



## TOPIC 1: Debate on values

### Teaching and learning aids

---

#### Islamic political thinkers in the Middle Ages

As can be seen in the chapter on Mohammed (T 1/15 and 16) many traditionally-minded Muslims still believe today that the Koran is the only comprehensive source of all values important to human co-existence. The Koran teaches men what is good or evil, what is right or wrong and what is just or unjust.

There were also, however, in the history of Islam between the 9th. and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries other kinds of thought that – as with Christianity – arose from the confrontation with classical philosophy.

#### Mu'tazilites (9th century)

The Mu'tazilite school maintained that the moral law was not a positive law set down by divine authority but resulted of necessity from nature, from the order of things, i.e. from the moral law of nature. (T 1/25)

Reason made knowledge possible to all men - not only believers - and it was indeed their duty to use it in order to know God. (T 1/26)

This strong emphasis on reason naturally gives men a certain autonomy which could only collide with the duty to obedience in the Koran. With religious and secular dominion closely bound together in Islam, Muslim rulers obviously considered Mu'tazilite thinking dangerous and in the course of time there prevailed an interpretation of the Koran that saw the demand for obedience as the "true" message of the Koran.

#### What is the real essence of the Koranic message?

Discussion of this claimed the attention of Islam early on, both in the spiritual field between philosophy and the Koran and in the field of secular dominion, which frequently decided theological controversy in its own interest. With regard to this one should remember the Shi'ites breaking away from the Sunnites at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Islamic traditions are partly historical selective decisions because of contradictory statements in the Koran. This is particularly true with regard to the kind of government organization and its legitimization.

#### Al Mawardi (975-1058)

In the course of the centuries after Mohammed's death the Sunnites adopted the caliphate, a system with one ruler that ideally would cover the whole area under Islamic rule.

Al Mawardi explained it as follows: *"God ordained a leader for his community to continue as successor to the Prophet, to safeguard the religious community and to be entrusted with the administration of practical affairs of government, so that the measures based on God's established order would be carried out and merge together in an understanding accepted by all."* (HEINE, 1996, p. 149)

The Caliph cannot legislate himself, but is responsible for the execution of the divine law (T 1/27). If the caliph has no direct heir, a special council of advisers, the Shura, is empowered to elect a new ruler.

### **Al Ghasali (1059-1111)**

The territorial spread of Islamic dominion led to the creation of sub-dominions, or sultanates, whose rulers, the sultans, grew more powerful as time went on than the caliph himself. This created a new problem for the Islamic world. Al Ghasali passed responsibility for religious and secular questions to the sultans, whereby the only binding link between all remained the text of the Koran. (T 1/28)

The theologian and lawyer Al Ghasali - born in Iran, lived in Baghdad – was not familiar with the writings of classical philosophers, but used their dialectic form of argument not to encourage rational thinking for the clarification of human co-existence, but subordinated it to wholly to God's commandment, since this alone would open the way to the true life.

### **Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126-1198)**

Ibn Rushd, a learned lawyer and doctor from Cordoba, opposed the claim to validity of a solely theological explanation of existence and defended classical philosophy, which enabled man through his nature-given power of reasoning to recognize what was good and evil or that there must be an omnipotent God.

Ibn Rushd knew the writings of Aristotle well, for he translated them into Arabic and wrote comments on them. These works were used by Christians and Jews as a basis for translation into Latin and Hebrew, thus taking Aristotelian philosophy into the monastery libraries of the Christian western world.

But Ibn Rushd was not interested in wide propagation of his „Arabic rationalism“; perhaps he feared the dangers in it for simple believers. (T 1/29)

It was nevertheless to provide a link between the language of Greek philosophy and the sacred language of the Koran, between philosophical truth and Koranic truth. While he was still alive Ibn Rushd fell into disgrace and his books were burnt. He is to this day considered a heretic by Islamic fundamentalists.

### **Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328)**

It is not surprising that at the time of the crusades and the various regional dynasties between Marocco and Syria there was little room for an "Islamic rationalism". This was also the opinion of the Syrian Ibn Taymiyya, who thought that separation of religion and politics would only result in disorder in the state. (T 1/30)

True, there is a certain contradiction between the Umma, common to all Muslims, and the actual countries with rulers where Muslims did or still do live.

Ibn Taymiyya did not seek a single Islamic state from Marocco to Iraq; it was more important to him for every ruler to create conditions in which a Muslim could live in peace, faithful to the Koran. This problem still remains unresolved today. Millions of Muslims are at present dissatisfied with their governments, over 10 million live in Europe and moreover have no Islamic community where religion, politics, economics and society make up one entity as described in the Koran. (cf. Sura 3, 110)

### **Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406)**

If Ibn Taymiyya had drawn back from the Islamic single state of Al Mawardi, then Ibn Khaldūn, who was working in Tunis, Cairo und Damascus, did so even more clearly. He expressly recognizes that the Islamic

state shows numerous similarities to other states, for the caliphate is a weak successor to the prophet of early Islam, and many regional rulers have no legitimization from the caliphs. Some refer to the law of God and demand obedience from their subjects, while others use reason to pursue the interests of their subjects. Ibn Khaldūn developed a theory of linear unfolding of history - unusual for his time - based on sociological observation.

*"The remarkable thing about the lines of thought of the north African historian of the 14th century is the fact that he ignores all form of theological considerations in his theory." (KHOURY and others, 1991, p. 375)*  
It therefore seems strange that in all his rational analysis of historical processes, in the last instance he did not renounce a divine order.

*"In spite of all efforts, the uninterrupted continuation of a divine order is in Ibn Khaldun's analysis a wishful dream that remains unfulfilled. For other forces of the greatest effectiveness prevent the absolute claim of Islamic law from being the only possible foundation for community life. He is left with the hope that Islamic rulers will succeed in realizing as much of the divine law as possible." (KHOURY and others, 1991, p. 688)*

It looks as if it is not so much the Koran itself as the people who interpret it in their own way who are to blame for the Islamic world being left behind socially and economically. (T 1/31)

## Summary

For the second great challenge in the 19th. and 20<sup>th</sup>. centuries Islam was conceivably poorly prepared.

1. Islamic rulers until then reigned absolute, legitimized by God's investiture. Their obligation to the law of the Koran remained theoretical; in general the ruler was above the law.
2. Society was organized according to a strict hierarchy, and the strong emphasis on obedience to those in power meant little development of individual responsibility.
3. The so-called "Islamic enlightenment" was finally ended in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and any intrusion of philosophical language in the interpretation of the Koran prevented.
4. Philosophy, theology and science were reserved for a small intellectual élite, which led to a certain contempt for simple uneducated people and stopped further development of their language, i.e. it could not go beyond the vocabulary of the Koran.

When Rifa'a R. Tahtawi, a great Arab thinker of the 19th. century, was given the task in 1831 of translating political literature from Europe into Arabic, he first had to modernize the Arabic language.

*"He soon realized that it is not enough to introduce concepts lacking in Arabic by inventing new words in the language. How were the subjects of a despotic ruler to understand the concepts arising from a bourgeois-democratic revolution such as liberté, humanité, fraternité when these words had no substantial meaning in the society they lived in?" (TIBI, 1983, p. 112)*