Intellectual and Social Life of the Caliphate

HSTAFM 162
Class 3.2 (1/21/16)
The House of Wisdom
*(bayt al-ḥikma)*

- Began under the ‘Abbāsid Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809) and culminated under his son al-Ma’mūn (r. 813–833).

- Extensive translation efforts undertaken to translate Greek and Middle Persian texts into Arabic.

Bayt al-Ḥikma, from the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, from a manuscript dated 1237.
The Translator: Ibn al-Muqaffa‘

- Born in Gūr in Iran ca. 721 CE, died in Baṣra ca. 757 CE.
- Secretary and prose author of Persian descent; an apparent convert from Manichaeism.
- Translated several important works from Middle Persian; also wrote major works on ethics.
Kalīla wa-Dimna

Translated from Middle Persian into Arabic in 750 CE by Ibn al-Muqaffaʻ.
Then I thought about medicine and realized that a physician cannot give his patient a remedy which would heal his illness to such a degree that he would never again suffer from it, or from any other illness. Seeing that there is no guarantee against the same disease, or an even more serious one, recurring, I came to the conclusion that knowledge of the hereafter is the only thing which brings permanent salvation from all diseases. Thus, I came to hold medicine in contempt and to long for religious knowledge. But when I had come to this conclusion, I felt uncertainty concerning religion. I found nothing in my books of medical learning which could show men which religion was the true one. I found that there are many religions and creeds and that followers of these creeds differ one from the other. Some inherited their religion from their ancestors, others adopted it on account of fear and coercion, yet others hoped by means of it to acquire worldly goods, pleasures, and prestige.
But every one of them claims that his religion is the true and correct one and that whoever contradicts him lives in error and deception. Concerning the creator and what he created, the beginning and the end of the world, and other questions they have violently different opinions, but every one of them despises, opposes, and attacks the others. I decided to frequent the scholars and leaders in every religious faction and to examine what they teach and stipulate in the hope that perhaps I could learn to distinguish truth from falsehood and attach myself confidently to the truth without having to accept on the authority of others something that I could not know or understand by myself. I pursued this plan, investigated and studied. But I discovered that all of these people merely repeat what was handed down to them. Each one praises his own religion and curses the religion of those who disagree with him. It became clear to me that their conclusions are based on illusions and that their speech is not motivated by a sense of fairness. In not one of them did I find that degree of honesty and rightmindedness which would induce rational persons to accept their words and be satisfied with them...I have decided to limit myself to those deeds which all men recognize as good and which are in agreement with all religions.
The Philosopher: al-Kindī

- “Father of the philosophers”, lived ca. 801–873 CE.
- Patronized by the ‘Abbasid caliphs Ma‘mūn and al-Mu‘taṣim.
- Extraordinarily prolific author, writing on philosophy, astronomy, optics, medicine, chemistry, mathematics, and music theory.
- Synthesized Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic thought, which became the framework for Islamic philosophy.
al-Kindī on falsafa

On First Philosophy II.4: We must not be ashamed to admire the truth or to acquire it, from wherever it comes. Even if it should come from far-flung nations and foreign peoples, there is for the student of truth nothing more important than the truth, nor is the truth demeaned or diminished by the one who states or conveys it; no one is demeaned by the truth, rather all are ennobled by it.
al-Kindī on falsafa

On First Philosophy III.1–2: [We must] be on guard against the evil of the interpretation of many in our own time who have made a name for themselves with speculation, people who are estranged from the truth. They crown themselves undeservedly with the crowns of truth, because of the narrowness of their understanding of the ways of truth . . . [and] because of the filth of the envy that has mastered their bestial souls, whose veil of darkness cloaks the vision of their thought from the light of truth.
On First Philosophy III.5: We beseech Him who can see into our hearts—who knows our efforts towards establishing a proof of His divinity, making manifest His oneness, driving away those who stubbornly resist Him and do not believe in Him by using proofs that refute their unbelief and tear aside the veils of their shamefulness and declare openly the deficiencies of their destructive creed—to protect us and whoever follows our path with the fortification of His unceasing might, to dress us in the armor of His preserving shelter and grant us the aid of the edge of His piercing sword, and support through the might of His victorious strength, so that He may thereby let us reach the end of our intention in aiding the truth and supporting what is right, and so that He may thereby let us reach the degree of those whose intention is pleasing to Him, those whose action He approves, and those to whom He gives triumph and victory over His opponents who do not believe in His grace, and who contravene the path of truth that is pleasing to Him.
The Historian: al-Ṭabarī

- Born in Ṭabaristān in Iran in 839; died in Baghdad in 923 CE.
- Studied jurisprudence under Ibn Ḥanbal; became a sought-after tutor in Baghdad.
- Wrote the most influential early work of Islamic tārīkh (history), the Tārīkh al-Rusul waʾl-Mulūk, a universal history.
The *Xwadāy-nāmag*
The Jurist: al-Shāfiʻī

- Born in Gaza in Palestine in 767 CE, died in al-Fuṣṭāṭ in Egypt in 820 CE.
- Apprenticed under the jurist Mālik ibn Anas in Medina, where he gained the reputation of a brilliant jurist. More than 100 books are attributed to him.
- Developed an independent line of legal interpretation (*madhhab*) by 810 CE.
What is “Islamic Law”?

- Crime: theft, murder, slander.
- Transactions: buying, selling, interest.
- Family Law: marriage, divorce, inheritance
- Warfare: treaties, civilians.
- Ritual: how should I pray, do pilgrimage?
- Pleasing God: what acts please or do not please God?
- Boundaries of Community: what makes you Muslim or not?
Judging Actions

Required (\textit{wājib}): ex. five daily prayers

Recommended (\textit{mustaḥabb}): ex. extra charity

Permitted (\textit{mubāḥ}): ex. wearing a blue dress instead of a green one

Disliked (\textit{makrūḥ}): not returning the greeting of another Muslim

Prohibited (\textit{ḥarām}): drinking alcohol, fornication
How do we apply Quran and Sunna? The First two Centuries

**Principles applied in reasoning**
- Quran
- Reliable hadith
- Rulings of Companions
- Best judgment

**People of Reason**

**People of Hadith:**
- Quran
- Reliable Hadith
- Ruling of Companions
- Weak hadith
- analogy

**Companions**

**Sunna**

**Quran**

**INTERPRETATION**

**Texts to be followed literally**
Al-Shāfi‘ī’s Compromise

• Sources of the Law:
  • Qur’ān
  • Ḥadīth: sunna as texts to be applied literally
  • Ijmā‘: consensus
  • Analogy: applying Quran and hadith to similar situations
  • Rulings based on these can become consensus (ijmā‘)
Sunnī Schools of Law (madhāhib)

Hanafi: based on Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767) and his followers in Kufa, the official school of the Ottoman Empire, widespread in India

Mālikī: based on the teachings of Mālik b. Anas (d. 796) in Medina, the school of North African and Andalusia

Shāfi‘ī: based on the teachings of al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820), found in Egypt, Southeast Asia, Yemen

Hanbali: based on the teachings of Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), found in great numbers only in Arabia (and Syria)