith could not be satisfied with that arrangement. Many legal rules were based on a hadith attested by a single chain of transmitters, a *ḵabar al-wāhid*. In the long run, those unique hadith, *āḥād* as they were called, became a problem. The jurist 'Īsā b. Abān (d. AH 221/836 CE), a disciple of Shaybānī and an influential man in the court of Hārūn al-Rashīd, seems to have written the first monograph on the question.¹⁸ Shāfi'ī considered them indispensable; he devoted a long chapter of his *Risāla* to them.¹⁹ But even by the looser criteria of a jurist, they were difficult to justify; to be valid, testimony normally had to be supplied by at least two people. An additional criterion had to be agreed on, therefore: the transmitter's integrity, or *'adāla*. The Mu'tazilites accepted that criterion from the beginning; Wāsil had spoken of it. For them, however, it was primarily a category of public life, regulating the "cohabitation" of people in politics, for example. To consider someone a person of integrity meant that you trusted him. Nevertheless, despite the existence of trust, verification was better. So it was that in place of the witness's reliability, al-Nazzām proposed

verification by context, concomitant facts (*qara'im*) that lent support to the veracity of a report. In doing so, he was still thinking within the framework established by Wasil, for his examples had to do with news of the day: for example, one heard of a neighbor's death and also saw a coffin set out in front of his house.²⁰ Like many others, al-Nazzam did not yet take the trouble to point out what was unique about hadith. There, context was less important because the reports regularly resurfaced over time along the chain of transmission, the *isnad*. It was his disciple Jāhiz who first focused on hadith. In pursuing his master's thinking, he added that the collective experience of a community accumulates in the tradition. Unfortunately, that experience deteriorates as a result of transmission, and in the end God finds himself obliged to send a new messenger.²¹

Al-Nazzām was the archetype of the rationalist, as his reactions constantly show. He did not believe in the existence of jinni, and he rejected the popular interpretation of dreams and omens.²² But he was also the first to prove the prophethood of Muhammad by predictions found in the Koran. He believed that the Prophet was gifted with a miraculous knowledge of the occult and of the future (*ghayb*). Indeed, the events the Prophet had foretold were borne out in ac-

counts. Some of these were historical, such as the short-lived triumph of the Byzantines over the Sassanids alluded to in sura 30:1-3, whereas others were literary, such as the stoning of devils by shooting stars or comets (sura 67:5, 15:16-17, among other verses), for which proof was sought in pre-Islamic poetry.²³ In opening the door to miracles halfway, he set off an avalanche. The next generation of Mutazilites would concern themselves with countless narratives on the subject, and not only those about Muhammad's exploits mentioned in the sacred text itself. There were also many in Ibn Ishāq's *Sira* and in other texts. 'Abbād b. Sulayman felt he could no longer ignore all that material. Miracles had become the principal tool for demonstrating Muhammad's truthfulness, just as they had always been for Jesus among the Christians. 'Abbād claimed that these events that surpassed the grasp of reason were true because they were sometimes recounted by people as irreproachable (*ma'sūm*) as the Prophet himself. That argument allowed him more confidently to adopt the postulate of the people of paradise, *ahl al-janna*, formulated by Abu 'l-Hudhayl.²⁴ The people to whom he was alluding were probably the Companions. As already mentioned, his master, Hishām al-Fuwāṭī (who had himself been a disciple of Abū 'l-Hudhayl), took an

important step toward canonizing the Companions, the *ṣaḥīḥ*. He did so in political theory but anticipated the consequences of that move for historiography.

In essence, *ijmā'* bore only a marginal relation to epistemology. In its epistemological manifestation, Aristotle included it within the "famous" or well-known opinions accepted by everyone, the *masbhū'at* in Ibn Sīnā's later terminology.³⁷ In Islam, the concept originally belonged rather to the political arena. *Ijmā'* was closer to consultation, *shūrā*. When, according to a text in Wakī's *Akḥḥ.īr al-quḍ.īy*, 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz recommended that his Basrian governor 'Adī b. Artāt consult competent, discerning people in cases where the Koran, the sunna, and the practice of caliphs no longer provided any solution, 'Umar was speaking in principle only of a consensus, *ijmā'*, of local scholars.³⁸ As early as the pre-Islamic era, a tribal chief could not make a decision simply on his own whim; he was obliged to follow procedure by eliciting a consensus. Al-Asamm, who was the first of the Mu'tazilites to grant a key position to *ijmā'*, recommended it primarily as a political instrument to establish the validity of the oath of allegiance, or *bay'at*.

But just as they are in our own societies, political decisions were open to judicial review, at least after the fact. Practice had to submit to the test of theoretical validity. It was thus integrated into a new context—that, indeed, of epistemology. In jurisprudence, *ijmā'* more or less corresponded to the sunna understood in the sense of "local custom"; we need only compare the consensus of Medinese scholars in Malik b. Anas's writings to be assured of that. It is known in the same form in Shāfi'ī's writings, as we have seen; Shāfi'ī considers *ijmā'* an additional confirmation and not an independent criterion. For him, the word generally means only agreement among specialists on the interpretation of a text, and this text is often a sunna.³⁹ Argument, therefore, always depends on the sunna. Compared to the omnipresent authority of one of the Prophet's sayings, the authority of an *ijmā'* was rather limited. The opinion of Shāfi'ī was shared outside Medina by many other ancient jurists—Awzā'ī, for example, or Abū Yūsuf.⁴⁰ For the Mu'tazilites who did not value hadith, the situation appeared in a different light. For them, *ijmā'* could replace the sunna rather than simply confirm it. Dirār b. 'Amr, for example, considers it the only criterion besides the Koran. In a sense, Dirār even granted it a higher place than the Koran itself, for it

was not clear, given the ambiguity of scripture and the problem of abrogation and *mutashabihāt*, on which passage of scripture a judgment ought, without the unanimous support of the community, to be based. People would simply set one *auctoritas* against another, as they did in hadith.³⁰ Later, when the Mu'tazilites had lost their battle against the Prophetic tradition and had to accept it as a source, they called *ijmā'* "the proposition of the community," *kh.ibar al-umma*, as opposed to the proposition of the Prophet, *kh.ibar al-nabi'*—that is, hadith.³¹

We therefore arrive at a rather paradoxical result: *ijmā'*, which later became the Sunni principle par excellence, was first propagated absolutely and without restrictions by those who would be considered heretics in later centuries—that is, by the Mu'tazilites. The situation was complicated by the fact that the parties opposing *ijmā'* were also recruited from groups that were unorthodox in their time, the Kharijites and the Shiites. But these cases were different; unlike the Mu'tazilites, they had always been excluded from the political coalition. In addition, the Kharijites had severed themselves from the community before it had even acquired a coherent shape. As a result, they were more literalist than the Mu'tazilites. They did not punish adultery with stoning, they

did not practice *mash 'alā 'l-khuffayn*, the practice of rubbing the shoes instead of the feet during ritual cleansing, and they inexorably cut off thieves' hands without recognizing the exceptions through which jurists attenuated the rigor of the Koran. That, at least, is what 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdadi said.³² The reality may have been more complex than it appeared. They wanted to have nothing in common with those they had abandoned. But they, of course, established solidarity among themselves: there is reason to believe that "the community of believers" of Basrian Ibadites, the *jama'at al-muslimin*, proceeded by consensus of a sort, though it was still on a political level. As for the Shiites, they were disappointed because they had been in the minority since the time of the Companions. During the caliphate of Abū Bakr and 'Umar, the consensus of the community had not favored 'Alī. In jurisprudence, the Shiites always indicated their preference for *qiyā'id*, independent reasoning. There, the vote of the majority lost much of its value very early on.

Among the Mu'tazilites, criticism emerged only with al-Nazzām. He was accused of having been influenced by the Shiites, but in reality he was reacting against the "people of hadith," *ashab al-hadith*, who had begun to base the *ijmā'* on a hadith: "My com-

munity will never reach agreement on an error."³³ That saying was demonstrably apocryphal. Shāfi'ī does not cite it.³⁴ Its content reminds us of the role played by the Holy Spirit in Christianity. "The Church of Rome does not make mistakes," Pope Lucius I is supposed to have said, according to the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals. By disseminating the hadith cited, Muslims reassured themselves that they were orthodox. Dissension, *ikhtilaf*, had always been considered characteristic of sects and infidels. In addition, the infidels not only disagreed among themselves, they also filled their imaginations with collective errors. Christians, for example, all agreed with the assertion that Jesus had died on the cross—which was clearly false, according to the Koran. The Jews were convinced that the revelation transmitted to Moses had never been abrogated, a belief that was refuted by the existence of Islam. But is it true that such errors had never occurred among Muslims? Jāhiz, following in al-Nazzām's footsteps, noted that during the caliphate of al-Mansur, in Bahrain (which at the time covered the entire eastern coast of the Persian Gulf), the whole population prayed as a community on Thursdays—hence, the day before the prescribed day. Al-Nazzām adopted a sarcastic tone in expressing his view on the subject: if a group of blind

people are brought together, they see no better than they did before. All Muslims believe, for example, that Muhammad was the only prophet sent to the whole world. Yet reason shows us that that is false; for all prophets Jesus, Moses, and the others—proved their authenticity through miracles, and a miracle is perceived by the senses and is thus addressed to human beings as such. The *imā'* is, then, nothing but an illusion. But that sort of ruthless skepticism not only destroyed *imā'*, it had consequences for hadith. By analogy, a report cannot become reliable by the mere fact of having had several chains of transmission (*mutawatir*).³⁵

Al-Nazzām was intelligent but was found to be a bit too capricious. Jāhiz, the first of the Mu'tazilites to distance himself from his master's doctrines, describes his character.³⁶ Khayyāt, who lived a generation later, claims that in Baghdad no one shared al-Nazzām's views any longer. Yet another generation later, Abū Hāshim accepted the hadith mentioned above, which al-Nazzām had ridiculed. He was determined to accept the *imā'*, and no "authority" supported it, except this hadith and a few passages from the Koran, which were however much too vague.³⁷ As the time of open options receded into the past, people increasingly felt the need for an agreement on

true custom. Al-Nazzām had still made fun of the Companions of the Prophet and of their internecine quarrels, but immediately after his death political correctness took hold in regard to the sacred past, even in the Mu'tazilite school.³⁸ To al-Nazzām, the disputes among the Companions still seemed normal; discord was life, and human beings had received intellect to help them find their own bearings. After him, that attitude became untenable. The Mu'tazilites never stopped praising reason, but now limits were placed on the breaking of taboos. Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbār would later say that even though the *ummi's* infallibility cannot be proved, one must not conclude that it will necessarily commit errors.

The "sound reason" Wāsil had spoken of was not yet al-Nazzām's arrogant rationalism. What Wāsil had in mind was the good sense of the jurists. People remembered that among these jurists were virtuosi who had in their time dazzled the masses with their wisdom and subtlety: Iyas b. Mu'āwiya, for example, or, before him, Shābī.³⁹ These men had a gift for judging a situation intuitively, by *fir'āsa*, with perspicacity. But they did not yet have a method, and even less a discourse on it. They employed analogies but relied in doing so on their knowledge of human be-

ings, without invoking any explicit rule. At the time, jurisprudence was at the forefront, having come into its own partly thanks to the instrument of the fatwa. No one was writing manuals yet, but people were trying to analyze specific situations that had not been clarified. Each community, each "sect," had its own specialist. In Mecca, there were specialists on pilgrims. Texts are available to help us reconstitute that forgotten culture: the *al-Jawābat* (Responses) by Jābir b. Zayd al-Azdī (d. AH 93/712 CE), or the *al-Aqwāl Qatāda*, summaries of juridical decisions made by Qatada b. Di'rāma (d. AH 117[?]/735 CE?).⁴⁰ Unfortunately, they were neglected because they were "sectarian," alien to the dominant trend in later centuries. The "method" revealed in them is *ra'y* (literally, "opinion"), a mode of thought that followed the logic of the situation without constantly appealing to an independent authority, but which was opposed to pure whim and arbitrary decisions (*hawā*).

The verb used in combination with *ra'y* was *ijtahada*, "to exert oneself"; *ijtahada ra'yahu* meant "to form an opinion about something."⁴¹ In the long run, the term *ra'y* lost its positive connotations. It was associated with the al-Kufā school, the followers of Abu Hanīfa who had stayed closest to the principles of ancient tradition in Iraq. In Basra, a town with

a complex intellectual outlook, the term *ijtihad* replaced *ra'y*, and people began to concern themselves with the specific reason, *'illa*, that justified the procedure applied.⁴² Those who did so came from different "disciplines." 'Uthmān al-Battī was a contemporary of Abū Hanīfā and corresponded with him. Abū Hanīfā sent him his famous Epistle, *Risāla*.⁴³ 'Uthmān's response was that of a jurist 'Amr b. 'Ubayd's that of a theologian, and the response of 'Abdallāh b. Abī Ishāq al-Hadramī, who was a generation older than the two others (d. AH 117/735 CE), that of a grammarian.⁴⁴ In the beginning, however, the Basrian *ijtihad* was taken to extremes, just as the *ra'y* was in al-Kufa. 'Ubaydallāh b. al-Hasan al-Anbarī (d. AH 168/785 CE), a disciple of Iyas b. Mu'āwiya, formulated the following maxim: "Whoever forms an opinion (and is capable of doing so) is right," *kull mujtahid musib*.⁴⁵ Muslims had suddenly arrived at pluralism—and, it appeared, at relativism.

The expert's independence was never so confidently asserted as at that time. 'Anbarī did not distinguish between jurisprudence and theology. He chose his examples from both fields at once. *Mash' alā l-khuffayn*, shoe-rubbing, could be either accepted or rejected, he said; but he also maintained that someone who defends free will is just as right as someone

who believes in predestination. He always chose problems that had not been definitively solved by the Koran, the only authority 'Anbarī seems to have accepted. For theology, that position turned out to be untenable. Eternal truths could not be subject to the caprices of the human intellect (though they were in reality). In the *fiqh*, the human attempt to understand divine law, it was a different situation. It was soon recognized that the judgment of a mufti or *qādi* never led to more than a certain probability (*ghalabat al-zann*). Manuals devoted to the hermeneutic foundations of the *fiqh* (*usul al-fiqh*) never fail to address the subject.⁴⁶ There too, Muslims wanted to avoid indecisiveness. 'Anbarī had touched on a sensitive and important point, as the absence of appeals courts in the classical judicial system demonstrates.⁴⁷

Yet jurists were not ready to resign themselves to uncertainty. Shāfi'ī did not yet see the situation as relating to verisimilitude. According to him, the believer, in following the law, is doing something that is either objectively correct or subjectively permitted.⁴⁸ It was the Mu'tazilites' rationalism that slowed down the process. Both al-Asamm and Bishr al-Marisi, a very influential jurist in the court of al-Ma'mūn and the instigator of the *mihna*, as well as al-Nazzām at a later time, continued to hope that basing all legal ar

gument on reason would be possible.⁴⁹ As for reasoning by analogy (*qiyās*), with which a casuistic system cannot dispense, al-Asamm and Bishr al-Marīṣī thought they could manage the situation through a method more solid than the *illa*.⁵⁰ At that point, however, al-Nazzām, with his usual skepticism, suggested that they were not on the right path. Not even God applied analogy—the Koran was the proof of that. According to sura 24:31, no one is allowed to see the hair of a free woman. Analogy would dictate that that is also the case for a slave woman, especially if she is beautiful (or more beautiful than the free woman). But the opposite is true, as verse 33:59 shows.⁵¹ The Sharia is rife with such contradictions. For example, the traveler, *ibn al-sabil*, who is exempt from prayer and fasting, must make up for only the second of these obligations, not the first.⁵² Chaos is intentional, and analogy would only increase it. The Koran is beyond criticism and can only be accepted. Apart from it, the only authority is reason. It does not tell us to proceed by analogy but to take scriptural commandments literally. If a husband repudiates his wife, he must do so with the exact words mentioned in the Koran or with a sentence containing the word *taliq* (divorce); intention alone will not

suffice. In taking that position, al-Nazzām abandoned the majority opinion and arrived at a literalist, or *zābirite*, view.⁵³ Unlike his two predecessors, he was not a practicing jurist.

Analogy, or *qiyās*, was considered a normal expression of *ijtihad*, and was included among the four basic principles of jurisprudence, the *usūl al-fiqh*. It was not a "source" but a method; it belonged to the realm of form and not of matter. In jurisprudence, its function was to support casuistic probabilism. In theology, that was not sufficient. Theologians used the same term, but what they meant by it was *qiyās al-ghā'ib 'alā 'l-shahid*. Rather than an analogy, it was a conclusion (*qiyās*) based on what was before one's eyes, *shahid* (that is, what was present and well known), as compared to the hidden, *ghā'ib*—that is, God and the hereafter. They did not admit that there could be an analogy between God and the world. Islam has never developed the doctrine of *analogia entis*, and the Mu'tazilites, despite all their theories about the attributes of God, always had the utmost respect for the affirmation of his transcendence, *tanzih* (*aphaeresis* for the Greeks).⁵⁴ For the Mu'tazilites, analogy was a manifestation not of *ijtihad* but of

istidlāl, a term they associated with the word for "proof," *dalīl*. *Dalīl* was nothing other than a "sign," an indication, and *qiyās* was any ratiocination whatsoever, preferably a deduction. It is for that reason that Aristotle's translators, usually Christians, took the liberty of applying the term *qiyās* to the syllogism, which in the *Organon* indicated the method for drawing conclusions *kat' exokhen*. The fact that *qiyās* was only a formal element in the jurists' tool kit facilitated the transition to philosophy, where the problems addressed were similar to those of theology. With regard to the other three "sources" of law, such an affinity did not exist.⁵⁷

Theological knowledge was however not only a certainty; it was also—and for the same reason—a duty. The Koran emphasized that God provided the "signs" (*āyāt*) so that humankind could recognize God's existence. In a sense, a knowledge of signs was even "necessary," for they were perceived with the eyes, and sense perception was inevitable—*darūr*, given a priori. What was "acquired" (*iktisābi*) in that process was only the conclusion, the result of moving from the *semēion* (*dalīl*) to the *semēioton* (*madlūl*), from sign to signified; but that conclusion could be drawn by anyone. One had only to desire it. What was acquired could also rightly be called *ikhtiyār*, depen-

dent on the choice (*ikhtiyār*) of the individual. As a result, knowledge of God became an obligation by virtue of divine law, an element of *taklīf*. It was a human act like any other. People could disagree on the way to define that act. On the subject of free will (*ikhtiyār*), for example, Dirār b. 'Amr had argued for a synergism that divided the elements of the human act between God and man. He thought that human beings are agents by virtue of the fact that they perform the action and "acquire" it for their own benefit (*kasb* or *iktisāb*), whereas God creates it in that he makes it occur.⁵⁸ The Mu'tazilites did not adopt that model, but Abū 'l-Hudhayl was one of the first to refute it.⁵⁹ He spoke of *ilm iktisābi*, knowledge "acquired" by theological speculation (*nazar*).⁵⁸ And the *kasb*, "acquisition," remained forever a "cipher," a metaphor for "responsibility."⁵⁹

The appeal to the *taklīf* produced new difficulties. If the "acquisition" of religious knowledge was obligatory, one ought not to postpone it. Every instant spent without knowledge of God and Islam was wasted. Moreover, knowledge required time; as a result, Muslims wondered what respite (*muhla*) people could have once they had reached adulthood. In that regard there was no fundamental difference between believers and pagans. Of course, Muslims took ad-

vantage of the fact that their "respite" was normally taken up by religious education, but the obligation itself was also valid for non-Muslims, and insofar as they fulfilled it, they were following God's commandment, just as believers were. Naturally, it was possible that they might remain unbelievers in spite of everything; in that case, their knowledge of truth would be only partial, and they would have fulfilled their duty without the intention that ought to accompany it. Abū 'l-Hudhayl was the first to discuss the problem. There are works of obedience, he said, by which one does not "will" God. That can also happen to Muslims. They find themselves in this predicament in the first instant of their knowledge of God, for they do not yet know that what they are doing is a meritorious act.⁶⁹

That theorem was rather far removed from reality. Normally, education introduced the concept of merit from the beginning, alongside the first religious ideas. But the aporia hidden within it fascinated Muslims. It may therefore be possible, they said, to fulfill, without realizing it, an obligation established by God. That eventuality seems to be universal: there is no reason to limit it to the infidels, for to know that one is obliged to know God, one must already

know him. One might conclude that the notion of God is an a priori concept. That was for a long time the conclusion; the word for "a priori" was *fiḥa*.⁶⁴ Abū 'l-Hudhayl believed it, despite the fact that he had gone to a great deal of trouble to develop proofs of the existence of God.⁶⁵ In his view, these proofs were designed only to provide reassurance a posteriori. But in that case one would have to concede that pagans too possessed that prior knowledge of God, and should one truly concede that pleasure to them? Certain theologians argued the reverse. The consequence seemed to be that unbelievers, at least those who had never had the opportunity to hear of God or of Islam, were innocent. They also did not deserve paradise, of course, but henceforth they could not be condemned to hell. The Koran offered a third alternative: They would return to dust after their deaths. According to sura 78:40, the polytheists of Mecca wanted to be treated that way after their resurrection, but to no avail. By comparison with hell, it was a more agreeable fate. But for those who had known the truth and rejected it, such a fate was out of the question.

Thumama b. Ashras, councilor and "minister without portfolio" to the court of al-Ma'mūn, made

the same argument, and al-Jāhiz came to embrace his viewpoint.⁶³ But al-Jāhiz took the idea further by asserting, in a psychological approach that was revolutionary for the time, that despite the "presumption of innocence," it may still be true that everyone, Muslim or not, arrives at the knowledge of God without being initiated in advance. One must simply concede that such knowledge cannot be controlled and that it shares that distinctive character with all other types of knowledge. Above all, it need not be "produced" (*muu'allad. mutau'allid*) by something; it can result naturally from an act of reflection, but that is not a condition sine qua non. Our brains work in a different way; our speculations are not calculable. Hence, there is no obligation to know God.

These ideas were ingenious and infused with a subtle tolerance, but they also indicated the bankruptcy of Mu'tazilite rationalism. In reacting against that apparent flaw, al-Jubbā'ī, with his usual scholasticism, tried to prove why human beings, despite the arguments advanced by al-Jāhiz, must necessarily feel the obligation to know God. No one, he said, lacks the experience of depending on a power that governs him and to which he is beholden. To show gratitude toward this power, however, a person must know whom to address. Knowledge of God is thus as it

were the personalization of the experience of the "numinous," of an indefinite divine power.⁶⁴ That theory too was only a hypothesis at first. A Muslim did not need that confrontation with the numinous, nor did the "people of the Book," the *ahl al-kitāb*, nor the majority of pagans, for they were all conditioned by the religious ideas of their society. To support the theory, therefore, an example had to be found or constructed. It was soon discovered in the figure of an individual living alone on an island, the Robinson Crusoe motif. Al-Jubbā'ī himself seems to have used it. Later on, it was primarily Shi'ite authors who adopted it: Kulīnī (d. AH 328/939 CE) and Ibn Bābawayh (d. AH 381/991 CE). The idea was later developed by Ibn Tufayl. Finally, Ibn al-Nafis granted it prominence and pushed it to the point of caricature in his *Risāla al-Kāmilīyya*.⁶⁵ In his narrative, the hero discovers not only theological and metaphysical truths by virtue of his intellect, but also, through the rational necessity of prophethood, the course of human history. The location of the "Robinson Crusoe" (who is called Kāmil, "Perfect," in Ibn al-Nafis and Hayy b. Yaqzan, "Living son of Awakened," in Ibn Tufayl), was naturally a marginal detail. The Orient had various remote places to offer: the desert (Ibn Bābawayh), a mountaintop (Kulīnī). Only Juwaynī, an Ash'arite,

and Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Kindi, an Ibadite, spoke of an island.⁶⁶

Rationalists trusting too much in certain models may become presumptuous, if not blind and fanatical. Over time, the Mu'tazilites stopped being the friends of the masses: they hated the incapacity of the latter to understand true doctrine. Even Bishr b. al-Mu'tamir, who had tried to win over the common people with his didactic poetry, criticized their *taqlid*, the intellectual indolence they showed—especially in not following his views.⁶⁷ His disciple al-Murdar developed the same attitude, at least for a while, until he converted to a more accessible didactic style and began to compose books intelligible to common mortals.⁶⁸ His ascetic simplicity linked him to the *sūfiyyat al-Mu'tazila*, the only ones to take a stand against intellectual arrogance. Outside the Mu'tazilite circles, Ibn Kullāb and his friends, who had endured the brutality of the *mihna*, also opted for more moderation. For them, someone incapable of articulating on his own why he is a believer can nevertheless be considered one. But even they expressed reservations. They admitted that such a person obeyed God with his faith, but they remained convinced that in spite of everything he was committing a sin be-

cause he neglected theological reflection. The *muqallid*, the one who, through his *sacrificium intellectus*, fails to find the right path, must therefore be likened to the "prevaricator," *fāsiq*.⁶⁹ Except that according to them the *fāsiq* was not in an intermediate position (*manzila bayna l-manzilatayn*), as he was for the Mu'tazilites, but could place his hope in God, who in his mercy might spare the *fāsiq* the sufferings of hell.⁷⁰

Intellectualism turned inward led to a certain quarrelsomeness. It was instigated most forcefully by public disputation, *munāzara*, where arrogance joined forces with competitiveness. The warping of the profession that resulted was typical of the *mutakallimun*. Let us compare other kinds of religious activity. Hadith was simply transmitted. Mysticism was limited at the time to intimate contact between master and disciple. Greek philosophy and science were taught at home. Conversely, theology, because of its apologetic nature, favored public debate from the start, and that attracted curiosity-seekers and produced emotional reactions. Winning and losing were always at stake. As in the marketplace, skill and speed of reaction often prevailed over circumspection and sincerity. Al-Jāhiz saw clearly that that propensity could devolve into charlatany. He himself,

though a good writer, was far from a good public jouster. His physiognomy did not lend itself to that, and the rules of public display may have been the same as they are in modern democracies. Al-Jāhiz also recognized that in the heat of argument the line between antagonistic positions could vanish. That was not serious so long as the positions were fictive, as they were in belles lettres. *adab* (in his *Book of Animals*, he himself had invented a *disputatio* between a cock and a dog).⁷¹ But theology was entirely different. One does not play around with the truth, and it is not enough to be right, especially by virtue of one's rhetorical skill. In the long run, the image of the *mutakallimun* increasingly came to resemble that of a star lawyer in an American trial today. The Mu'tazilites were aware of the disadvantages. They found themselves facing a wave of resentment and antipathy. Even now, the inclination is to take the word *kalām*, from which *ilm al-kalām* and *mutakallimun* are derived, to mean "pointless talk," "prattle." The simple folk had that reaction, but so did the scholars close to them, the *ashab al-hadith*, many jurists, and finally the philosophers themselves. Philosophers, however, reacted that way for a different reason: they thought that the style of the *kalām* corresponded to Aristotle's dialectic, a genre the Greek master had

ranked second, clearly below the apodictic art represented by syllogistic logic.⁷²

How do we know what we know? Why are we right when we are right? Men of later generations, al-Ghazālī, for example, but also Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, were fascinated by syllogism and had great hopes for it. But its promise proved illusory. Ultimately, syllogism yields only what has been put into it. The conclusion depends on the premises, but who will verify the premises? If the premises had been taken from the Koran, the question would have been superfluous. That was not generally the case: theologians always proceeded differently, as we have seen. Knowledge comes from a conviction (*i'tiqād*) supported by proofs, they said. Abu 'l-Hudhayl had already made that assertion, adding that such a precondition is not valid for every sort of knowledge. Some forms of knowledge are not "produced" because they are "necessary."⁷³ But when they are produced, that is, when truth emerges at the end of our reflection process, we sense it. Truth does not manifest itself through reality testing, which in any case is not always possible in theology. Rather, it imposes itself through a subjective criterion: peace of mind (*sukun al-qalb*). To think, to reflect, is a movement of

the soul, said al-Nazzām, and that movement subsides when one arrives at knowledge.¹ Nevertheless, it is illusory to believe that the piece of knowledge is true for that reason; perhaps we are simply the victims of a natural reflex. Indeed, those who err also believe they are right. Al-Jāhiz exhorted people not to forget that he remembered the Greek skeptics' objections.² It was reported that one of these skeptics, a "sophist," had badgered Thumama b. Ashras, in insisting that every thought is only conjecture (*hisbān*).

As a result, al-Jāhiz added an objective criterion to al-Nazzām's approach. There are sentences, he said, that are recognized as true not only subjectively but also objectively, by virtue of their correspondence to reality, their *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, as the Christian Scholastics would have said. He had discovered the need for that adjustment when considering false propositions. Although it is acceptable to say that something is true because one believes it, one cannot say that the same thing is false because one does not believe it. There thus exist not only statements that are true and others that are false, but also statements that are neither true nor false, either because they do not correspond to reality, despite the fact that someone believes them, or, conversely, because someone says of a thing that it is objectively true, without be-

ing convinced of it. The first case is that of "innocent" pagans, the second that of "hypocrites," *munāfiqun*.³ Al-Jāhiz knew that his master al-Nazzām had already referred to a Koranic verse in which a similar case was described by God himself: "When the hypocrites come to you [the Prophet] they say: 'We bear witness that you are God's apostle.' God knows that you are indeed his apostle; and God bears witness that the hypocrites are surely lying."⁴ At a certain point, then, the *munāfiqūn* had said, but without believing it, something that was true; for that reason, they were liars. Truth and sincerity were not the same thing, nor were lies and error. Unfortunately, at the time, the Arabic expression *kadhībati* could mean both "you are lying" and "what you're saying is false." Like the word *pseudos* in Greek, the Arabic word does not distinguish between the subjective and the objective meaning.⁵ But even though there is no difference in the language, there certainly is one in reality. Once again, al-Jāhiz took the Koran to witness. Sura 34:8 tells us that the polytheists of Mecca could not decide whether to consider the Prophet a liar or a man possessed by jinni. Yet in this context, "possessed" could only allude to someone who says false things without knowing it.

The first to refute the "sophists," or rather, the ar-

guments of the Greek skeptics, was another student of al Nazzam, Muhammad b. Shabib al-Basri. He knew that to achieve that goal, he would have to explain sensory illusions.⁷⁹ We are familiar with the skeptics' arguments through Sextus Empiricus's treatises and through other texts. In the Muslim world, these books were still unknown, and their "sophisms" were instead spread via a "diffuse tradition" that disseminated many Greek ideas never officially translated. Those responsible for it may have been physicians: the "empirical" school that refused to base diagnoses on syllogisms had links with skepticism. But fundamentally, theologians were not dealing with sensory illusions: the problem was revelation. No one would ever succeed in explaining it and replacing it with reason. If all the elements of faith could be discovered through human reflection, why would God have spoken? That is what Ibn al-Rāwandī said, and he was not altogether wrong. If he had heard the reply to his argument that his antagonists later gave—namely, that God did so to spare his creatures a little trouble—he would have only smiled sarcastically.⁸⁰ It is true that Muslims have avoided absurdity for all time;⁸¹ even for them, however, harmony between faith and reason remained an inaccessible ideal.

NOTES

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