Theology

The highly technical scholarship found in theological works composed under the religious discipline of kalām (lit., “the speech”), which also includes philosophical and mystical theology, differs from the commonly taught Muslim creed. Theological controversies in Islam focus on seven major issues:

1. the analysis of the concept of God;
2. the ontological and the cosmological proofs of God's existence;
3. the cosmology of the relationship between God and the world;
4. the ethics of the theodicy of God's order with respect to free will, determinism, fate, good, evil, punishment, and reward;
5. the pragmatics of the language of religions and the peculiar function of the faculty of imagination special to prophets, mystics, and prophet-statesmen;
6. the relationship between reason and revelation; and finally,

7. the politics of the application of divine rule to the community.

**Major Schools of Thought.**

Islamic theology begins during the reign of the last two “rightly-guided” (rāshidūn) caliphs, ʿUthmān and ʿAlī (r. 644–661). Salient features of the tradition as developed in various schools of thought are outlined in this section.

**Khawārij (the secessionists).**

Initially this group followed ʿAlī, but when he allowed an arbitration following the battle between him and Muʿāwiyah in 657 at Ṣīffīn, they protested and “seceded” from the party of ʿAlī. The Khawārij rejected the Sunnī view that the ruler must belong to the tribe of Quraysh as well as the Shiʿī claim that he must be a descendant of the Prophet. Instead, they held that right action and faith are the only essential attributes of a true Muslim, including a leader among them. Thus they viewed the caliph as a virtuous authority of Islam, calling for jihād and trying to kill whomever they regarded as being outside their egalitarian community.

**Murjiʿah.**

This school was developed by Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 745), Abū Hanīfah (d. 767), and others as a reaction and even as a corrective to the extreme puritanism of the Khawārij. Their views were shared by many other Muslims, such as Ibn Karrām (d. 973), the founder of the Karrāmīyah school (see below). The salient doctrine of the Murjiʿah was to postpone judgment on believers who committed a grave sin; moreover, they emphasized the promise (al-waʿd), hope (irja ), and respite granted by God rather than threat and punishment. They also opposed the doctrine of eternal punishment of sinners and emphasized the goodness of God and his love for human beings. Politically their position opposed the Khārijī view that advocated punishment of believers who committed sins and supported rebellion against Muslim rulers whom the Khawārij considered corrupt or deviating from true Islam. In contrast, the Murjiʿah held that one should obey a Muslim ruler even if one disagreed with his policies or questioned his character. The controversy was a politically sensitive one: some Muslims disagreed strongly with the perceived sinful deviation of the third caliph ʿUthmān and the Umayyad rulers; others criticized the fourth caliph ʿAlī for his submission to arbitration with Muʿāwiyah. The practical side of the theoretical controversy was translated into the practical question of whether or not a Muslim should obey a ruler with whom he disagrees.
Pointing to the Qur’ān (9:106), the Murji‘ī doctrines evolved into three important theological theses. First was the primary authoritative and epistemic status given to the intention of faith (īmān). Here they rejected the utilitarian formula that ethical imports are ultimately derivable from consequences of an action. Instead, in accord with the ethical views held by the jurists, they maintained that the intention of the agent—specifically, the state of his or her belief—is the sole criterion for instituting punishment on him or her. Faith became closely associated with both gnosia (ma‘ārifah) and the open proclamation (iqrār) of God, with the tendency to equate being a Muslim with having faith. Second, the adherents of this group achieved a pragmatically convenient political posture; it followed from their views that caliphs like ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī should be obeyed even if they had committed a sin; consequently, this perspective justified and rationalized the moral status of early Islamic history. In addition, their principles justified their obedience to rulers of the Umayyad dynasty with whose policies they disagreed. Third, unlike the Khawārij, they preached tolerance toward other Muslims and supported the spirit of unity within the community of the faithful. In this tenor, followers of Abū Ḥanīfah—for example, Abū Muṭṭal-Balkhī, as indicated in his al-Fiqh al-abṣāt—held views sympathetic to non-Arabs who embraced the faith of Islam and held no descent or only indirect descent from the original Quraysh family. This perspective was favorable to the Umayyads, who made extensive use of Christians and non-Arabs in their administration.

Qāḍarīyah.

The major doctrines of this school are discussed in the works of Ma‘bad al-Juhānī (d. 699), Abū Marwān Ghaylān ibn Marwān al-Dimashqī al-Qubṭī (d. 730), and others listed by Hasan al-Bāṣrī (d. 728) in his Risālah. The Qāḍarīyah recognized a power (qudrāh) in human agents that makes them responsible for acts performed; in this sense human action is different from all other events. They held that only by asserting human freedom can one justify God's power to blame or to punish man. They also agreed with the later Mu‘tazili position of Wāṣil ibn ‘Atā‘ that persons are intuitively self-conscious of their capacity to make choices and that this conscious awareness and intention will make them responsible for the outcome of their acts. The assertion of human free will is a standard argument to absolve God from responsibility for evil in the world. The doctrine of free will is compatible with two distinct views. First is the position that no act can be an effect of two different powers. Therefore if God empowers persons, he cannot exert any subsequent power over their resulting acts; otherwise, he will and will not empower persons, which implies an impossibility and a contradiction. The other alternative was formulated by making the following distinction: God’s powers are necessary due to himself, while human powers are derived by acquisition (kasb) from God. Eventually the latter position gained more support among the Sunnī theologians, who did not wish to deny that God is a remote cause of all events or that he wills order in the cosmos.

Another doctrine accepted by the Qāḍarīyah was the principle of continuous creation. The
practical import of the Qāḍārīyah position on human responsibility was politically significant; it held each Umayyad caliph responsible for his acts. Suspected of having brought secularism into the Islamic state, the Umayyad caliphs were challenged by the Qāḍārīyah. As a result, al-Juhānī and al-Dimashqī were executed by the Umayyad rulers ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 705) and Hishām (d. 743), respectively. This inquisition (miḥnah) was officially in support of the Muʿtazilī position that the Qurʾān is created. The persecutions ended in 848 when Caliph Mutawakkil (r. 847–861) came to power. Many of the positive doctrines of the Qāḍārīyah were utilized later by the Muʿtazilah, who adapted them to their own system.

Muʿtazilah.

This group of theologians chose a middle position on the question of whether or not those who are Muslim by faith but commit sin are still Muslims. In addition, this group, supposedly initiated by Wāṣil ibn ʿAṭāʾ (d. 748), held that in spite of some Qurʾānic passages that speak about God's omnipotence at the expense of God's justice (7:178, 32:13, and 3:154, for example), God is basically just. More importantly, God's uniqueness and unity is absolute: the so-called divine “attributes” are all dimensions of the divine essence. They refused to apply anthropomorphic attributions to God, hence their belief that the Qurʾān, as part of divine speech, is created in time and is not eternal. The promises for both rewards and punishments are fulfilled on the Judgment Day. For them good and evil are not irrational or blind by-products of fate as part of a deterministic theodicy applied to humans. On the contrary, a person has free will, can construe a rational depiction for both good and evil, and is thus responsible for his or her acts. Human reason harmonizes with revelation.

Major Muʿtazilī theologians include Abū al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf (d. 849/850), his nephew al-Nazẓām (d. c.835/845), and the celebrated jurist ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1204/1205). In addition to upholding standard Muʿtazilī doctrines, al-ʿAllāf proposed that there were bodies akin to atoms that were mathematical points created by God, who combined them into different substances and objects, some inert and some alive. Thus life becomes an “accident[al property]” that God adds to the aggregate of atoms that constitute the human body; God can of course destroy a person at will. Later Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274) criticized this doctrine by pointing out that a mathematical point and a physical body are ontologically two different types of entities; thus embedded in this Muʿtazilī theory is a categorical mistake.

Al-Nazẓām held that God's acts—including creation—are necessary. God makes the world of infinitely divisible atoms, including human souls, which are composites of atoms. A body is characterized by qualities such as coldness and sound. The living body, the soul-spirit, permeates aggregates of atoms and is endowed with free will. Several later thinkers, such as Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 1022) and al-Ṭūsī, singled out al-Nazẓām's crude
materialism in order to ridicule Muʿtazili doctrines.

Another major Muʿtazili was ʿAbd al-Jabbār, the celebrated jurist. Studies by George F. Hourani (Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of ʿAbd al-Jabbār, Oxford, 1971) shed much light on his theology. ʿAbd al-Jabbār held that God's acts are not necessary; if they were necessary, they could not be classified as "acts" but would be called compulsive responses. One cannot claim, he points out, that God's words are truthful only on the basis of revelation, for that would beg the question and constitute circular reasoning. That must be deduced from rationalistic theology by appeal to God's wisdom. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's rationalistic epistemology distinguishes between the semantics of the correspondence of a thought to its designatum, which is an external object, and the pragmatics of the intentional state of satisfaction and tranquility in the subject. He held that ultimately the subjective dimension is affected by the objective correspondence ground. A paradigm of a noncognitive and subjective judgment is an aesthetic judgment, based primarily on the approval and disapproval of the agent. By contrast, ethical judgments, while not innate, are objective because they are received by direct comprehension in the context of empirical experiences. In this sense ethics is analogous to geometry, where instances are used to illustrate principles.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār strongly criticized the theistic subjectivism of the Ashʿarīyah, which asserts that God's command is the sole criterion for determining the correctness of an act. A command qua command cannot be the sole source obligating an agent to act; instead, there must be additional factors such as the nature of the agent issuing the command and the consequences of the act for the receiver of the command. Moreover, there could be a plurality of commanders, which implies that the receiver of the command must use at least one criterion different from the mere fact of "having been commanded" to carry out one command and refuse another. The goodness of God is similar to the goodness of persons. But while persons, because of the limits of their knowledge, may do evil, God is never in a state in which he can make a mistake, and thus all his acts are good by his own free will. The use of logical arguments by Muʿtazilis, their materialism, and their rationalistic ethics contributed extensively to the development of philosophical methodology in Islamic theology. Z.āhirīyah and Ibn Ḥazm. A central conflict in Islamic theology lies in the interpretation of sacred texts. On one extreme there are the so-called Bāṭinīyah, who claim that in many cases the observable exoteric or apparent (zāhirī) signifies an internal (bāṭīn) meaning often associated with an esoteric, mystic, iconic significance of the outward expression. The doctrines of the Bāṭinīyah school became an important element of Islamic mysticism and central tenets of the Ismāʿīlīs. A group of theologians reacted against this trend by advocating the literal interpretation of texts. The zāhirī school was founded by Dāʿūd ibn ʿAlī al-zāhirī (d. 817), a jurist who objected to the views of the Shāfiʿī school of jurisprudence, taking up the other extreme. Dāʿūd ibn ʿAlī took the Qurʾān, the ḥadīth, and the consensus of Muḥammad's companions to be the only acceptable sources of authority.
Although Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995) lists more than 150 books attributed to Dāʿūd ibn Ṭālī, he does not mention the zāhīrī movement. The zāhīrī school was popularized by Ṭālī ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), who more than other theologians emphasized syntactic analyses to support his theological position. For example, he distinguishes between two senses of modal “necessity” (wājib), which means either a syntactical necessity implied by the rules of grammar or a moral obligation rooted in revelation. In the context of his critique of both the Muʿtazilī and Ashʿarī theologians, as well as of non-Muslim philosophers, Ibn Ḥazm made some original contributions to Islamic epistemology. For example, he granted cognitive legitimacy only to revelation and sensation, because revelation is based on religious authority, and sensation is immutable. Since a pattern of deductive reason used in a proof (burhān) by itself, according to his analysis, is an abstract schema without content, it cannot provide any content for theology or ethics without an essential normative content acquired from revelation. Another misuse of reasoning is to extend legal knowledge by certain illegitimate techniques that had been adopted by Muslim legal experts.

Ibn Ḥazm's theory of observation includes the notion of a “sixth” sense, a primary type of intelligence (awwal al-ʿaql) similar to categories of understanding, from which derive such intuitive principles as those that a part is less than the whole, or that no two bodies can simultaneously occupy the same space. Hourani labels Ibn Ḥazm a “subjective theist” who—against the rationalistic ethics of the Muʿtazilah—argues that all values depend on the will of God, who is totally free from any moral code. Space and time are limited and are created by God, who is himself unlimited; God can even perform infinite division of bodies, and thus for him there are no atoms. Following Dāʿūd ibn Ṭālī, he held that the consensus of the community was restricted to the community of the companions of the Prophet; in doing so, he denied legitimacy to the essential thought of the contemporary progressive vehicles of Islamic legal reasoning. Following a literal (zāhīr) reading of the sacred texts, Ibn Ḥazm advocated a return to reliance on tradition (ḥadīth), opposing also the principles of imitative following (taqlīd), analogy (qiṣṣā), good judgment (istiḥsān), and giving reason (taʿāqqu). For example, in the case of analogy, Ibn Ḥazm argues that there is no textual support for this method. Following the zāhīrī literal interpretation of texts, he strongly opposed the Shiʿī view of allegorical interpretation (taʾwīl) in the same spirit that he rejected the analogical reasoning used by many Sunnī schools. He advocated a grammatical and syntactic interpretation of the Qurʾānic account of God. God's names in the Qurʾān are to be taken literally as names applied to him by himself; they are not adjectives attributed to a substance. We have no right to infer ontological attributes from these names—neither anthropomorphic attributes nor attributes implying duality—because these expressions are merely signs by which we name God. God is an incorporeal, eternal unity unlike any other entity. Psychologically, human happiness lies in a desire for pleasure and a repulsion from care; this state of bliss can be achieved only through salvation. The help of the Prophet and revelation play a key role in human salvation, but the means to achieve salvation are a proper use of reason, philology, and
observational evidence. Ibn Hazm's school of thought influenced future theologians as well as mystics, as indicated by the works of Ibn 'Arabī, who investigates the divine names and makes a distinction between God as he is revealed to us and God as absolute reality.

**Karrāmiyyah.**

This school is named after its founder, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Karrām (d. 973). Its creeds gained popularity in Khorāsān province in Iran and had the patronage of Sultan Maḥmud Ghaznawī, whose court welcomed mystics such as Rūmī, scientists such as Birūnī, and philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā. More linked to the Murji'īs and Hanbalis, the Karrāmiyyah were accused of anthropomorphism because they advocated the most literal interpretation of the Qur'ān in passages such as sūrah 7:55 and 10:3, where physical references are made in the context of the nature of God. According to some of the Karrāmiyyah, spatiotemporal dimensions are applicable to God, who literally sits on a throne. Several original and nonstandard doctrines of the Karrāmiyyah set them apart from most Muslim thinkers. For example, unlike most Muslim philosophers, this school advocates that God is in fact a substance (jawhar); some went so far as to identify God as a body. Most other Muslim theologians take mental intentional belief or correct moral behavior to be criteria for being a faithful believer. The Karrāmī emphasis on verbal expression extended to God and his creation. Supposedly entities are created when God commands with the word “be” (kun). In their cosmogony they attempted a synthesis between monotheistic creationism and the doctrine of the eternity of the world by assigning to God a temporal dimension different from that of created existents. When hundreds of thousands of people were massacred by Chinggis Khan in the province of Khorāsān, many Karrāmis were among them. Like the Qādarīyah and the Murji'ah, the Karrāmiyyah died out as a movement, and some of its doctrines were integrated by the later Ṣāhibīs and other schools.

**Ash'arīyah.**

This school of classical Sunnī thought, led by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash’arī (d. 935), was one of the pioneers of “occasionalism,” which depicts the world as a series of occasions that are effects of God's will. This view has several important theological implications. First, against the Mu'tazilah, al-Ash’arī rejects rationalist ethics and holds that human beings are incapable of understanding the logic of good and evil because these are derived from God. God relates to the world owing to his generosity. Al-Ash’arī's system attempts to solve the problem of a need to justify epistemically, for example, the existence of unobserved contingent causal laws between events. Concerning the proof of God's existence, al-Ash’arī held that God is the necessary existent, because a series of contingent existents for their actualization need one member to be necessary; otherwise, a vicious infinite regress is implied. God as a creature of temporal entity must be
atemoral and unchanging; otherwise he would have been temporally produced and thus not be God. God must be a unity, for if there were multiple gods, there would be a possibility of conflict of will among gods, and one god among many could not be the cause of the set of contingents dependent on a single will. God is alive (2:255), omnipotent (2:284), and omniscient (3:5). His willing an entity implies creating the entity in question. Against the Muʿtazilah, al-Ashʿarī argues that God also sees and hears without an implication of either temporality, anthropomorphism, or injustice to God. The Qurʿān, as God's speech, is eternal. When God asserts for an entity X, "Be!" then X is created (16:40). If the Qurʿān were created—as the Muʿtazilīs argue—then God would need to have spoken to his own speech, which is absurd. God has eternal speech and eternal will and cannot do evil for the following reasons: God who produces the good is better than the good itself, in the same manner that if there were positive agents of evil, they would have been better than evil; but the evil that is created by God is for another entity and not for himself.

Māturīdiyyah.

Another key figure in Sunnī theology was Abū Manaṣīr Muḥammad al-Māturīdī (d. 956). He presented new methodological schemes to test theological disputes. In terms of content he took a middle position between the Muʿtazilah and the Ashʿarīyah on the question of free will as well as on divine justice. With regard to the divine attributes he held that divine justice and grace are interconnected with divine wisdom. For him the notion of an unjust God is meaningless. Consequently, divine justice follows syntactically and ontologically from the nature and the essence of God without limiting God's freedom. With respect to human freedom, he holds that unlike other animals, the human being is endowed with an intellect, a moral sense, and an awareness of freedom. This conscious awareness of freedom is an essential mental constituent of being a living human being. Evidently God, the creator, treats human beings differently from purely physical substances because he has sent them a prophet, a guide. Since the Qurʿān has dictated moral responsibility to persons, persons are necessarily free. Persons intend actions, and God freely realizes these intended actions. This formula preserves both God's omniscience and human freedom.

Māturīdī's method of Qurʿānic interpretation is based on two presuppositions: first, the Qurʿān cannot be tested by any other source; second, a problem does not lie in the text but in our own confused reading of the text. Consequently, when we do not understand a passage, we should attempt to decipher it by comparing it with passages that are clearer to us. It follows from Māturīdī's view that our reactions to the Qurʿānic passages are pragmatic icons to their intended meaning. For example, some passages that do not correlate with a large body of other passages should not be taken in their literal sense, while the meaning of others should be left to God's knowledge. This ingenious method allows Māturīdīs to apply a method analogous to contemporary statistical dimensions of
inductive logic to give different “weights of interpretation” to each set of interrelated passages in the entire field of Qur’anic texts, with the clearer passages being used to comprehend other passages. These problems with understanding the Qur’an signify the inner complexity of the texts in question. They signal the presence of allegorical, literal, iconic, and other types of intended meanings. They also reveal our capacity, and the transcendental categories by which a finite being attempts to know God.

In the same manner, the problem of divine attributes and the question of their eternity must be solved in the context of religious worship. To begin with, Māturīdī argues, it would be impossible to talk about God without mentioning some attributes. Moreover, if these attributes were not eternal, then God would have been ephemeral, and that contradicts our notion of his omniscience. Consequently we make a distinction between our use of attributes to approach God as we can know him and the actual nature of God in himself. For example, if we assert that God is wise, we mean that he is aware of all events in the world; we do not mean that the sense of wisdom attributed to God is like the wisdom of human beings. With respect to God, we hold the principles of unity, the denial of similarity (tanzīh), and the absolute difference between him and created entities. This solution permits discourse about God without losing the principle of unity.

Māturīdī preserves the primacy and incorrigibility of the Qur’ān without accepting its literal interpretation. Against the zāhīri̇s he succeeded in preserving the unity of the concept of God as well as the primal authority of the Qur’ān, while rejecting anthropomorphism. He holds that both morality and reality are open to reason—however, to a limit. The existence of the limit is proven by the contradictions, antinomies, and paradoxes of reason. Because reason has limits, it needs a spiritual guide, a prophet, who by revelation can help us in all secular and religious problems.

Māturīdī's epistemology is directed against skepticism. It takes reports (al-akhbār) to be a legitimate source of knowledge in addition to sensation and theoretical thinking. Māturīdī's attribution of cognitive value to reports is in line with ordinary-language analysts in Anglo-American philosophy, who emphasize the ordinary use of language as a significant basis and criterion for a theory of meaning. If we ask how do we in fact know certain facts, the answer often lies in historical reports and in the accounts we receive from previous generations. To deny this source is to misuse the very meaning of experience and knowledge. Among these reports, some claim, are the sayings of the prophets. Special attention should be paid to these by examining the evidence, such as the chain of narrators and the texts in question.

Māturīdī's clever use of philosophical arguments and new perspectives on Sunnī theology invigorated the Sunnī theological tradition. Later, modern thinkers such as Muḥammad ʿAbduh were able to go back and reinterpret the tradition.
Aḥmad ibn Taymīyah (1262–1327), another creative Sunnī theologian, focused on criticism not only of Jews and Christians but also of other Muslims, including al-Ghazālī's criticisms of fellow theologians. He criticized the Ashʿarīs for their denial of free will because such a view, Ibn Taymīyah claimed, negates the usefulness of religious prescriptions and dismisses religion as the foundation of ethics; human beings for him are genuine agents with free will. He objected to the Muʿtazilah's identification of God with his essence; this maxim negates the most significant dimension of religious experience, which is the personal aspiration to the relation of love between God and persons. Islam for him is primarily a prophetic religion with an emphasis on revelation to guide humankind; the method of natural religion or natural theology, which sets human reason as the source of truth, is totally mistaken in religious contexts. Ibn Taymīyah held that God is absolutely eternal and self-caused, as he is the efficient cause of the world and the only source of moral command for persons. There is no knowledge of God as he is revealed to us except God's revelations; at most, we should focus on textual exegesis of God's revelation. The Peripatetic philosophers, using logical and causal analyses, mistakenly treat God as an impersonal principle, who has not created the world and has no knowledge of its particulars. These doctrines flatly contradict the only source of truth we have, the revelations. In addition, philosophical methodology, restricted to logic—that is, to clarification of concepts and valid construction of arguments—is inapplicable to theology for the following reasons: Conceptual analyses and definitions at best are merely formal and syntactic constructions of the belief of the logicians, and definitions qua definitions have no informative or factual content; in the same manner, deductions are useless for establishing facts. Valid deductive schemata are of logical forms; they indulge in the game of manipulation of universal and abstract concepts without any specific existential import.

Ibn Taymīyah extends his criticism to the theoreticians of Sufism, such as Ibn al-ʿArābī, who advocated monistic mysticism. For Ibn Taymīyah, Ṣūfis are especially guilty because they write against the absolute transcendence of God. For example, Ibn al-ʿArābī places universals in God, which implies that God's perfection needs the concretion of the universals. Thus he, and other theoreticians of mysticism who emphasize similarity, mistakenly identify God—who is perfect, transcendent, and totally dissimilar—with the created, either in the realm of total nature or with the mind-dependent phenomena of humans' existential intentional experiences. This spiritualization of a psychological phenomenon is wrong both logically and morally. The depiction of unity of being violates the total independence of God from the universe, sacrificing God's transcendence at the expense of his immanence.

Ibn Taymīyah proceeds to criticize the Shiʿah; he considers them to be like the Jews in claiming special status for themselves, because the Shiʿah indulge in the myth of the
uniqueness of the Imam, his infallibility, and his special tie with God, a position Ibn Taymīyah grants only to the prophet Muhammad (5:20, 9:30–31). Christians are accused of the same folly in their belief in the Trinity, their modification of the Bible, and their antimontheistic practices.

**Philosophical Theology.**

Islamic theology extends beyond the traditional theological schools to more independent Islamic philosophers and mystics. It is often difficult, indeed, to distinguish the theologian from the philosopher. Many Muslim philosophical writers, such as Abū ʿAlī ibn Sīnā, known to the West as Avicenna (980–1035), Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (1201–1274), and Shihīb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), also wrote on many other disciplines including mathematics, music, linguistics, medicine, and theology. Moreover, the standard Muslim philosophical texts began with a definition of philosophy, an analysis of concepts, the proposal of contingent existents (bodies, souls, and intelligence), and finally the necessary existent, which is God. Islamic metaphysics (ilāhīyat) is equivalent to theology, much as Aristotle’s theology is found in book Lambda of his *Metaphysics*, the prototype of all monotheistic metaphysics and theologies.

**Ibn Sinā.**

The most influential and original philosophical theology is found in the works of Ibn Sīnā, who wrote about 250 works that have been translated into dozens of languages; St. Thomas Aquinas used many of his central themes and quoted him more than five hundred times. Ibn Sinā’s major contribution to medieval theology is that, as the philosopher of “being,” he places the study of being logically prior to the study of God. Instead of “God,” Ibn Sīnā initiates his metaphysics on “being” as the primary notion in the soul, and on the set of logical modalities (necessity, impossibility, and contingency) as the primary structures of being. Thus the realm of entities consists of impossible beings (which have no existence), contingent beings (which exist if they are caused), and finally the necessary being (which is the unique necessary existent, God). This deduction of necessary existent from necessary being is the second version of the ontological argument repeated later by St. Anselm (1033–1109), René Descartes, and others. Ibn Sīnā’s careful cosmological depiction of God, outside Aristotle’s categorical schema, provided a theoretical model for later monistic Śūfīs. If God were a substance, and the only substantial changes are generation and destruction, then mystics could not depict a union or a connection between human and God. In this tenor Ibn Sīnā, unlike Aristotle, holds that God is not an individual substance, because a substance is a composite of a substratum and an essence; the constituents of the composite are the material causes of the composite; thus, if God were a composite, then it would not be self-caused and thus not a necessary existent. It is, instead, the beholder of the world and the ground of other
existents, which are contingent owing to the following account: since the necessary being is absolutely perfect (fawq al-tāmm), it is not only the source of itself, but the source of all other entities; thus the world is emanated from it.

In addition to the analytic features of the necessary existent, Ibn Sīnā reflects on the moral and pragmatic dimensions of God. He explains why a union (payvand) with the necessary existent is the highest happiness and the greatest pleasure. Physical pleasures like food and lust have their limits, whereas a person encounters unlimited pleasure in his spiritual search. It is in this relation that a finite being encounters not only the unlimited but also her or his own remote final cause, and in a sense the essence of himself or herself. This desire for imitation of a higher being is an inborn cosmic love; thus the love of the absolute good is embedded by nature in the human being in her or his search for perfection. In examining Ibn Sīnā's cryptic Treatise on Destiny, Hourani shows that Ibn Sīnā implies that hell and heaven are in fact intentional states experienced in this life based on one's own spiritual and moral perspectives. In an attempt to solve the problem of evil, he differentiates between a primary function of an entity—for example, sunshine as the source of energy—and the secondary side effects—for example, the sun burning the head of a bald man. God's will applies to the good received in the primary function of entities; their secondary effects are necessary accidents of their own nature. Owing to its nature as the absolute good (al-khayr al-maḥḍ), the necessary existent is not even “free” to create the world. He is the only existent that is categorically necessary; all others are conditionally necessary—that is, the necessary existent is the ultimate cause of realization of all other existents.

Al-Ṭūsī.

Another major Muslim philosophic theologian is Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, also known as Khvājah, who developed the refinements of Ibn Sīnā's theology in the context of Shi'i thought. Without doubt al-Ṭūsī is the most versatile of all Muslim thinkers. He is the author of approximately one hundred works, including commentaries on Euclid; comprehensive texts on logic, astronomy, mathematics, practical ethics, philosophy, theology, and mysticism; and extensive commentaries on Ibn Sīnā's theodicy. He was also an official in the court of Hülegü Khan (1217–1265) and used his influence to oust the last Sunnī caliph in Baghdad. Al-Ṭūsī advocated an early if not the first version of so-called “soft determinism” in accordance with the Shi'i hadith that there is neither an absolute determinism (as maintained by the Ash'arīs) nor pure free will (as held by the Mu'tazilīs). Accordingly, the universe is the best of all possible worlds, which could not have been otherwise. Every entity has an assigned “rule” in it as its “destiny.” For persons, the self-conscious belief in free will means that the will of the human agent is used as a factor when we explain a set of causes that collectively determine its proper effect. Persons are often ignorant of the mechanism that determines their own will and other causes; psychologically, they feel that they are free or that there are accidents. In principle,
however, there are always laws that could have been employed to predict future events. Al-Ŷūsī follows Ibn Šīnā in avoiding controversial topics. For example, he notes that if God knows future events, then these events are determined and human beings are not free; al-Ŷūsī remarks that God, if omniscient, would also know what he wills and does not will in the future. Thus whatever answer one gives to this puzzle applies to God as well as to men.

As a mathematician, al-Ŷūsī adds refinements to the problem of infinite regress used in standard forms of cosmological arguments and arguments about the possible division of matter into atoms. He makes a distinction between syntactic series (for example, natural numbers), in which members are defined recursively, and series applied to concrete entities, which could be called “ontic” series. In a manner similar to Aristotle’s acceptance of “potential” but not “actual” infinity, he labels syntactic infinity permissible and ontic infinity vicious. He uses the argument against vicious infinite regress of ontic series to prove God’s existence, while he upholds the infinity of syntactic series to reject the doctrine of atomic substance. Like Ibn Šīnā, he notes that “matter as experienced” is open to a series of divisions that terminate owing to our finite ability to divide indefinitely; however, a mathematical mapping of matter, which is only a syntactic entity, can be divided indefinitely. There is no actual infinite (vicious) regress in either of these divisions. Thus the position of the atomistic theologians is totally mistaken. Al-Ŷūsī holds that an absolute syntactic existence is a mental notion, not a reality external to mind. God in itself as the necessary existent is for him an absolute unity from any perspective, to which no attribute can be added. A remarkable similarity exists between his views and the theodicy of the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) on both the topic of free will and the impossibility of material substances.

Other philosophical theologians.

Another philosophical theologian is Suhrawardī, who modified Ibn Šīnā’s system by expressing it in illuminationistic terms, where the divine is the “light of lights.” He rejected the Aristotelian substance-event language and proposed a new non-Aristotelian terminology. The final destruction of Aristotelian types of philosophy in Islam, however, came with the existent philosophy of Šadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, also known as Mullā Šadrā (d. 1641). He finally broke the influence of the Peripatetics on Shi’ī theology and established a philosophy that gives primacy to actual existents.

The systems of Mullā Šadrā and the Iranian philosopher Hādī ibn Mahdī Sabzavārī (1797/1798–1878) have been the subject of commentaries by recent Shi’ī scholars in Iran, notably Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Jalāl al-Dīn āshtīyānī. Here Islamic philosophical theology finds no conflict with either the aims of those who study mysticism or of those who focus on the study of Qur’ān, ḥadīth, and Islamic law. All these disciplines are taught as a required curriculum in the training of Shi’ī jurists, who often employ them
for an interdisciplinary perspective on Islamic studies. In recent Shi‘ī orthodoxy, philosophy has been accepted as the major core of theological analyses.

**Mystical Theology.**

An original dimension of the Islamic contribution to theology is constituted by the mystical writings of philosophers and poets, among them al-Husayn ibn al-Manṣūr al-Hallāj (d. 922), Abū Yazīd Bīstāmī (d. 874), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabi (1165–1240), Fārīḍ al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 1229), and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273). The salient features of Islamic mystical theology include the epistemic priority placed on the immediate experience of a sense of unity of being (al-wahdat al-wujūd), emphasis on allegorical and iconic language to express mystical themes, and often an advocacy of the ethics of the incarnation of the divine.

Ṣūfīs appeal to the mystical passages in the Qurʾān to support their theology. God is held to be thoroughly immanent in all the world (4:132), including in human beings, to whom God is described as being closer than the jugular vein (50:16). All entities return to God as their source (96:9); human beings were created by the very breath of God (15:29). The Qurʾānic texts are used to justify the Ṣūfī claim that an intimacy with God can be reached in the state of mystical union. Some, such as Ibn al-ʿArabī, depict the world in different stages or layers of divine presence. For them there is no possibility of experiencing the noumenal God—God as he is in himself. God in this sense is the primary ontological entity, a reality-truth (al-ḥaqq). He is not a personal God, but is rather analogous to Ibn Sīnā’s concept of “being-quà-being” (hastī), a primordial reality in himself. This is different from God as he is manifested to persons. For some mystics nature is a theophany, signaling God as he can be experienced in our monadic perspective: by knowing herself or himself and receiving nature, a person can have a gnosis of God as manifested. Worship is a reception of immanent presence and is the mystical interpretation of “testimony,” a major pillar of Islam. Because the world exists by the grace of God (7:57), each entity, whether a substance like a leaf, an event like the blossoming of flowers, or a light like that of the sun, is an icon of divine grace. God in himself, from the perspective of a noumenon, is not knowable, but God reveals himself in the world relative to the perspective of each mystic. Texts in Islamic mystical theology have been written by some of its most systematic thinkers, such as Ibn Sīnā, and such acute mathematicians as al-Ṭūsī. Far from being on the fringe of the theological arena, Islamic mystical theology belongs to its very center.

As a prime example of this tradition one notes Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, a prominent figure in Islamic theology. The core of his original philosophy has until recently been ignored in the West; most literature on al-Ghazālī focuses on his criticism of what he took to be the Islamic Aristotelian school of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. Let us begin with a brief sketch of
his doctrines. Al-Ghazālī's system may be introduced by a Cartesian skeptical search for certainty, which begins by showing that sense perception and conceptual analyses can be doubted. He rejects the former on the basis of standard arguments from illusion, and the latter by proving that the criteria of self-evidence are psychological and can change with experience. His argument is analogous to the views of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who points out the fallacy of self-reference and notes that one cannot see one's eyes directly or measure a ruler by itself. In the same manner, al-Ghazālī argues that one's own private notion of certainty cannot be the criterion of the correctness of analytical judgments such as mathematical statements or deductive logic schemata. His ultimate epistemological choice is based on an existential phenomenology of voluntarism in the following sense: The primary marks of God and the soul as ultimate realities are not static attributes. Both God and the soul are without any quality or any quantity. Their main mark is dynamic will, such as God's will to create the world or the intentional urge of the soul seeking personal salvation. In his mystical theism al-Ghazālī equates ethical insights with nonanalytical types of knowledge. Accordingly, the noblest states of mind are not the contemplation of atemporal concepts but rather immediate experiences such as exuberance (dhawq), urgency (shawq), and intimacy (uns). Like contemporary existentialists and phenomenologists, he takes only authentic experiences that dynamically transform persons to be paradigmatic cases of cognitive states; his system adopts a normative epistemology in a voluntaristic phenomenology.

For his criticism of other thinkers, al-Ghazālī classified four types of approaches to Islam: those of the theologians, the philosophers, the so-called Bāṭinīyah (the Ismā‘īlī sects), and the Şūfis (Islamic mystics). His criticisms of the theologians and the Bāṭinīyah are not so intensive as his objections to the philosophers. He accepts the Şūfis and reserves his uncompromising criticisms for the theology of philosophers.

Al-Ghazālī claims that theologians do not begin with a truly open attitude in their inquiry; they are apologists and defenders of orthodoxy instead of being concerned with the existential reality of religious experience. Often they assume a variation of the premises they wish to prove, and many of them naively follow the premises of their opponents. Some follow their own mistaken methods so blindly that they end up with the absurd conclusion that God is a body. His attack on the Bāṭinīyah's views of the Imam had two major arguments. Al-Ghazālī held that only the Prophet was the true mediator figure, and that the essence of religious experience was the immediate phenomenological will for an intimacy with God, rather than a transference of learned (taʿlīm) tradition as taught by the Bāṭinīyah.

In his criticism of the philosophers' theological findings, al-Ghazālī begins by rejecting the materialists and the naturalists, who are obviously irreligious and cannot offer a theology. Ultimately he focuses on the works of philosophers who consider themselves to be theists. Al-Ghazālī finds no problem when these philosophers attend to mathematics,
logic, or natural sciences; he finds little problem with their ethics and political philosophy; his main concern is with their theology. Here he shows that some of their theses are contrary to religion; these include the denial of the resurrection of bodies, the denial of God's knowledge of particular events, and the belief in the eternity of the world. Next al-Ghazālī attacks the logic of philosophers' arguments on many theological topics, showing the invalidity of their deductions as well as the weakness of their premises. These include theses such as the denial of God's attributes, God's knowledge through his essence, our claim to the legitimacy of cause-and-effect relationships, and the substantiality of the human soul.

An important topic in the scholarship of Islamic theology is the assessment of al-Ghazālī's influence and importance. We note that, after al-Ghazālī, Islamic philosophy flourished with vigor in the west in the works of Ibn Ṭūfayl and Ibn Rushd (Averroës), who rebutted him on every issue. In the east there was a strong renaissance of philosophy in the works of Suhrawardī, Mullā Ṣadrā, Sabzavārī, and others. The only possible influence that al-Ghazālī might have had on the development of Islamic philosophy was to show the weakness of the Aristotelian system: none of the later systems was Aristotelian. Ibn Rushd commented on Aristotelian philosophy, but his system includes topics such as the pragmatics of religious language that were totally absent from Aristotle's work.

Nonetheless, Muslim philosophers continued to write on theological topics. In fact, philosophical theology became part of the curriculum of both Sunnī schools, such as al-Azhar in Egypt, and Shiʿī madrasahs such as those in Mashhad and Qom. Al-Ghazālī's major influence was to provide a legitimate bond between Sunnī orthodoxy and Sufism that strengthened both traditions. In addition, al-Ghazālī stands as a giant, a major master of both the theory and praxis of Islam; he is the creative thinker who embodied the best of what is universal in Islam and in being a Muslim. After al-Ghazālī, mysticism continued to develop in both philosophy and metaphysical poetry. Mystics' attention to and analyses of the intentional and experiential dimensions of religious experience have been among the most original contributions of Islam to civilization.

**Modern Theological Movements.**

Islam is a communitarian religion with a political agenda. Consequently, far from having a fossilized theology, it contains many mechanisms for reform, innovation, and adaptation. New theological movements reflect the nature of Islam in the light of modern events. These include the confrontation of classical Islam with Western colonial powers (a parallel with the time of the Crusaders), modern technology (especially military hardware), and fundamental challenges to the core of religious law expressed in changes in family structure, dress codes, and antimonothestic literature and movements. Important among modern theological thinkers are Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asadābādī (also known as al-Afghānī,
1839–1897), Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905), Muhammad Iqbal (1878–1938), and Muḥammad Ḥusayn Tabātabāʾī (1903–1989). The first three thinkers were Muslims with European education who had first-hand experience of the Western world with its science, technology, and social problems. Their attitude depicts a politico-theological confrontation with the West on the basis of Islamic rationalism.

In its true classical Islamic spirit, al-Afghānī’s theology is integrated with his political response to the challenge of European Christian civilization. Analyzing European development in its historical setting, he offers on theological grounds a Pan-Islamic movement that revives the caliphate and establishes the Islamic force as a world power. Coming from a political realist, this grand plan in practice is transformed into a call for an Islamic nationalism capable of maintaining its independence from Western economic domination. He supports this program by three appeals: first, to realize the urgency of immediate political and economic independence; second, to recognize the ultimate superiority of Islam over other religions—which as the Muʿtazilah assert, lies in its rationality; and third, to believe in the pragmatic result, a religious life that includes not only the spiritual dimension and the special status of the religious community, but also special inner qualities necessary for achieving bliss. These qualities include modesty, honesty, and truthfulness, which free human beings from the consequences of hedonism and materialism. Like many other modern reformers, al-Afghānī was a major influence on a group of reform movements represented by Egypt's Salafīyah and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Al-Afghānī had many followers, among them his protegé Muḥammad ʿAbduh, a philosopher, scholar (ʿālim), professor at al-Azhar University, journalist, and muftī (chief judge). ʿAbduh proposed large-scale social programs for long-term social reform. He taught theology, the science of unity, and wrote a number of works, including legal opinions, on matters such as permitting the consumption of animals slaughtered by Jews and Christians, legalizing lending at interest, and introducing reforms granting rights to women. His theology focused on a close connection between reason and revelation. The latter, according to him, was intuitive knowledge given by God to the prophet primarily to educate the masses rather than to enlighten the elite through exegesis. Following the Muʿtazilah, ʿAbduh believed that the Qurʾān was created in time, and that theology is a rational science. Also, like al-Afghānī, he objected to passive mysticism and invited Muslims to hold fast to the principles of their religion while focusing on reform; he supported the innovation of practices open to learned reexamination and modernization.

Muhammad Iqbal considered Islam as an intellectual, moral, and experiential phenomenon that draws human beings as dynamic instruments of God into the realization of the open, infinite possibilities of the world. Iqbal held that the Islamic intellectual tradition transforms Greek models of abstract knowledge into an empirical investigation of concrete facts, as is illustrated by the Qurʾān’s attention to actual
specifics. True worship implies an awareness of the factual reality of concrete existents using the empiricist inductive mode of knowledge. Thus the natural knowledge of how God reveals himself in the world is compatible with the idea of a transcendent God.

Ṭabāṭabāʿī, who was representative of the Iranian Shīʿī religious class, was trained in Iran and remained there. During the twentieth century, the theological schools of Qom and Mashhad were the most active centers educating analytic Shīʿī theologians grounded especially in the philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā as well as in Western classical and contemporary thought.Ṭabāṭabāʿī distinguishes three Shīʿī perspectives: the formal (the extensional and the intentional study), the intellectual (logical arguments on theology and cosmology), and the mystical (for example, gnosis and the method of unveiling). People should realize that even though objects giving them nonspiritual pleasure are made for them, they as humans are not made for the objects. A person's uniqueness as a human person is to reflect on the true meaning of Islam, which means a gnostic submission to one God by imitating the model of the paradigmatic sage, who is the Shīʿī Imam and the perfect human of all time (al-insān al-kāmil). Because this unique feature is the essence of a person, differentiating her or him from other creatures, submission to one God—that is, being a Muslim—is the essence of a person. The word “essence” is used here to signify “the cause of completion (Greek, telos) of an entity.” The knowledge of Islam, for Ṭabāṭabāʿī, in accordance with Shīʿī theology, begins with the knowledge of God (for example, of his essence and theodicy), proceeds to knowledge of the Prophet, moves from these to the eschatological return of a person, and finally to the knowledge of the Imam. In spite of Shīʿī Islam's status as a minority creed and its concentration in Iran, Pakistan, and Iraq, the present schools of Shīʿī theology possess spiritual and political influence beyond their minority status.

**Challenges of the Twenty-First Century.**

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Islamic theology faces issues related to political events. These include the Israel-Palestine conflict; terrorism, especially 9/11 and its aftermath; the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq; and the theme of “clash of civilizations,” in which the West, China, and Islam are seen as fundamentally at odds.

Islamic theology in this period confronts four challenges. First, theological discussions have taken on an expressly political character—both in justifying and condemning such contentious issues as acts of terrorism, theories of just war, suicide bombing, pluralism, and human rights. Second, such debates are trans-sectarian in the sense that they pose similar problems for Sunnīs and Shīʿah. Third, the category of “theologian” itself has been broadened to include what we might call “lay intellectuals” such as Muḥammad Shahrour (b. 1938) among the Sunnīs and ʿAbd al-Karīm Soroush (b. 1945) among the Shīʿah. Lastly, on “modern” topics such as economics—for example, considering the role of
interest and the development of capital—Muslim experts, often trained in the West, are encouraged to proffer their own “Islamic” models independent of more traditional clergy who are ignorant of Western scholarship in these areas. A number of female scholars, working from a feminist perspective, have initiated open discussions on theological issues relating to Islam and gender, but it is too early to predict the effects of these dynamic changes on Islamic theology.

Islamic theology has responded in many ways to the accusation that Islam nurtures terrorism and clashes with cherished values of Western civilization. In their response, many Muslims point to what may be labeled as the “dialogue among civilizations,” adopted in the year 2000 as the theme of the United Nations and notably proposed by Mohamed Khatami, then president of Iran. Such a dialogue presumes that contemporary Islam, consonant with its classical theology, offers a transcultural call to humanity to follow a monotheistic vision of health, peace, and harmony. The Islamic way (tariqah), which acknowledges the prophecy of Christ and Moses, embraces the logos of Christian love and service; these goals are furthermore thought to be harmonious with the Way (Dao) of Eastern traditions. Opposing this view, a small minority of Muslims advocates violent confrontation with those who, in their view, contravene Islam's core tenets. Perceiving themselves as freedom fighters and their opponents as “state terrorists,” they often argue that their enemies share commonalities with the Crusaders of the Middle Ages.

In sum, contemporary Islamic theology has defended the creed against a number of negative accusations by calling for a hermeneutic return to what is assumed to be the primordial meaning of Islam, which, for many if not most Muslims, involves an invitation to believers to engage in peace and harmony. Nevertheless, a small minority of Muslims justifies violence against what it perceives as transgressions against its sacred center.

See also ‘ABDUH, MUḥAMMAD; AFGHāNī, JAMāL AL-DīN AL-; FEMINISM; GHAZāLĪ, ABū ḤāMID AL-; IBN AL-‘ARABĪ, MUḥYĪ AL-DīN; IBN ḤAZM, ABū MUḥAMMAD ‘ALĪ IBN AḥMAD; IBN SīNā, ABū ‘ALĪ AL-HUSAYN IBN ‘ABD ALLāH; Ibn TAYMĪYAH, TAQī AL-DīN AḥMAD; IQBAL, MUHAMMAD; subentry on; KHAWāRIJ; MāTURĪDĪ, ABū MANṣūR IBN MUḥAMMAD; MURJI‘; MU’TAZILĀH; PHILOSOPHY; SHI‘Ī ISLAM; SOROUSH, ABDOLKARIM; subentry on; SUNNĪ ISLAM; ṬABāṬABĀ‘Ī, MUḥAMMAD HUSAYN; and ṬūSĪ, NAṢĪR AL-DĪN AL-.

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