

Heritage and Renewal between the Mashriq and the Maghrib:
The Debate between Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī on Islam and Secularism
in *Ḥiwār al-mashriq wa-al-maghrib*

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Abstract

The ‘heritage thinkers’ (*al-turāthiyyūn*) are a group of new religious thinkers who have undertaken a critical analysis of the Arab-Islamic heritage (*al-turāth*) by way of explaining a perceived Arab-Muslim decline and achieving renewal (*al-tajdīd*). This article is the first in-depth analysis of a major text in the history of heritage thought: the ‘Dialogue of the Mashriq and Maghrib’ (*Ḥiwār al-mashriq wa-al-maghrib*) between the Egyptian Ḥasan Ḥanafī (1935–2021) and the Moroccan Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī (1935–2010). After introducing the two thinkers and the text, we undertake a close reading of their debate on the relationship between Islam and secularism. We show that, in line with an argument developed by earlier generations of Muslim modernists, Ḥanafī and Jābirī argue that the most salient features of modernity are to be found in the Arab-Islamic heritage and that renewal can take place through a cognitive act of assent to that fact. They differ, however, on which dimensions of the heritage they deem the most fertile ground for *tajdīd*. Through a ‘naturalistic’ reading of the categories (*aḥkām*) of the divine law, Ḥanafī identifies theoretical jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) as the means for realizing an authentic ‘Islamic secularism’ that avoids Western secularism’s illegitimate bifurcation of religion and the world. By contrast, Jābirī uses the rationalist Maghribī historiographical tradition to argue that Islam has left the organization of the state to the independent judgement of Muslims. He proposes that by turning to the rationalist Maghribī tradition, which he regards as the historical basis of Western rationalism, Arab Muslims will be able to achieve an authentically Islamic modernity that embraces the liberal values of democracy, pluralism, and rationality and is consistent with contemporary needs. While Ḥanafī, then, seeks to uphold Arab-Islamic unity throughout the dialogue, Jābirī emerges as a partisan advocate for the perspective of the Maghrib.

Introduction

The *turāthiyyūn* (‘heritage thinkers’) are a group of ‘new Muslim intellectuals’,¹ who, since the 1970s,² have undertaken a critical analysis of the Arab-Islamic heritage (*al-turāth*) as a way of meeting the twin demands of ‘authenticity’ (*al-aṣālah*) and ‘contemporaneity’ (*al-mu‘āṣarah*) – or ‘tradition’ (*al-taqlīd*) and ‘modernity’ (*al-ḥadāthah*) – in response to the perceived intellectual, social, and political ‘crises’ (*azamāt*) facing the Arab-Muslim world in

¹ Carol Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (London: Hurst, 2011).

² Although the beginning of ‘heritage thinking’ is difficult to pin down with precision, it is often said to have been initiated at two academic conferences that took place in the Arab world in the early 1970s, one on ‘Authenticity and Renewal in Contemporary Arab Culture’ in Cairo in 1971, and another on ‘The Crisis of Civilizational Development in the Arab Homeland’ in Kuwait in 1974. See Armando Salvatore, ‘The Rational Authentication of *Turāth* in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muḥammad al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī’, *The Muslim World* LXXXV, nos 3–4 (1995), 191–214; 198–199; Elizabeth Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 117–120, 121–150; Carol Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues* (London: Routledge, 2019), 18; Harald Viersen, *The Time of Turāth: Authenticity and Temporality in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter, 2024), chapter 2.

the latter part of the twentieth century.³ Though often presented as a response to the psychologically devastating defeat by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War,⁴ in both their concern with the reasons for perceived Arab-Muslim ‘decline’ in the face of Western progress⁵ (the so-called ‘What went wrong?’ question, also known as ‘the question of the age’ [*su’āl al-‘aṣr*]),⁶ and in their belief that an answer to that question involves critical reflection on the Islamic intellectual tradition, these thinkers stand in a longer line of Islamic reformist thought that goes back at least to the Islamic modernists Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), and their immediate successors.⁷ Indeed, many heritage thinkers, including one of the two treated in this article, explicitly position themselves as heirs to those earlier reformers.⁸ As we shall see, in claiming that the best of Western modernity is to be found in the Arab-Islamic heritage, the *turāthiyyūn* also

³ Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World*, 18–19. See also Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 13, noting Salvatore’s description of the *turāthiyyūn* as ‘heritage advocates’. The hyphenated phrase ‘Arab-Muslim world’ is used to reflect the fact that the heritage thinkers often elide the contemporary ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ situation. As Cemil Aydin has argued, the idea of a unified ‘Muslim world’ emerged simultaneously with the rise of European imperialism in the nineteenth century. See Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

⁴ For the Six-Day War as a watershed in modern Arabic thought, see Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 2; Meir Hatina and Christoph Schumann (eds.), *Arab Liberal Thought after 1967: Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2015); Meir Hatina, *Arab Liberal Thought in the Modern Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). For heritage thought as a response to the 1967 defeat, see Salvatore, ‘Rational Authentication’, 194; Hamarneh, ‘Introduction’, xix; Carol Kersten, ‘Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Introduction to His Life and Work’, in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse: Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini*, translated by Jonathan Wright (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 1–22: 2.

⁵ The rise of the West, and the concomitant decline of the Muslim world, was famously described by Marshall Hodgson as ‘the great Western Transmutation’. According to Hodgson, the rise of technical specialization in Europe meant not only that ‘by about 1800, the Occidental peoples (together with the Russians) found themselves in a position to dominate overwhelmingly most of the rest of the world – and, in particular, to dominate the lands of Islamdom’, but also that ‘all peoples had to adjust their governments to a modern European international political order; but also to adjust their economies – a harder task – to the competition of technically industrialized Europe; and finally to adjust their mental outlook to the challenge of modern science as studied in Europe’. Marshall Hodgson, ‘The Great Western Transmutation’, in Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44–71: 44–45.

⁶ The ‘What went wrong?’ question is exemplified in the title of a famous 1930 book by the Islamic modernist and pan-Islamist thinker Shakīb Arslān (d. 1946), ‘Why have the Muslims fallen behind while others progressed (*limādha ta’akhhara al-muslimūn wa-taqaddama ghayruhum*)?’ Notably, this book began life as a series of articles first published in Rashīd Riḍā’s journal *al-Manār*. See Amir Shakib Arslān, *Our Decline and its Causes*, trans. M.A. Shakoor (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1944). The expression ‘the question of the age’ is used by Muḥammad ‘Imārah (d. 2020) in his study of the Egyptian reformer ‘Abd Allāh al-Nadīm (d. 1896), who, ‘Imārah notes, anticipated Shakīb Arslān’s framing of the question in terms of Islamic decline and European progress. See Muḥammad ‘Imārah, *Bi-mā taqaddama al-ūrūbiyyūn wa-ta’akhharnā wa-al-khalq wāḥid* (Cairo: Dār al-Bashīr li-al-thaqāfah wa-al-‘ulūm, 2016).

⁷ Amir Dziri, *Tradition und Diskurs: Wandel als Möglichkeit islamischer Hermeneutik* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 53–54. See also Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 259.

⁸ Yasmeen Daifallah, ‘Turath as Critique: Hassan Hanafi on the Modern Arab Subject’, in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (eds.), *Arabic Thought Against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2018), 285–310: 287–288. Jābirī’s relationship to the earlier modernists is more complicated. He refers to the ‘What went wrong?’ question as ‘the Nahda question’ (*al-su’āl al-nahḍawī*), and regards ‘the problematic of authenticity and contemporaneity’ (*ishkāliyyat al-aṣālah wa-l-mu’āsarah*) that arises from it as the key issue in contemporary Arab thought. In this way, as Harald Viersen observes, he ‘emphasizes the link between the ideals and problematics of the nahḍa and the later philosophical discourse in the Arab world’, while at the same time ‘suggesting that it is a problematic that Arabs should overcome’. Viersen, *The Time of Turāth*, 19, 74.

recapitulate the essential argument of the Muslim modernists.⁹ Where they differ from their predecessors is in their self-conscious and extensive engagement with the concept of *turāth*, a concept which the earlier reformers rarely seem to have used.¹⁰

At the same time, heritage thinking is also commonly depicted as a counter-narrative to the so-called ‘Islamic Awakening’ (*al-ṣaḥwah al-islāmiyyah*) of the 1970s and 80s, which was driven by Islamist groups of which the heritage thinkers are often sharply critical.¹¹ In the view of the *turāthiyyīn*, the Arab-Islamic heritage is not limited either to the religion of the ‘pious predecessors’ (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) of the early generations of Islamic history (as it typically is for Salafists and Islamists),¹² or to the ‘traditional’ Islam represented by the four Sunni schools of law, the Ash‘arī and Matūrīdī schools of theology, or the Sufi orders (as it is for neo-traditionalists),¹³ but includes intellectual traditions that have been, to a greater or lesser extent, marginalized within the mainstream Sunni tradition, including Aristotelian philosophy (*falsafah*), Mu‘tazilī *kalām*, Ismā‘īlī Shī‘ism, and the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn ‘Arabī and his school.¹⁴ By concentrating on the heritage, the *turāthiyyūn* aim to establish the authenticity (*al-aṣālah*) of their projects within the context of the Arab-Islamic past, while avoiding what they regard as the problematic features of the Islamist approach (for instance, its authoritarianism, exclusivism, and romanticization of the formative Islamic period), as well as slavish imitation of Western liberal modernism (which, they think, cannot simply be transposed to the Arab-Islamic context) and uncritical emulation of the mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition (which, owing to its ossification at some point in the medieval period, does not hold the answers, so they believe, to contemporary problems).

Most importantly, in formulating their answer to the ‘What went wrong?’ question, heritage thinkers, adopting and developing an idea introduced by the earlier modernist reformers, argue that the best and most salient features of Western modernity are in fact to be found within the heritage itself. In their view, ‘what went wrong’ was that these ‘modern’ elements of the heritage have historically been marginalized by the mainstream Sunni tradition, and conversely have been taken up by the West. On this account, ‘renewal’ (*tajdīd*) involves recovering and restoring the modern elements of the heritage, which are not simply an empirical phenomenon of the past or a set of texts amenable to historical analysis, but a

⁹ As Marshall Hodgson observes, earlier reformers such as ‘Abduh and, in the South Asian context, Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) and Abū al-A‘lā al-Mawdūdī (d. 1979) likewise attempted ‘to develop the Islamic heritage in terms of Modernity’. Marshall Hodgson, ‘Modernity and the Islamic Heritage’, in Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, 207–244: 233.

¹⁰ The beginning of this focus on the *turāth* as a concept is difficult to pin down with precision. See Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 31, n. 58; Salvatore, ‘Rational Authentication’, 193. The term *turāth*, for instance, only appears once in Shakīb Arslān’s famous text referred to in footnote 6. See Shakīb Arslān, *Limādhā ta’akhhara al-muslimūn wa-limādhā taqaddama ghayruhum?* (Doha: Wizārat al-thaqāfah wa-al-funūn wa-al-turāth, 2015), 45.

¹¹ Salvatore, ‘Rational Authentication’, 194–195; Kersten, ‘Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’, 2–3.

¹² Salafis understand the period of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* ‘to have started with the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad (ca. 610) and to have ended around the time of Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s death (855)’. Bernard Haykel, ‘On the Nature of Salafi thought and Action’, in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34–57: 38–39. ‘Abduh, by contrast, ‘uses [the term] more generally to refer to the central tradition of Sunni Islam in its period of development’. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 149.

¹³ For the Salafist and neo-traditionalist idealization of these aspects of the heritage, see Masooda Bano (ed.), *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change. Volume 1, Evolving Debates in Muslim-Majority Countries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Masooda Bano (ed.), *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change. Volume 2, Evolving Debates in the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Walaa Quisay, *Neo-Traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodoxy, Spirituality and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 37.

metahistorical reality awaiting rediscovery in the minds of contemporary Arab-Muslims and, thereafter, concrete manifestation in the world. This act of rediscovery is the goal of the *turāthiyyūn*.

Among the heritage thinkers of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, leading figures include the Egyptian Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010), an advocate of a critical hermeneutics of the Qur'an inspired by the scriptural exegesis of the Mu'tazilah and Ibn 'Arabī.¹⁵ Another key figure is the Algerian Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010), whose 'applied Islamology' makes use of methods drawn from the modern human and social sciences (including the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida) to undertake a 'critique of Islamic reason'.¹⁶ Also of note is the Tunisian Mohamed Talbi (d. 2017), a historian of medieval North Africa who advocated an Islamic religious pluralism and regarded the North African philosopher of history Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) as a 'pioneer of modernity' before modernity itself.¹⁷

In this article, we focus on the thought of two other leading heritage thinkers of the same period, the Egyptian Ḥasan Ḥanafī (1935–2021) and the Moroccan Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī (1935–2010). While these thinkers have been the subject of several important studies,¹⁸ little scholarly attention has been paid to *Ḥiwār al-mashriq wa-al-maghrib* ('The Dialogue of the Mashriq and the Maghrib'), a book published in 1990 based on a series of exchanges that took place between Ḥanafī and Jābirī in the pages of *al-Yawm al-Sābi'* (The Seventh Day), a pan-Arab weekly published from Paris,¹⁹ between March and November of the previous year.²⁰ After introducing the text and the two participants in the dialogue, this paper explores their thinking on 'heritage and renewal' in the context of their debate on the relationship between Islam and secularism in chapter three of the text.²¹ Through this case study, we show how both thinkers echo the earlier modernists in advocating renewal through a return to what they take to be the 'modern' dimensions of the Arab-Islamic heritage, and differ from one another mainly in respect of which dimensions of the heritage they deem to be modern. While

¹⁵ Katajun Amirpur, *New Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Democracy, Freedom, and Women's Rights* (London: Gingko, 2015), 35–65; Nadia Oweidat, *Reform and its Perils in Contemporary Islam: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

¹⁶ Carool Kersten, 'From Braudel to Derrida: Mohammed Arkoun's Rethinking of Islam and Religion', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4, no. 1 (2011): 23–43.

¹⁷ Ronald L. Nettler, 'Mohamed Talbi's Theory of Religious Pluralism: A Modernist Islamic Outlook', *The Maghreb Review* 24, nos 3–4 (1999), 98–107; Fitzroy Morrissey and Ronald L. Nettler, 'Mohamed Talbi's Discussion of Ibn Khaldūn as the "Pioneer of Reason and Modernity"', *The Maghreb Review* 47, no. 3 (2022), 260–291.

¹⁸ Daifallah, 'Turath as Critique'; John Esposito and John O. Voll, 'Hasan Hanafi: The Classic Intellectual', in *idem.*, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68–90; Thomas Hildebrandt, *Emanzipation oder Isolation vom westlichen Lehrer?: die Debatte um Ḥasan Ḥanafīs "Einführung in die Wissenschaft der Okzidentalistik"* (Berlin: K. Swartz, 1998); Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*; Josep Puig Montada, 'Hasan Hanafi and "The Indissoluble Bond" between Heritage and Renewal', *Studia Islamica* 118 (2023), 104–127; Martin Riexinger, 'Nasserism Revitalized: A Critical Reading of Hasan Hanafi's Projects "The Islamic Left" and "Occidentalism" (and their Uncritical Reading)', *Die Welt des Islams* 47, no. 1 (2007), 63–118; Salvatore, "Rational Authentication"; Zaid Eyadat, Francesca M. Corrao, and Mohammed Hashas (eds.), *Islam, State, and Modernity: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Future of the Arab World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

¹⁹ Aya Khalil, 'Sociohistoire d'*al-Yawm al-sābi'*: une revue panarabe en exil (1984-1991)', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 152 (2022), 163–182.

²⁰ Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār al-mashriq wa-l-maghrib: nahwa i'ādat al-fikr al-qawmī al-'arabī* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'arabiyyah li-al-dirāsāt wa-al-nashr, 1990).

²¹ We plan to undertake a further case study of chapter five of the *Ḥiwār*, on liberalism, in a future article for *The Maghreb Review*.

Ḥanafī finds what he deems to be the ‘secular’ values of modernity in the *uṣūl al-fiqh* tradition, Jābirī locates modern rationalism and pluralism in Maghribī historiography.

Hasan Ḥanafī and Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī: Life, Work, and Heritage Thought

a. Ḥanafī:

A graduate of Cairo University, where he studied under the philosopher, and disciple of ‘Abduh, ‘Uthmān Amīn (1905–1978), Ḥasan Ḥanafī spent the ten years from 1956 to 1966 as a doctoral student at the Sorbonne, receiving a *doctorat d’état* for a three-part thesis on phenomenology and exegesis that was supervised by Paul Ricoeur. Returning to Egypt, in 1967 he became professor of philosophy at Cairo University, where he remained for the rest of his long career, with the exception of periods as a visiting professor in Belgium (1970), the United States (1971–1975), Kuwait (1979), Morocco (1982–1984), Japan (1984–1985), and the United Arab Emirates (1985).²²

A prolific writer and public speaker who described himself as an ‘engaged scholar’ (*‘ālim multazim*),²³ Ḥanafī’s intellectual output combined writing and lecturing on philosophical, religious, and cultural topics, on the one hand, and the development of a political ideology that he termed ‘the Islamic left’ (*al-yasār al-islāmī*), on the other.²⁴ As a philosopher trained in the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Ḥanafī produced studies of Western philosophers including Spinoza, Feuerbach, Vico, and Hegel; the New Testament and the Qur’an; and multiple aspects of the Islamic intellectual heritage, including the traditional religious sciences connected to the Qur’an, Hadith, and the biography of the Prophet, and the Islamic jurisprudential, theological, philosophical, and mystical traditions.²⁵ His early doctoral work, in which he sought ‘to extrapolate a general Islamic method for philosophical investigations’, primarily through a reinterpretation of the tradition of Islamic theoretical jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) that he had studied with the orientalist Robert Brunschvig and Louis Massignon, paved the way for his major cultural-philosophical endeavour, which he termed the ‘Heritage and Renewal’ (*al-turāth wa-al-tajdīd*) project.²⁶ The most important statement of this project is Ḥanafī’s book *al-Turāth wa-al-tajdīd: mawqifunā min al-turāth al-qadīm* (‘Tradition and Renewal: Our Standpoint towards the Pre-Modern Tradition’), which was first published in 1980.

In that book, Ḥanafī explains that, correctly understood, the heritage is an expression of a ‘living reality’, always adapting to the present age and expressing its spirit, insofar as it consists of ‘a group of interpretations that are made by every generation, building on their

²² Hildebrandt, *Emanzipation*, 10–13.

²³ Riexinger, ‘Nasserism Revitalized’, 66.

²⁴ See Kazuyo Shimogaki, *Between Modernity and Post-Modernity: The Islamic Left and Dr. Hasan al-Hanafī’s Thought* (Japan: The International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies: International University of Japan, 1988); Oweidat, *Reforms and its Perils*, 79–80. *Al-Yasār al-islāmī* was the title of a journal that Ḥanafī founded, which ran for just one issue. Ḥanafī regarded the Islamic left as a union of the ‘four national currents’ (*al-tayyārāt al-waṭaniyya al-arba‘a*) that had defined the political history of modern Egypt, namely liberalism, Marxism, Nasserism, and ‘the Islamic movement’ (*al-ḥaraka al-islāmiyya*). Riexinger, ‘Nasserism Revitalized’, 68.

²⁵ For a list of Ḥanafī’s major writings, see Montada, ‘Hasan Hanafi’.

²⁶ Kersten *Contemporary Thought*, 33. See also Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 120 and 131, where he notes that Ḥanafī translates ‘ilm *uṣūl al-fiqh* as ‘the science of the foundations of understanding’, thus pointing to its potential as a general philosophical methodology. For more on the early Ḥanafī’s conception of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, see Carool Kersten, ‘Bold Transmutations: Rereading Hasan Hanafi’s Early Writings on *Fiqh*’, *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2007), 22–38.

[contemporary] requirements'. The concept of the 'living reality' (*al-wāqī'*), it should be noted, is a central organizing principle in Ḥanafī's thought, as it is for several modern Muslim thinkers, denoting, in a sense, the criterion by which all forms of religion, thought, or heritage should be judged.²⁷ This adaptability of the heritage to living reality, he asserts, is permitted by the fundamental sources (*al-uṣūl al-ūlā*) – that is, the Qur'an and Sunnah – on which the heritage is based.²⁸ Being an expression of living reality, the heritage is not simply 'a defence of what has been inherited from the past (*difā'^{an} 'an al-mawrūth al-qadīm*)', nor is it merely a collection of texts, and its renewal (*tajdīd*) is necessary in order for it to continue to exist.²⁹

Having established this conceptual framework, Ḥanafī criticizes Islamic theology, philosophy, and Sufism for having effected a separation, in Arab-Islamic thought, between reason (*al- 'aql*) and living reality (*al-wāqī'*), with the damaging result that Islam has failed to adapt to changing conditions and its heritage has failed to be (adequately) renewed.³⁰ Among the major intellectual disciplines of the premodern Islamic heritage, only theoretical jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) managed to escape the separation between reason and reality that befell the other disciplines. It is this connection to living reality that makes *uṣūl al-fiqh*, in Ḥanafī's view, the basis for an authentically Islamic 'method for philosophical investigations', that is, an indigenous Islamic phenomenology. Even though *uṣūl al-fiqh*, too, in Ḥanafī's account, ended up in a state of rigidity (*thabāt*), in which blind emulation (*taqlid*) and purely theoretical discussions were the norm, the recognition of its original 'phenomenological' form remains the most effective path to renewal.³¹

b. Jābirī

A onetime political activist for the Union socialiste des forces populaires, whose founder, Mehdi ben Barka (1920–65), was one of his early mentors, in his youth al-Jābirī studied philosophy in Damascus and Rabat, before becoming a schoolteacher, the author of widely-read school textbooks on Islamic thought and philosophy, and latterly a university lecturer at the University of Muhammad V in Rabat. As a left-wing activist, he was briefly imprisoned in 1963 on suspicion of conspiring against the Moroccan state, and contributed to socialist political journals.³² In 1971, he completed a doctoral thesis on Ibn Khaldūn in which he sought to apply the North African philosopher of history to 'our contemporary Arab reality'

²⁷ Ḥanafī's position is close to that ascribed by the Egyptian writer Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn (d. 1977) to the High Priest Caiaphas in his novel *Qariyah zālimah*: '...reform (*al-iṣlāḥ*) is most likely to succeed when it keeps close to actuality (*al-wāqī'*)'. See Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn, *Qariyah zālimah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Uṣrah, 1997), 72–73; M. Kamel Hussein, *City of Wrong: A Friday in Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994), 72. For the concept of 'the jurisprudence of reality' (*fiqh al-wāqī'*) in contemporary Islamic reformist thought, see Rezart Beka, 'The Jurisprudence of Reality (Fiqh al-Wāqī') in Contemporary Islamic Thought: A Comparative Study of the Discourse of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022), Nāṣir al-'Umar (b.1952), and Abdullah Bin Bayyah (b.1935)' (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2022).

²⁸ Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *al-Turāth wa-al-tajdīd: mawqifunā min al-turāth al-qadīm*, 4th edition (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-jāmi'iyyah li-al-dirāsāt wa-al-nashr wa-al-tawzī', 1992), 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19. Elsewhere, Ḥanafī criticizes contemporary Arab Muslims for having 'adopted the orientalist view of the ancient heritage, as if we are observers of it, rather than its possessors'. Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Dirāsāt falsafiyyah* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Anjalū al-Miṣriyyah, 1987), 13.

³⁰ Ḥanafī, *al-Turāth wa-al-tajdīd*, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³² For al-Jābirī's life, see Walid Hamarneh, 'Introduction', in Mohammed 'Abed al-Jabri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Critique*, translated by Aziz Abbasi (Austin: Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1999), vii–xix.

(*wāqī' inā al-'arabī al-rāhin*) by examining his answer to the 'What went wrong?' question: 'Why did Arab-Islamic civilization collapse after it had attained such greatness and glory?'³³

In the early 1980s, Jābirī retired from political activism to focus on cultural-philosophical critique. The most important result of this intellectual activity is the four-volumes that make up his 'Critique of Arab Reason' (*naqd al-'aql al-'arabī*) project: *Takwīn al-'aql al-'arabī* ('The Formation of Arab Reason', 1984), *Bunyāt al-'aql al-'arabī* ('The Structure of Arab Reason', 1986), *al-'Aql al-siyāsī al-'arabī* ('Arab Political Reason', 1990), and *al-'Aql al-akhlāqī al-'arabī* ('Arab Moral Reason', 2001).³⁴ Another significant contribution to heritage thought is *Naḥnu wa-al-turāth* ('Us and the Heritage'), a collection of articles on Islamic philosophy published in 1980.³⁵ Later in his career he turned to the hermeneutics of the Qur'an, publishing, in 2006, *Madkhal ilā al-Qur'ān* ('An Introduction to the Qur'ān') and, in 2008, an exegesis of the Qur'an in which he rearranged its *sūrah*s chronologically.³⁶

Particularly in the 'Critique of Arab Reason' project, Jābirī's major focus has been on epistemology. In *Takwīn al-'aql al-'arabī*, he engages in a critical analysis of the 'epistemological systems' (*nuḥum ma'rifiyyah*) that he believes have constituted Arab-Islamic thought since 'the age of codification' (*al-'aṣr al-tadwīnī*), the period between roughly the mid-8th and mid-10th centuries AD when the intellectual disciplines were turned into systematic sciences. Jābirī lays the blame for Arab-Islamic weakness at the door of two of these epistemological systems, which he believes have taken a particularly strong hold over Arab reason.³⁷ These are, first, 'the system of explication' (*al-niḥām al-bayānī*), which relies principally on analogical reasoning (*al-qiyās*) and is characteristic of the science of Arabic grammar (*al-naḥw*), and religious sciences such as jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*), theology (*al-kalām*), and Qur'anic exegesis, and, second, 'the system of gnosticism' (*al-niḥām al-'irfānī*), the method of supra-rational mystical experience, which was inherited from Greek hermeticism and Neoplatonism and Persian gnosticism, and is characteristic, as he sees it, of Sufism, Shi'ism, the Brethren of Purity, and Avicennian philosophy.³⁸ Jābirī is particularly disparaging about this 'gnostic' system, which he associates with the 'resignation' (*istiḳālah*)

³³ Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, *Fikr Ibn Khaldūn: al-'aṣabiyyah wa-al-dawlah: ma'ālim khaldūniyyah naẓariyyah fī al-tārīkh al-islāmī*, sixth edition (Beirut: Markaz dirāsāt al-waḥdah al-'arabiyyah, 1994), 10–11. See also Massimo Campanini, 'Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and Ibn Khaldun: A Path to Modernity', in Zaid Eyadat, Francesca M. Corrao, and Mohammed Hashas (eds.), *Islam, State, and Modernity: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Future of the Arab World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 25–40.

³⁴ Abdou Filali-Ansari identifies these volumes as 'one of the "classics" of contemporary Arab thought'. Abdou Filali-Ansari, 'Can Modern Rationality Shape a New Religiosity? Mohamed Abed Jabri and the Paradox of Islam and Modernity', in John Cooper, Ronald Nettle, and Mohamed Mahmoud (eds.), *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 156–171: 156. Jābirī's 'critique of Arab reason' project was itself famously subjected to a 'critique' by the Syrian intellectual Georges Tarabichi (1939–2016). See Abdul Karim Barghouti, Jamal Daher, and Nadim Mseis, 'The Critique of Arab Reason Between al-Jabri and Tarabishi', in Zaid Eyadat, Francesca M. Corrao, and Mohammed Hashas (eds.), *Islam, State, and Modernity: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Future of the Arab World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 41–64.

³⁵ Some of these essays can be found in French and English translation. See Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri, *Introduction à la critique de la raison arabe*, trans. Ahmed Mahfoud and Marc Geoffroy (Paris: La Découverte, 1994); Muḥammad 'Ābid Jābirī, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Contemporary Critique* (Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1999).

³⁶ Mariangela Laviano, 'Al-Jabri and His Introduction to the Qur'ān', in Zaid Eyadat, Francesca M. Corrao, and Mohammed Hashas (eds.), *Islam, State, and Modernity: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and the Future of the Arab World* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 109–125.

³⁷ See Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, *Takwīn al-'aql al-'Arabī*, 5th edition (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 1991); Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

of the Arab intellect and blames for the ‘self-absorption (*al-inkimāsh*), backwardness (*al-tarāju*), and decline (*al-inḥiṭāt*)’ which, he thinks, have characterized Arab-Islamic thought since the medieval period.³⁹

By contrast, Jābirī takes inspiration from ‘the system of demonstration’ (*al-nizām al-burhānī*), the method of logical reasoning that is characteristic of Arab-Islamic Aristotelian philosophy (*al-falsafah*), particularly in the Maghrib and al-Andalus.⁴⁰ While the Mashriq, as he sees it, became mired in the ‘a-rationalism’ (*al-lā-mā qūliyyah*) of the Sufi and Avicennian gnostic system, the Maghrib managed to preserve the Aristotelian method of rational demonstration. This process, he explains in *Naḥnu wa-al-turāth*, reached its culmination with the Andalusian *ḥayyūf* Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (d. 1198), who, through his ‘realistic, critical, [and] rationalistic’ philosophical discourse, ‘freed himself intellectually from the epistemological apparatus’ of Eastern gnosticism.⁴¹ Those who still attempt to cling to the gnostic ideological vision of Ibn Sīnā after Ibn Rushd’s refutation of it, Jābirī explains, ‘live their (intellectual) lives outside of history’. This, in fact, is what has occurred in the Arab world, in al-Jābirī’s view; hence the Arabs fell into ‘ossification and decline’ (*jumūd wa-inḥiṭāt*), while the Europeans, ‘who took Ibn Rushd from us’, flourished.⁴² Jābirī writes in this context of ‘the Averroist spirit’ (*al-rūḥ al-rushdiyyah*), which he defines as the rejection of Avicennian ‘gnosticism’, a rationalist perspective on the relationship between religion and philosophy, and an attempt to connect the heritage to ‘global contemporary thought’.⁴³ He likens it to the ‘Cartesian spirit’ that defines French philosophical thought and the ‘Humean spirit’ which has dominated English thinking. It is this ‘Averroist spirit’, he concludes, that contemporary Arabs need to recover, for ‘the Averroist spirit is acceptable to our age, because it agrees with its spirit in more than one respect – in its rationalism, realism, axiomatic perspective, and critical engagement’.⁴⁴ The path to renewal, in other words, lies in contemporary Arab Muslims abandoning their attachment to the ‘gnostic’ Mashriqī heritage and instead embodying the rationalist ‘Averroist spirit’ of the Maghribī heritage.

Heritage and Renewal in *Ḥiwār al-mashriq wa-al-maghrib*

a. Overview:

Jābirī’s partisanship for the Maghribī dimension of the Arab-Islamic heritage seems to be at the root of the decision by the publishers of the *Ḥiwār* to frame the dialogue with Ḥanafī as a debate between the Mashriq and Maghrib. For his part, Ḥanafī indicates his discomfort with this framing, his rejection of Jābirī’s partisan distinction between a rationalist Maghrib and a

³⁸ See esp. *ibid.*, chapter 6, section 2, and chapter 9, section 2. The identification of Avicennian philosophy as ‘gnostic’ or ‘mystical’, it should be noted, contradicts the prevailing view in contemporary Avicennian scholarship, for which see Dmitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna’s Philosophical Works*, 2nd edition (Leiden: Brill, 2014), esp. 343–346.

³⁹ Al-Jābirī, *Fikr Ibn Khaldūn*, 278–279.

⁴⁰ For *burhān* and its centrality to the Andalusian Aristotelian philosophical tradition, see George F. Hourani, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy: A Translation, with Introduction and Notes, of Ibn Rushd’s Kitāb fasl al-maḥāl* (London: Luzac, 1976), 20; Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 2nd edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 92, 93; Jābirī, *Takwīn al-‘aql al-‘arabī*, p. 313ff. Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *Bunyāt al-‘aql al-‘arabī: dirāsah taḥlīliyyah naqdīyyah li-nuzum al-ma‘rifah fī al-thaqāfah al-‘Arabīyah*, 3rd edition (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 1993), 528ff.

⁴¹ Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa-al-turāth: qirā‘āt mu‘āṣirah fī turāthinā al-falsafī*, 5th edition (Beirut: al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-‘arabī, 1993), 43.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

‘gnostic’ Mashriq, and his disavowal of the Mashriq-Maghrib division more generally.⁴⁵ For Ḥanafī, by contrast, the unity (*waḥdah*) of the Arab-Muslim world is a core political principle; indeed, he interprets the fundamental Islamic doctrine of *tawḥīd* (the declaration of God’s unity) as a call for the ‘unity of the nation’ (*waḥdat al-ummah*) in the face of imperialist division (*al-tajzi’ah*), an interpretation which reflects his self-conscious indebtedness to the ‘pan-Islamic’ reformist project of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī.⁴⁶

This perspective is captured in his contribution to the first chapter of the dialogue. Ḥanafī begins that chapter with a critique of the well-known Hadith of the ‘saved sect’ (*al-firqah al-nājiyah*). According to this Hadith, which is particularly popular among Salafi groups, the Muslim community will be divided into seventy-three sects, only one of which will be saved.⁴⁷ According to Ḥanafī, this Hadith is ‘the worst thing that has harmed us’, since it has inculcated among Muslims an attitude of exclusivism (*aḥādīyyat al-ṭaraf*) and mutual accusations of treachery and infidelity (*al-takfīr wa-al-takhwīn al-mutabādalayn*) and thereby caused disunity.⁴⁸

Continuing on the same theme, Ḥanafī goes on to identify seven major requirements (*taṭallubāt*) or challenges (*taḥādīyyāt*) for the Arab-Muslim world in the context of ‘our contemporary reality (*wāqi’ unā al-rāhin*)’, one of which is ‘unity in the face of division (*al-waḥdah fī muqābil al-tajzi’ah*)’.⁴⁹ Such division, including the division between Mashriq and Maghrib, he believes, ‘is one of our tragedies’, and is a result of colonialism.⁵⁰ In what appears to be a criticism of Jābirī’s position – though one which Ḥanafī also applies to other thinkers from the Arab West, such as the Tunisian historian Hichem Djaït (1935–2021)⁵¹ – he argues that those in the present generation who posit a clear break (*qaṭī’ah*) between a naturalistic, scientific, rationalist Maghrib and a religious, illuminationist (*ishrāqī*), and

⁴⁵ Unity between the Mashriq and the Maghrib, established through dialogue (*hiwār*) between a thinker representing each region, is the intended aim of Ḥanafī’s review of the Tunisian historian Hichem Djaït’s *La personnalité et le devenir arabo-islamiques* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), the Arabic version of which was published in the University of Kuwait’s *al-Majallah al-‘arabiyyah li-al-‘ulūm al-insāniyyah* in 1987. ‘It is only the desire for dialogue between Arab thinkers’, he writes, ‘and to establish bridges between the neighbouring Arab regions and to tie bonds of connection between the two wings of the Arab world in the Mashriq and the Maghrib that impelled me to this aim [sc. to review Djaït’s book]’. Ḥanafī, *Dirāsāt falsafīyyah*, 228.

⁴⁶ Ḥanafī, *Dirāsāt falsafīyyah*, 21. This indebtedness is visibly shown by the fact that al-Afghānī’s picture appears on the front cover of the sole issue of Ḥanafī’s journal *al-Yasār al-islāmī*.

⁴⁷ For this tradition, see Ignaz Goldziher, ‘Le dénombrement des sectes mohamétanes’, *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 26 (1892), 129–137. For the Salafi use of the Hadith, see Yasir Qadhi, *Understanding Salafism: Seeking the Path of the Pious Predecessors* (London: Oneworld, 2025), 12–13.

⁴⁸ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Hiwār*, 7.

⁴⁹ The seven challenges are: 1) The liberation of the land (*tahrīr al-arḍ*) (meaning, principally, Palestine); 2) Public freedoms (*al-ḥurriyyāt al-‘āmmah*); 3) Social justice (*al-‘adālah al-ijtimā’iyyah*); 4) Unity in the face of division (*al-waḥdah fī muqābil al-tajzi’ah*); 5) Identity in opposition to Westernization (*al-huwiyyah fī muqābil al-taḡhrīb*); 6) Progress in the face of backwardness (*al-taqaddum fī muwājahat al-takhalluf*); 7) Mobilizing the masses against apathy (*tajnīd al-jamāhīr ḍidd al-lāmubālāh*). See al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Hiwār*, 12–14; Ḥanafī, *Dirāsāt falsafīyyah*, 42–47; Riexinger, ‘Nasserism Revitalized’, 67–68.

⁵⁰ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Hiwār*, 12.

⁵¹ See Ḥanafī, *Dirāsāt falsafīyyah*, 238: ‘The author [Djaït] adopts this erroneous concept, which has spread through the regions of the Arab West, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia, and subsequently in Libya and Algeria, of the particularity of the Arab West in relation to the Arab East. The Maghrib [according to this concept] is rationalist while the Mashriq is mystical; the Maghrib is traditionalist while the Mashriq is creative; the Maghrib is scientific while the Mashriq is religious ...’. For Djaït’s biography and approach to the study of the formative period of Islamic history, see Nicolai Sinai, ‘Hisham Djaït über die “Geschichtlichkeit der Verkündigung Muhammads”’, *Der Islam* 86, no. 1 (2011), 30...42. For his intellectual project more generally, see Idriss Jebari, ‘The production of critical thought in the Maghrib: Abdallah Laroui and Hichem Djaït (1965–1978)’ (DPhil dissertation, University of Oxford, 2015).

mystical Mashriq, thus making the Maghrib closer to the modern West, go to an extreme and undermine the unity and independence of the Arab world.⁵² What is needed instead, he says, is a ‘united national programme of action’ (*barnāmaj ‘amal waṭanī muwaḥḥad*), where the term *waṭan*, as in Arab nationalist discourse, refers to the Arab world as a whole. Such a programme, Ḥanafī suggests, is achievable, since the present generation contains many thinkers from both the Mashriq and Maghrib who have been able to put forward intellectual projects that engage with the lived reality (*al-wāqi‘*) of the Arab world and the quest for liberation (*al-taḥarrur*), independence (*al-istiqlāl*), social change (*al-taghayyur al-ijtimā‘ī*), and revolution (*al-thawrah*), which are common to both regions. The dialogue with Jābirī, he hopes, might be a further contribution to the unification of the Arab world.⁵³

By contrast, Jābirī is happy to take on the role of representative of the Maghrib in the dialogue. In his contribution to the first chapter of the *Ḥiwār*, he attempts to complicate Ḥanafī’s picture of a united Arab world, and, insofar as he accepts the existence of a single Arab-Islamic civilization, to bring to the centre of that civilization the Maghribī perspective, which he believes has historically been misunderstood and marginalized by the Mashriq. His notion of Arab-Islamic unity is of a complex, differentiated unity, in which regional particularities are maintained, in contrast to Ḥanafī’s assumption that the Arab-Islamic world is ‘naturally’ unified and has only been divided as a result of Western interference. Jābirī acknowledges the existence of some form of Arab-Islamic unity as a way of responding to Ḥanafī’s statement that ‘some among us’ in the Maghrib have postulated a break (*qaṭī‘ah*) between the Mashriq and the Maghrib. Recognizing that this is a thinly veiled criticism of his own position, and of other Maghribī thinkers who share his view, Jābirī protests that he only uses the term *qaṭī‘ah* in a specific epistemological sense – that is, to refer to the epistemological ‘break’ between Mashriqī gnosticism and Maghribī rationalism.⁵⁴ This break, he implies, is significant, because it means that the Maghrib has forged a way towards the modern values of rationality, science, and progress, while the Mashriq has remained frozen in irrational, ‘unscientific’ mysticism and the limited rationalism of analogical reasoning.

This argument becomes clear when Jābirī turns his attention to Ḥanafī’s critique of the Hadith of the ‘saved sect’, which is the main focus of his contribution to the first chapter. Jābirī highlights the attempt of Andalusian and Maghribī scholars such as the Mālikī jurists al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 1126) and al-Shāṭibī (d. 1388) to interpret this Hadith in rationalist terms (specifically their tendency to question the authenticity of the report through an analysis of its *matn* rather than simply its *isnād*), an endeavour which he takes to be indicative of the fundamentally rationalist orientation of the Maghribī intellectual tradition. This Maghribī rationalism, he claims, is best exemplified by Ibn Rushd and Ibn Khaldūn, and consists in interpreting revelation in accordance with ‘what we call today, in the language of science, the

⁵² Jābirī’s most trenchant critic, the Syrian intellectual Georges Tarabichi (d. 2016), who wrote a five-volume critique of Jābirī’s *Naqd al-‘aql al-‘arabī* project, likewise stressed the invalidity of Jābirī’s distinction between a rationalist Maghrib and an irrational Mashriq. See Jebari, ‘An Intellectual Between the Mashriq and Maghrib’, 87–91.

⁵³ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 8.

⁵⁴ The term ‘epistemological break’, which denotes the ‘moment of rupture separating science from its non-scientific past’, was coined by the philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard and developed by critical theorists such as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. See Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 2nd edition (online) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), s.v. ‘epistemological break’, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/display/10.1093/acref/9780198794790.001.0001/acref-9780198794790-e-224>, last accessed 19 September 2025. It should be noted that Jābirī sometimes seems to use the term descriptively, to highlight the existence of a rupture between the Mashriq and Maghrib in their respective ways of thinking, and sometimes prescriptively, to advocate a break with irrational Mashriqī thought.

laws of nature and social phenomena (*qawānīn al-ṭabī‘ah wa-ẓawahir al-ijtimā‘*). This perspective, moreover, is ‘the point of departure on which Cartesian rationalism is based, both with Descartes himself, and with Leibniz, Spinoza, and others’. Insofar as this rationalist trend in modern European thought goes back to Thomas Aquinas, ‘whose relationship to the thought of Ibn Rushd is not hidden’, Jābirī concludes, ‘it is legitimate for the researcher to inquire into the relationship of Maghribī-Andalusian Averroist rationalism (*al-‘aqlāniyyah al-rushdiyyah*) to European rationalism’.⁵⁵ The result of such an inquiry, it is implied, would be that the rationalism of the Maghribī tradition is nothing less than the foundation of Western modernity.

The *Ḥiwār* is made up of ten chapters, each of which features a contribution from both thinkers. Most often (chapters one, two, three, five, eight, nine, and ten) Ḥanafī takes the lead and al-Jābirī responds, though at other times (chapters four, six, and seven) the order is reversed. The titles of the chapters are as follows:

1. On the Meaning and Aims of Dialogue (*fī ma‘nā al-ḥiwār wa-maqāshiduhu*)
2. Fundamentalism and the Contemporary Age (*al-uṣūliyyah wa-al-‘aṣr*)
3. Secularism and Islam (*al-‘almāniyyah wa-al-islām*)
4. Arab Unity: Regional or Integrationist? (*al-waḥdah al-‘arabiyyah: iqlīmiyyah am indimājiyyah?*)
5. Liberalism (*al-lībrāliyyah*)
6. Modernity and Tradition (*al-ḥadāthah wa-al-taqlīd*)
7. Nasserism (*al-nāṣiriyyah*)
8. A Pause for Review (*waqfah li-al-murāja‘ah*)
9. The Arabs and the French Revolution (*al-‘arab wa-al-thawrah al-faransiyyah*)
10. The Palestinian Issue (*al-qaḍiyyah al-falasṭīniyyah*)

There is also an appendix, featuring contributions from Ḥanafī and Jābirī titled, respectively: ‘We aimed for dialogue but have been afflicted by defamation and preying on mistakes’ and ‘Concerning what has been said about my partisanship for the Maghrib’.

As can be seen from the table of contents, the principal focus of the dialogue, at least on the surface, is politics. More specifically, the two thinkers concentrate on the role that the Arab-Islamic heritage (*turāth*), in both its Mashriqī and Maghribī forms, can and should play in addressing the social, political, cultural, and intellectual challenges facing the contemporary Arab-Muslim world, while also considering the impact of modern Western ideologies such as secularism and liberalism on modern Arab-Islamic thought and society. The extent to which Arab Muslims should seek social, political, cultural, and intellectual renewal in their own tradition, on the one hand (and if so, in what elements of their tradition), or in Western ideologies, philosophies, methods, and traditions, on the other, is a question that runs throughout the dialogue. It particularly comes to the fore in chapter three, in which Ḥanafī and Jābirī discuss the relationship between Islam and secularism, and which we have chosen to analyse below, because we think it exemplifies key features of their thought on heritage and renewal.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁶ As noted above, we plan to undertake an analysis of the chapter on liberalism to supplement the analysis found in the present article.

b. The Debate on Islam and Secularism

i. Ḥanafī: ‘Islam Does Not Need Western Secularism’

The dialogue on secularism is initiated by Ḥanafī, who prefaces his exposition of secularism and Islam with a subtitle that succinctly states his position on this issue: ‘Islam Does Not Need Western Secularism’. Ḥanafī remains steadfast in his fidelity to this general position as he proceeds to develop his ideas on Western secularism, and whether Muslims need to adopt and adapt it to Islam’s own identity and situation. His analysis can be divided into three main parts, consisting of a linguistic argument about the term *‘almāniyyah*; a narrative account of the rise of secularism in Europe and its transmission to the Arab world; and his solution to the problem of how to maintain what he regards as the admirable modern values represented by secularism while at the same time remaining authentically Islamic.

Ḥanafī’s linguistic argument is based on the observation that the Arabic term for secularism, *al-‘almāniyyah*, is an Arabized borrowed term (*al-laḥẓ al-mu‘arrab*), and therefore ‘not an authentic (*aṣīl*) Arabic word’.⁵⁷ The term, he observes, is ‘derived from the Latin *saeculum*, which means an era or a generation (*al-‘aṣr*)’. It is, therefore, ‘a term that belongs to Western civilization’, and denotes, in the Western context, ‘the separation of church and state, and the religious and political authority’. Because it is a foreign term, when its ‘missionaries’ (*du‘āt al-‘almāniyyah*) translated it into the Arab-Muslim context, the arrival of this ‘newcomer’ (*al-wāfid*) inevitably produced a counter-reaction from those who claimed to uphold Arab-Islamic authenticity (*anṣār al-aṣālah*), which is to say that the manifestation of the alien concept as a concrete socio-political phenomenon engendered societal disturbances and conflict.⁵⁸

Ḥanafī’s linguistic argument echoes an apologetic line of argument found in classical Islamic scholarship that denied the presence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur’an. As Andrew Rippin summarizes it, for the proponents of this view, ‘To admit that there were foreign words in the Qur’an that had been intentionally borrowed would be to undermine the meaning of the challenge put forth to the masters of Arabic speech to produce a chapter of text which was “like” the Qur’an’.⁵⁹ While Ḥanafī is not concerned here with the language or inimitability of revelation, he maintains a similar view that there exists a self-contained and self-sufficient pool of Arabic *political* vocabulary that should determine how Arab Muslims order their societies. On this account, foreign political vocabulary signifies the presence of non-Islamic religious doctrine, hence his use of the religiously loaded term *du‘āt*.

Ḥanafī’s linguistic argument, then, contains an underlying assumption that if a proper indigenous name for something does not exist in the native language of a particular culture, then that thing cannot *authentically* exist in that culture, despite its obvious intellectual, social, and political presence. This, we can assume, is especially the case for a religious culture, like the Islamic, that is strongly tied to a particular language. Thus, the forms of secularism that have been instituted in the Arab-Muslim world for him have only an *ersatz* existence in that context, despite being recognized as real by some observers. Western

⁵⁷ Ḥanafī makes the same observation – that it is ‘an Arabised borrowed term’ – about liberalism in chapter five of the *Ḥiwār*. See al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 57.

⁵⁸ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 34.

⁵⁹ Andrew Rippin, ‘Syriac in the Qur’an: Classical Muslim Theories’, in *The Qur’an in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 249–262, at 252.

secularism, then, could *never* achieve true authenticity (*aṣālah*), even if it should become the dominant ideology in the Arab-Muslim world. He seems here to be suggesting a sort of linguistic-cultural determinism – a sort of ‘strong’ Whorfianism⁶⁰ – which would *necessarily* preclude secularism becoming integral to the Arab-Muslim world.

Ḥanafī next offers a narrative account of the rise and spread of secularism in Europe and the Arab-Muslim world. Having defined secularism in the Western context as the separation of church and state, he explains that such a separation was the ‘sole solution’ for the Europeans in their quest for progress (*taqaddum*), given the historical dominance of the church over the state in the European context and the struggle between the popes in Rome and the kings of European states. In the modern period, Ḥanafī observes, the separation between church and state, in which the church was responsible solely for religious affairs and the state for worldly affairs, became a feature of daily life in Europe, and the basis of the constitutions of European states. This development signalled ‘a reversion to the words of Christ, “Render what is Caesar’s to Caesar, and what is God’s to God [Matthew, 22:21]”’.⁶¹

‘*Almāniyyah*, then, is not only a European concept without any real meaning in Arabic language and thought; insofar as it means the separation of the religious and political authorities, it is also a specifically European solution to a European problem (the struggle between the church, represented by the papacy, and the state, represented by secular kings), or, more precisely, a Christian solution to a Christian problem, the implication being that it is neither needed nor meaningful in the Arab-Islamic context, where the same problem does not exist. It is, moreover, a solution rooted in Christian scripture. While it may therefore be appropriate, correct, and beneficial in a Christian European context, its adoption by Arab Muslims – under the influence of Christian European ‘preaching’ – constitutes what is known, polemically, within the Islamic tradition (though Ḥanafī does not appeal to this concept here) as *al-tashabbuh bi-al-kuffār*, the emulation or imitation of the unbelievers, which Muslim scholars, particularly those of a traditionalist bent, have often regarded as illegitimate and dangerous.’⁶²

Furthermore, as Ḥanafī sees it, the separation between church and state in Europe was not, in fact, total. Turning to the relationship between secularism, imperialism, and Christian missionary activity in non-European areas and among ‘non-European peoples’, he describes a process whereby the church in Europe, having lost the battle to the state and succumbed to secularism, came to serve as an arm of the state, particularly in the process of proselytizing (*tabshīr*) non-Europeans: ‘The church both advanced secularism, and followed it; colonialism was bound up with proselytising, and proselytising was bound up with colonialism’. Specifically, non-European peoples were first converted from their ‘local national religions’ to Western Christianity; then, after faith in Western religion had been inculcated in them, they were encouraged to pledge their loyalty to ‘the political West’.⁶³ In this way, *tashabbuh* both drew people away from Islam, and exposed the Arab-Muslim world to division and exploitation at the hands of Christian Europeans.

⁶⁰ See Barbara C. Scholz et al., ‘Whorfianism’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/linguistics/whorfianism.html>, last accessed 18 September 2025.

⁶¹ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 34.

⁶² See Youshaa Patel, *The Muslim Difference: Defining the Line between Believers and Unbelievers from Early Islam to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

⁶³ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 35.

Ḥanafī then looks in more detail at the situation in the Arab-Muslim world, explaining that secularism came into Arab-Muslim lands mainly through the proselytizing efforts of Christian Arabs, ‘the majority of whom were from [Greater] Syria (*al-shām*), whose cultural loyalty (*al-ḥaḍārī*) was to the West’. These Syrian Christian Arabs had little or no connection to Islam ‘as religion or civilisation’, having been educated in foreign schools and Christian missionary institutions. As examples of these Christian Arab secularists, Ḥanafī names the Syro-Lebanese intellectuals Shiblī Shumayyil (d. 1917), Ya‘qūb Ṣarrūf (d. 1927), Faraḥ Anṭūn (d. 1922), and Niqūlā Ḥaddād (d. 1954), and the Egyptians Salāmah Mūsā, Walī al-Dīn Yakan (d. 1921), and Lūwis ‘Awaḍ (d. 1990). The Syro-Lebanese intellectuals cited by Ḥanafī, it should be noted, were all émigrés to Egypt. Shumayyil, Anṭūn, Ḥaddād, and Mūsā were among the leading Arab advocates of socialism in the early 20th century;⁶⁴ Shumayyil (through his translations of the German materialist Ludwig Büchner’s commentaries on Darwin) and Ṣarrūf (through the journal *al-Muqtaṭaf*, of which he was one of the founding editors) were pioneers of Darwinian evolutionary theory in Arabic;⁶⁵ while, most pertinently in the present context, Anṭūn, influenced by the anticlericalism of the French scholar Ernest Renan, acted as an ‘apostle of secularism’ in Egypt, having come to the conclusion that secularism provided the solution to ‘the central problem of how Christians could find a meaningful place in Middle Eastern life’.⁶⁶ He argued for the separation of religious and secular authority on the grounds that the essence of a religion is to be found in its fundamental principles rather than its laws.⁶⁷

Ḥanafī labels these Christian intellectuals’ commitment to secularism as ‘taking the Western way’, a description that echoes, though in less pejorative terms, the way that the earlier Egyptian Muslim reformer ‘Abd Allāh al-Nadīm (d. 1896), who was editor of the journal *al-Ustādh* and an associate of al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh, attacked Shumayyil, Ṣarrūf and other Arab secularists as ‘paid agents’ (*al-‘umalā’ al-uḡarā’*) of the Western imperial powers.⁶⁸ As a result of their education and upbringing, Ḥanafī observes, this ‘Western way’ was the ‘easiest’ course for them to take ‘in their sincere call for progress and renewal (*al-taqaddum wa-al-tajdīd*) in their countries’; for they were not only most familiar with this way, but also ‘saw it as being effectual in the actual progress of the West’.⁶⁹ Again, the point is that, while secularism, in the sense of the separation of church and state, may be both religiously and conceptually appropriate and conducive to social progress in the European Christian context, it cannot be taken out of that context without doing violence both to its meaning and to the new context into which it is introduced.

Yet that, according to Ḥanafī’s narrative, is exactly what took place in the Arab-Muslim context, for the second stage in the rise of secularism in the Arab-Muslim world occurred when some Muslim thinkers emulated those Christian Arab secularists. He cites as examples a number of Egyptian Muslim modernist intellectuals, including ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Rāziq (d.

⁶⁴ Donald M. Reid, ‘The Syrian Christians and Early Socialism in the Arab World’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 2 (1974), 177–193.

⁶⁵ Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), chapter 3.

⁶⁶ Donald M. Reid, *The Odyssey of Faraḥ Anṭūn: A Syrian Christian’s Quest for Secularism* (Minneapolis & Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1975), 23, 63.

⁶⁷ Charles D. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Egypt: A Biography of Muhammad Husayn Haykal* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983), 25.

⁶⁸ See Muḥammad ‘Imārah, *Bi-mā taqaddama al-ūrūbiyyūn*. For al-Nadīm’s increasingly hostile stance towards the West, see Aisha Al-Omary, ‘Representing the West in the Writings of Rifā‘ah Rāfi‘ Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, and ‘Abd Allah Al-Nadīm’ (PhD dissertation, University College London, 2022).

⁶⁹ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 35–36.

1966), whose *al-Islām wa-uṣūl al-ḥukm* (1925) is a landmark of Islamic secularism, Khālīd Muḥammad Khālīd (d. 1996), whose early writings, most notably *Min hunā nabda*, likewise advocated Islamic secularism, and Fu'ād Zakariyyā (d. 2010), a Marxist secularist who argued, against Ḥanafī and the Islamist movement, that secularism in the sense of the separation of religion and politics was not unique to the West, and that a contemporary Islamic secularism could be 'an extension of the [Islamic] rational tradition of the Mu'tazilites, al-Fārābī, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn al-Haytham'.⁷⁰

As already hinted at above, the adoption by these Muslim intellectuals of a conceptually and religiously foreign ideology generated, almost inevitably, a counter-reaction from those 'Islamic movements' (*al-ḥarakāt al-islāmiyyah*), such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who sought to uphold Islamic authenticity. They strongly rejected secularism, identifying its links to Westernization (*al-taghrīb*), colonialism, and Christian missionary activity. In Ḥanafī's view, these Islamic movements were right to respond to European-style secularism in this negative way. But though they correctly held fast to Islam, 'which', Ḥanafī agrees, 'is a synthesis of *dīn* and *dunyā*, they invoked the slogan of divine sovereignty (*al-ḥākimiyyah*)', according to their understanding of Q 5:44–50. Yet, as Ḥanafī sees it, this slogan, which, as is well known is a central concept in the thought of the influential Islamist intellectuals Abū l-'Alā' Mawdūdī (d. 1979) and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966),⁷¹ harboured an illiberal outlook, which promoted a one-sided doctrine of authoritarian and arbitrary scriptural exegesis. This illiberalism was a serious fault, says Ḥanafī, as the Islamists thereby omitted the values of freedom, democracy, and progress that were invoked by the champions of secularism. The mistake lies, as we shall see, in the fact that these liberal values of secularism are indeed Islamic, even if 'secularism' itself is a foreign import. 'The challenge for us', Ḥanafī asks, 'is how is it possible to realise the goals of the secular trend, namely our societies' aspiration for freedom and progress, and at the same time realise the desires of the other [Islamic] trend, namely the application of the Islamic Sharī'ah, thereby preventing the bifurcation (*izdiwājiyyah*) of religion (*dīn*) and the world (*dunyā*), faith and action, and law and belief?'⁷²

Consistent with his longstanding interest in Hegel, Ḥanafī's historical narrative of the rise and development of secularism in the Arab-Muslim context is framed in terms of a dialectic between a thesis (the Western Christian secularism embraced by certain Arab-Christian and Arab-Muslim intellectuals) and its antithesis (the doctrine of divine sovereignty embraced by the Islamic movements). The struggle between the two perspectives leads to disunity, in violation of the fundamental principle of *tawḥīd*, which, in Ḥanafī's interpretation, necessitates political and ideological unity as well as the recognition of God's unity. As we learn in the third section of his contribution, the synthesis of the two poles, and the means of restoring Arab-Islamic unity, is Ḥanafī's own theory of an Islamic secularism that both embodies the liberal values of Western Christian secularism while avoiding its separation of religion and the world, thereby remaining authentically Islamic.

The route to this synthesis lies, as Ḥanafī sees it, in a correct understanding of the nature of the Sharī'ah, which, consistent with his special interest in theoretical jurisprudence (and with

⁷⁰ Fouad Zakariyya, *Myth and Reality in the Contemporary Islamist Movement*, trans. Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi' (London: Pluto, 2005), 41.

⁷¹ Sayed Khatab, *The Power of Sovereignty: The Political and Ideological Philosophy of Sayyid Qutb* (London: Routledge, 2005); Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'The Sovereignty of God in Modern Islamic Thought', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25, no. 3 (2015), 389–418; Andrew March, *The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 75–113.

⁷² Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 36–37.

the attitude of the Islamic tradition more broadly),⁷³ he seems to regard as the essence of Islam. Key to Ḥanafī's argument is his rejection of the widespread view, common both to Western secularists and their Arab (Christian and Muslim) acolytes, which sees the Sharī'ah as a harsh system of restrictions and severe penalties. In challenging this reading of the divine law, it should be noted, Ḥanafī inherits a longstanding conception of Islam – as expressed primarily through its law – as a 'religion of ease' (*dīn al-yusr*).⁷⁴ To correct this mistaken perspective, Ḥanafī turns, first, to the theory of the 'aims of the law' (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), and second – and this is the main part of his argument – to the central concept within Islamic theoretical jurisprudence of the 'categories' (*aḥkām*) of the law – that is the categorization of actions as legally 'necessary' (*wājib*), 'recommended' (*mustaḥabb*, *mandūb*), 'permitted' (*mubāḥ*), 'reprehensible' (*makrūh*), or 'forbidden' (*ḥarām*).⁷⁵

Going back at least to Muḥammad 'Abduh,⁷⁶ the theory of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* has often been employed by modern Islamic reformers seeking both to expand the role of the Sharī'ah in the public sphere and to reinterpret Islamic law in keeping with modern values and needs.⁷⁷ Ḥanafī's invocation of the *maqāṣid* (and, as we shall see, Jābirī's use of the same concept) is consistent with that latter aim. Islamic law, he explains, is a positive law (*sharī'ah waq' iyyah*), which is based on the realization of common interests (*al-maṣāliḥ al-'āmmah*), that is, what legal theorists call 'the aims of the law' (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*) – a widespread notion in post-classical Islamic jurisprudence.⁷⁸ Among the aims of the law, Ḥanafī observes, are five which classical legal theorists define as 'necessary' (*ḍarūriyyāt*): the preservation of religion, life, intellect, honour, and wealth, which are 'the ingredients of life'. These five essential aims, Ḥanafī argues, are exactly the same as the values defended by Arab secularists, 'except they take them from Western civilization rather than the Islamic Sharī'ah, from the other rather than from the self, by way of blind emulation (*taqlid^{am}*) rather than original thinking (*ibdā'^{am}*).'⁷⁹

Here we come to the crux of Ḥanafī's argument, and his broader heritage thought. Western 'secularism', as he sees it, carries the liberal values that constitute an intrinsic feature of true Islam. Yet 'almāniyyah' as Western and Westernized Arab thinkers have employed the concept is at the same time incompatible with this true Islam, for not only is it conceptually alien for Arab Muslims, but it also separates *dīn* and *dunyā*, which are joined in Islam. The conceptual solution for Ḥanafī is to redefine 'secularism' as a set of values which, in his view, are identical with true Islam, as understood through the prism of the *maqāṣid* theory, which avoids the 'bifurcation' of religion and society. This true, 'secular' Islam, in his view,

⁷³ For a summary and critical analysis of the widespread 'legal-supremacist' interpretation of Islam in Islamic Studies scholarship, see Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 117–129.

⁷⁴ For the way that this conception was forged against the foil of the idea of Judaism as a religion of hardship, see Ze'ev Maghen, *After Hardship Cometh Ease: The Jews as Backdrop for Muslim Moderation* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).

⁷⁵ See Bernard G. Weiss, *The Search for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1992), 2.

⁷⁶ Yasir S. Ibrahim, 'Muḥammad 'Abduh and *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*', *The Maghreb Review* 32, no. 1 (2011), 2–30.

⁷⁷ Felicitas Opwis, 'New Trends in Islamic Legal Theory: *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'a* as a New Source of Law?', *Die Welt des Islams* 57, no. 1 (2017), 7–32.

⁷⁸ For the connection between *maqāṣid* and *maṣlaḥah* in classical theoretical jurisprudence, see Felicitas Opwis, *Maṣlaḥah and the Purpose of the Law: Islamic Discourse on Legal Change from the 4th/10th to 8th/14th century* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).

⁷⁹ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 37.

once existed, yet suffered a trauma (namely, European colonialism, missionary activity, and their pernicious and divisive impact) which tore apart its perfect synthesis of religion and society, and which explains the decline of the Arab-Muslim world. The true Islam remains located, however, in the theories and methods of theoretical jurisprudence, awaiting its rediscovery and renewal in the contemporary context.

While this argument is broadly consistent with the Muslim modernist use of the *maqāṣid* theory, Ḥanafī's use of the five legal categories (*al-aḥkām al-khamsah*) to argue that secularism in the real sense is indigenous to Islam is more original. Ḥanafī introduces this concept in the context of his already-mentioned critique of Westernized Arab secularists who uncritically imitate the West on account of their fear of the 'severity' (*shiddah*) of Islamic law, particularly in the domain of criminal law, and the penalties set down by scripture for certain crimes (that is, the *ḥudūd*). This fear, Ḥanafī argues, arises from their 'misunderstanding of the spirit of the law' (*sū' fahm rūḥ al-sharī'ah*), for they mistakenly imagine that the divine law came 'to prevent, curb, and prohibit, rather than to satisfy desires, to fulfil needs, and to enable man's capacities and his feeling for nature (*iḥsāsahu bi-al-ṭabī'ah*)'.⁸⁰ Far from being essentially or predominantly restrictive, the five legal categories in fact express 'the different levels of natural human action' (*mustawayāt al-fi'l al-insānī al-ṭabī'ī*).

As the last two quotations indicate, key to Ḥanafī's interpretation of the five *aḥkām* here is the concept of "nature" (*al-ṭabī'ah*). In his view, the legal categories are endowed with a universal and necessary quality of conformity with the basic structure of the universe, corresponding, in this way, with laws of nature (such as gravity) in the scientific sense. Ḥanafī's discussion of the correspondence between the *aḥkām* and the laws of nature is worth quoting in full:

The necessary is what human beings do by nature (*bi-ṭabī'atihi*), by way of an internal necessity (*'an ḍarūrah*), such as performing actions at their appropriate times. The forbidden is what human beings refrain from doing, also by nature, and according to an internal necessity, as for example an antipathy to matters that are taboo (*al-ḥurumāt*). The recommended is what human beings do freely and by choice (*ṭawā'iyat^{am} wa-ikhtiyār^{am}*), if they are willing and able (*idhā mā arāda wa-kāna qādir^{am}*). The reprehensible is what human beings refrain from doing, also freely and by choice, seeking moral perfection (*bughyat al-kamāl al-khuluqī*). As for the permitted, it is the natural act (*al-fi'l al-ṭabī'ī*), outside the sphere of the formal legal regulations. It is the spontaneous, automatic action (*al-fi'l al-tilqā'ī*) which expresses the natural human tendency towards the good, the act of innocence and childlike simplicity. Thus, the five legal categories, on this naturalistic understanding (*bi-hādhā al-fahm al-ṭabī'ī*), in fact simply describe the natural human actions, just as the secularists desire, outside the domain of the formal [categories of] the permitted and the forbidden, which are imposed as obligations from without.⁸¹

As Arthur Lovejoy observed, 'nature' is 'one of the major and persistent ideas of Western thought' and 'the sacred word of the Enlightenment', signifying for Enlightenment philosophers 'the uniformity of reason in all men'.⁸² Seemingly aware of this fact, Ḥanafī

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), xii, 80, 79.

here attempts to show, through an original interpretation of the legal categories, how nature is also central to Islamic law, and therefore to Islam, thereby rendering redundant the Westernized Arab intellectuals' reliance on Western European secularism. In his reading of the *aḥkām*, compliance with the divine law involves nothing more or less than living in accordance with natural human instincts and with the natural order as a whole. The Sharī'ah, properly understood, is thus entirely devoid of coercion.⁸³ To the contrary, living by God's law is liberating, and constitutes human beings' 'natural' state. Seen in this way, failure to conform to the divine law should be understood as a deviation from the natural order of things, and this, we might suggest, is the meaning of *kufr* in Ḥanafī's view.

Though he does not make use of the concept of *fiṭrah* (the 'natural disposition' in which all humans are created) here, Ḥanafī's interpretation of the law seems to reflect the influence of the famous Ḥanbalī traditionalist Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328),⁸⁴ who, largely in reaction to Avicennian logic, regarded man's natural disposition as 'a fully reliable guide to truth' in the ethical-legal as well as the theological sphere.⁸⁵ That said, Ḥanafī's sources are eclectic, and his use of the term *ṭabī'ah*, rather than *fiṭrah*, here, chimes with its appearance in the *falsafah* tradition to which Ibn Taymiyyah was so strongly opposed, and in particular with Ibn Ṭufayl's (d. 1185/6) famous story of Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān, who, through his own natural capacities, came to know the highest metaphysical truths.⁸⁶ From the modern context, Ḥanafī's most important predecessor in his identification of religion and nature is the South Asian modernist reformer Sayyid Aḥmad Khan (d. 1898), who famously held that compatibility with nature is the test of true religion and that, insofar as it is the religion that is most compatible with the divinely instituted laws of nature, 'Islam is nature and nature is Islam'.⁸⁷

For his part, Ḥanafī connects the identity of natural and divine law to the idea that Islam, through its law, is the religion most connected to living reality (*al-wāqī'*). As we saw above, as Ḥanafī sees it, the Arab-Islamic heritage must maintain its connection to living reality and

⁸³ Compare the historian of Islamic law Wael Hallaq's claim that the Sharī'ah, because it incorporates both 'law' and 'morality', was 'less coercive than any imperial law Europe had known since the fall of the Roman Empire'. Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharī'ah: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

⁸⁴ For Ibn Taymiyyah's influence on a diverse range of modern Islamic movements and thinkers, see Jon Hoover, 'Ibn Taymiyya between Moderation and Radicalism', in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, ed. Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 177–203.

⁸⁵ Jon Hoover, 'Fiṭra', *Encyclopaedia of Islam* THREE (online edition), <https://referenceworks-brill-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/display/entries/EI3O/COM-27155.xml>, last accessed 18 September 2025. See also Sophia Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Theological Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' ta' āruḍ al-' aql wa-l-naql* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 271–273, 293–296. We are grateful to Ismail Lala for pointing out this parallel to us.

⁸⁶ D.E. Pingree and S. Nomanul Haq, 'Ṭabī'a', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd (new) edition, <https://referenceworks-brill-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/display/entries/EIEO/COM-1135.xml>, last accessed 11 August 2025; Remke Kruk, 'Ibn Ṭufayl: A Medieval Scholar's Views on Nature', in *The World of Ibn Ṭufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 69–89. As Lenn E. Goodman observes, 'Ibn Yufayl postulates in Hayy natural capacities for brilliance, boldness, curiosity, and goodness ... In the case of Hayy, the *fiṭra* rapidly comes to mean his genius'. Lenn E. Goodman (trans.), *Ibn Ṭufayl's Hayy ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 13.

⁸⁷ Syed Ahmed Khan Bahador, *Essays on the Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (London: Trübner & Co., 1870), ix–xi; Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 317. The fact that Ḥanafī echoes Sayyid Ahmad Khan in this respect (despite condemning his pro-Western stance) has already been pointed out in Riexinger, 'Nasserism Revitalized', 110, n. 221.

continually be renewed in order to survive. This adaptability, he thinks, is built into Islamic law. While the categories of theoretical jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) correspond to the (presumably unchanging) laws of nature, practical jurisprudence (*furūʿ al-fiqh*), which is to say, the substantive rules that make up the law, is able to change in keeping with changing requirements. The unchanging nature of *uṣūl al-fiqh* is useful insofar as it provides a fixed set of metahistorical general principles (*al-mabādiʿ al-ʿāmmah al-thābitah*) to guide the derivation of substantive law from the revealed sources. As indicated above, these principles consist in the preservation of the aims of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*). ‘As for [practical] jurisprudence’, he writes, ‘it changes in accordance with changing needs and interests (*maṣāliḥ*). If earlier [jurists] derived a jurisprudence that responded to their conditions, then we are capable of generating a jurisprudence that serves our needs, according to our conditions, and realizing our changing interests, generation after generation.’⁸⁸

How does all this relate to Islam and secularism? For Ḥanafī, the divine law, because it corresponds to the laws of nature and adapts to living reality, is an essentially *worldly* phenomenon. In Islam, in other words, religion (*al-dīn*) is not separate from the world (*al-dunyā*), as in Western Christianity; rather, *dīn* and *dunyā* are mutually imbricated. Paradoxically, and seemingly contradicting his earlier disavowal of the term *ʿalmāniyyah* on linguistic grounds, he describes this union of religion and the world as a kind of ‘secularism’, where true secularism denotes not the separation of religion and society, but their union, and the acknowledgement and implementation of the modern liberal values signified by the term.

In his concluding remarks to the chapter, Ḥanafī places this idea in the context of Arab-Muslim decline vis-à-vis the West. ‘Islam’, he writes, ‘is a secular religion in its very essence (*dīn ʿalmānī fī jawharihi*), and consequently has no need of an additional secularism drawn from Western civilisation’.⁸⁹ If this idea clashes with the prevailing popular image of Islam, he goes on, then that is because it is the ‘backwardness’ (*takhalluf*) of Muslims – a term that evokes the ‘What went wrong?’ question – which has led to Islam being transformed into ‘a priesthood (*kahnūt*) and a religious system of government (*sulṭah dīniyyah*), rites, ceremonies, and rituals, penalties and fixed punishments’. This transformation led in turn to people growing weary of the religion, and turning towards Western secularism, which represents ‘rationality, liberalism, freedom, democracy, and progress’ (*ʿaqlāniyyah wa-lībrāliyyah wa-dīmūqraṭiyyah wa-taqaddum*).⁹⁰ Yet as admirable as these values are, they are neither authentic to Western secularism, nor foreign to Islam, which, when properly understood, is essentially ‘secular’ in the truest sense.

Ḥanafī’s polemic against Western secularism thus prepares the way for his claim that Islam is in fact a secular religion. This polemic, as we have seen, is twofold: first, a ‘Whorfian’ linguistic thesis, arguing that Western secularism is conceptually alien to Arab Islam and, having been imposed on it from without, can never be authentically integrated into Arab-Islamic thought and practice, and second, the argument that despite its promotion of positive and desirable liberal values, Western secularism is in fact not a true secularism, for in separating church and state, it removes religion from society and separates it from the natural order of things. Seen from this perspective, it is only Islam that deserves the appellation of ‘true secularism’. While the distorted Islam of regulations, rituals, and punishments, which has been imagined into being by Westernized Arab secularists and authoritarian Islamists,

⁸⁸ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 38.

⁸⁹ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 38.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

creates an oppressive system devoid of religious meaning, authentic, original Islam, as expressed in theoretical jurisprudence, unites religion and nature. Here, liberal values do not require separation of religion from state and society, as in Western secularism; rather, in Islam, liberal values represent the core identity of the religion, if one looks to the aims (*maqāṣid*) and categories (*aḥkām*) of the divine law and understands their true meaning. In this way, if secularism in the West is defined by the most desirable principles of human existence, though in a flawed dualistic configuration, and if Islam is the complete, undivided repository of these values, with *dīn* and *dunyā* as one, then Islam must of necessity be secular in its very nature – and secular in the true sense of *uniting*, rather than separating, religion and the world. Indeed, what Europe discovered only relatively late, and in a dubious form, Islam has possessed innately, and in its ever-perfect form, for centuries. Muslims now must retrieve and renew this ideal system of secularism and apply it in their own lives.

Unlike some other modern Muslim reformers (for example, Rashīd Riḍā, with his theory of a revived caliphate),⁹¹ Ḥanafī does not stipulate the exact means by which Muslims might achieve this act of retrieval and renewal. The implication is that they would act here as individuals, from their own intuitive understanding of Islam and nature, without formal instruction, direction or coercion from ‘clerical’ authorities, intellectuals, or educational institutions, despite what may initially appear as Ḥanafī’s own guidelines for others on the ‘proper’ ways by which *tajdīd* might be achieved, which he lays out in his book on *The Heritage and Renewal*. Much of this book emphasizes the need for an ‘activist’ outlook towards achieving change in the *turāth*, consonant with the needs of the *wāqi‘*. What is most salient in Ḥanafī’s advice on how to achieve this renewal, however, is that he does not always engage in instruction; indeed, many of his ‘methodological recommendations’ for reform are comments on how would-be reformers might recognize, through their intuitive understanding, already-accomplished instances of renewal, whether these occurred randomly, or through the deliberate intent of an earlier reformer.⁹² Such phenomena of renewal, for Ḥanafī, represent instances of natural necessity, which could not be other than what they are. The reformer, then, does not actively ‘reform’ anything, but rather bears witness in an ‘act of recognition’ of a deterministic reality, whatever the formal renewal involves. Whatever, and whenever, true renewal occurs, human agency effectively plays merely an opportunistic role in the process. Muslims are able to approach Islam as part of the natural order since the Sharī‘ah and its directives reflect that order as ordained in God’s creation, as we have seen in Ḥanafī’s discourse on the nature of the categories of the divine law. Going a step further, we think Ḥanafī here subscribes implicitly to a notion of deterministic natural reason, which, barring the intrusion of accidental obstacles, ‘compels’ human beings, in a uniform manner, to think and act according to the natural structure of the world, much as we see in Ibn Taymiyyah’s theory of *fiṭrah* or Ibn Ṭufayl’s story of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*.

Let us observe by way of conclusion that Ḥanafī’s argument for an ‘Islamic secularism’ bears comparison with the theory of ‘the Islamic Secular’ which has recently been articulated by Sherman Jackson.⁹³ Jackson describes his ‘basic argument’ in the following terms: ‘while the

⁹¹ Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *The Caliphate or Supreme Imamate*, trans. Simon A. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

⁹² See e.g. Ḥanafī, *al-Turāth wa-al-tajdīd*, 17, where Ḥanafī suggests that if Arab Muslims want to change their contemporary reality they ought to acquire a ‘feeling’ (*iḥsās*) for history, and observes that ‘thoughts (*al-afkār*) are not merely empty opinions or pure conceptions (*ārā’ fāriḡah aw taṣawwurāt mujarradah*), but are ways of life and methods of behaving (*anmāṭ ḥayāt wa-manāḥij sulūk*)’. In this way, he implies that renewal occurs through new ways of thinking that are connected to lived reality.

⁹³ Sherman A. Jackson, *The Islamic Secular* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

secular, as commonly understood in the contemporary West, connotes a fundamentally dichotomous relationship with the religious, the Islamic juristic tradition, particularly *uṣūl al-fiqh*, points to an alternate understanding of the construct'.⁹⁴ While this argument appears on the surface to be very close to Ḥanafī's position – an impression reinforced by Jackson's insistence that 'the Islamic Secular cannot be translated into Arabic as simply *al-fikr al-'almānī fī al-islām* or *al-'almānī al-islāmī*' – Jackson in fact departs from Ḥanafī's identification of the categories of the divine law with the natural order. Jackson's concept of the Islamic Secular is rooted in the notion that the Sharī'ah, as conceptualized in the *uṣūl al-fiqh* tradition, is a 'bounded entity', meaning that the scope of the divine law is limited to the number of divine commandments (*aḥkām shar'iyyah*). Beyond that is the 'secular' space, where there are no relevant divine commandments (for instance, over questions of economic policy or architectural design), but where Muslims can still carry out their activities in a devotional manner; hence the 'Islamic Secular'.⁹⁵ In Jackson's view, Islamic law in this way differs from the 'ontological realism' of the Greek view of divine law, according to which 'the structure of the law was assumed to be pegged to the extra-mental structure of the world, its prescriptions corresponding to the inherent nature of the universe'.⁹⁶ By contrast, it is precisely this 'ontological realistic' view of the divine law that underlies Ḥanafī's notion of Islamic secularism. Where the two thinkers are united is in their basic assumption that there is such a thing as an Islamic secularism and that such a secularism is to be found, not in a rejection of Islamic law, but in Islamic theoretical jurisprudence. For both Ḥanafī and Jackson, in other words, the Islamic intellectual heritage remains deeply relevant for contemporary Muslims thinking about the relationship between Islam and politics. This, as we shall see, is an assumption that is shared by Jābirī, who, however, has a rather different take on which aspects of the Arab-Islamic heritage remain relevant and ought to be taken as the material for Islamic law.

ii. Jābirī: Islam is not a Church (*kanīisah*) to be separated from the State (*dawlah*)”

Jābirī's contribution to the chapter on Islam and secularism is titled 'Islam is not a Church (*kanīisah*) to be separated from the State (*dawlah*)'. It centres around his response to Ḥanafī's claim that 'Islam is a secular religion in its very essence'. In Jābirī's estimation, this statement is basically meaningless and interest in this issue reflects the widespread 'confusion' (*labs*) in modern Islamic thought about the relevance of secularism to the Arab-Islamic context.

Before engaging directly with Ḥanafī's argument in his contribution to the chapter, Jābirī relates that he has already dealt with the issue of secularism in the pages of *al-Yawm al-sābi'* (the same journal in which the dialogue with Ḥanafī first appeared), in an article titled 'The Alternative to Secularism (*badal al-'almāniyyah*): Democracy and Rationalism (*al-dīmūqrāṭiyyah wa-al-'aqlāniyyah*)'. This article appeared in 1988, less than two years before the publication of the *Hiwār*. The issue of secularism, he asserts in that article, is a 'pseudo-issue' (*mas'alah muzayyafah*) in the contemporary Arab context. Noting that the concept of secularism was introduced into the Arab world in 19th-century Lebanon as an expression of the desire for independence (*al-istiqlāl*) from the Ottoman caliphate, 'or at least of a desire for democracy and respect for the rights of minorities (*ḥuqūq al-aqaliyyāt*)', Jābirī concludes that it is necessary 'to distance the slogan of secularism from the lexicon of Arabic thought

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, 74–120.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

and to substitute it for the slogans of democracy and rationality’, which are the two real ‘objective’ requirements of Arab society. By democracy, he explains, he means ‘the preservation of rights’ (of both groups and individuals), and by rationality ‘the practice of politics based on reason (*al-‘aql*) ... rather than passion (*al-hawā*), zealotry (*al-ta‘aṣṣub*), and frequent changes of mood (*taqallubāt al-mizāj*)’. Neither concept, he further notes, is incompatible with Islam, which, as in Arab nationalist thought, should be seen as ‘the spirit of the Arabs’, both Muslim and non-Muslim.⁹⁷

In referring back to this earlier article in the *Ḥiwār*, Jābirī shifts the emphasis away from secularism, which for him is a non-issue in the Arab-Islamic context, and onto democracy and rationality, which he sees as the principal requirements of contemporary Arab-Muslim society. In so doing, he avoids engaging directly with Ḥanafī’s linguistic analysis of ‘*almāniyyah*, which as we saw above is the foundation of Ḥanafī’s rejection of the importation of Western secularism into the Arab-Islamic contexts. Whereas, for Ḥanafī, ‘*almāniyyah* in the Christian sense of the separation of church and state is inapplicable in the Arab-Islamic context because this term is not found within Arab-Muslims’ linguistic heritage, for Jābirī, language is not relevant to the issue of how contemporary Arab Muslims should organize their societies. Democracy, in other words, is compatible with contemporary Islam, even if the term *dīmūqrāṭiyyah* is a foreign borrowing. At the same time, in shifting the focus away from the ‘slogan’ of secularism and onto the *values* that that slogan represents, Jābirī echoes Ḥanafī’s concern for preserving the positive liberal values embodied by Western secularism while avoiding the uncritical adoption of that alien concept and the ideology it represents.

Nevertheless, Jābirī’s evaluation of the role played by those whom Ḥanafī termed the ‘missionaries of secularism’ (*du‘āt al-‘almāniyyah*) is more positive than his interlocutor’s. Unlike Ḥanafī, who criticized the Christian Arab advocates of secularism, and their Muslim imitators, for uncritically ‘taking the Western way’, Jābirī apparently has no issue with the Christian contribution to the discourse of democracy and rights in the Arab-Muslim world. Indeed, he highlights the fact that it was predominantly Christian (though their religion is left unsaid) Lebanese intellectuals who introduced the slogan of secularism into the Arab-Islamic context as a way of expressing their demands for independence, democracy, and rights. Though he does not name them, he likely has in mind the same Syro-Lebanese Nahda intellectuals cited earlier by Ḥanafī, such as Farah Anṭūn and Shiblī Shumayyil, who migrated to Egypt and advocated secularism, Arab nationalism, and scientific ‘progress’.⁹⁸ The demands of these Christian secularists, as Jābirī sees it, were legitimate and admirable; indeed, they point the way for the contemporary Arab-Muslim world, which ought to seek the realization of these demands while dropping the irrelevant slogan of secularism. In this positive evaluation of the role played by Christian intellectuals, we think, we find Jābirī to be less concerned than Ḥanafī is with the issue of Islamic ‘authenticity’. For him, it seems, it is not so much the renewal of the Islamic religious heritage that is desirable, as the recovery of the rationalist ‘Averroist spirit’ of the Maghribī dimension of the Arab-Islamic heritage; hence his emphasis on the *rationalism* that underlay the original call for secularism on the part of the Syro-Lebanese Christian intellectuals who advocated it. As we shall see, for Jābirī, this rationalism is not merely a characteristic of the post-Enlightenment Western political ideologies that inspired those Arab-Christian intellectuals, but is also, and more fundamentally, the defining characteristic of the Maghribī intellectual *turāth*.

⁹⁷ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 39.

⁹⁸ Reid, *The Odyssey of Farah Anṭūn*.

Turning then to Ḥanafī's claim that 'Islam is a secular religion in its very essence', Jābirī indicates that, even if he were to agree with the sentiment of Ḥanafī's position, he finds the method used to express it 'inappropriate', for it does not differ from expressions such as 'Islam is a socialist religion', 'Islam is a capitalist religion', or 'Islam is a liberal religion', all of which, in al-Jābirī's view, 'do not solve the problem' – that is, of what has 'gone wrong' in the modern Arab-Muslim world and how to fix it – 'or promote mutual understanding'. For al-Jābirī, the key issue facing the Arab-Islamic world is not whether Islam is a secular religion, but rather what form (*shakl*) the state ought to take.⁹⁹ In this way, he resists Ḥanafī's essentializing 'reification' of religion, shifting the focus away from the question of what Islam is and onto the question of what Muslims ought to do.¹⁰⁰

Al-Jābirī's method for treating the question of what form the state should take diverges from Ḥanafī's approach to the question of the relationship between Islam and politics. Where Ḥanafī's conception of an indigenously Islamic 'secularism' is rooted, as we have seen, in, on the one hand, a linguistic argument about the term '*almāniyyah*', and, on the other, a reinterpretation of the legal categories as expressions of natural (*ṭabī'ī*) realities, Jābirī turns not to linguistics or theoretical jurisprudence, but to history – a method consistent with the one adopted throughout his 'Critique of Arab Reason' project, where his main focus is on Islamic intellectual history. Here, as in the third volume of his Critique of Arab Reason project, his focus is on Arab-Islamic political history. A study of the political history of Islam, he indicates, suggests four major points pertaining to the issue of the relationship between religion and the state, each of which follows on from the previous one.

First, since the time of the Prophet, who founded the first Islamic state, Islam has been a political religion, or what is referred to in classical Islamic political theory as *dīn wa-dunyā* – that is, a way of organizing both religious and worldly affairs.¹⁰¹ As the title of al-Jābirī's contribution has it, 'Islam is not a church to be separated from the state', terms which – and here Jābirī is in implicit agreement with Ḥanafī – only make sense in a Christian context.¹⁰² The upshot is that the investigation of the proper form of government in Islam is a legitimate one; indeed, going further, it might be taken to imply that Islam has something useful to say on the question of how to organize the state today.¹⁰³

Nevertheless – and here we come to the second point – neither the Qur'an nor the Hadith, according to Jābirī, define the form that the Islamic state should take, and this means that Islam has 'left the matter to the independent interpretation of the Muslims (*ijtihād al-muslimīn*)'.¹⁰⁴ While Jābirī, as Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' has observed (and as we have just seen),

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁰ For the reification of religion as a feature of modernity, see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

¹⁰¹ See also al-Jābirī, *Fikr Ibn Khaldūn*, 255, where, drawing on Ibn Khaldūn, Jābirī asserts that 'the connection between religion and the state in Islam, at least in the first generations, is a proven historical reality'. For a summary of how Islam is presented in classical Islamic political theory as a religion of this world as well as of the next, see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), chapter one.

¹⁰² The subtitle seems to criticize, implicitly, those Western observers who speak of church and state being united in Islam. Cf. Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, 18: 'Many have recognized that the [Muslim] community is not only a social group but a religious body; that 'church and state' are one, to use the inappropriate language of the West'.

¹⁰³ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 40.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

rejects the thesis of the pioneering Islamic secularist ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq that Islam has nothing to do with politics,¹⁰⁵ he ultimately reaches a similar position to that of ‘Abd al-Rāziq, who concluded his famous 1925 treatise *al-Islām wa-uṣūl al-ḥukm* with the claim that the Islamic religion has left politics to ‘the laws of reason (*aḥkām al-‘aql*), the experience of nations, and the principles of politics (*qawā’id al-siyāsah*)’.¹⁰⁶ In Islamic jurisprudence, the usual basis for *ijtihād* is scripture, that is, the Qur’an and Hadith. Given their silence on the question of what form the state should take, Jābirī indicates that, in this case, *ijtihād* ought to be – indeed, can only be – rooted in the study of Islamic history. As he puts it later in the section, ‘what remains in the hands of the Muslims’ after the Qur’an and Hadith have been found to contain no guidance on the issue ‘is their history, that is, the historical experience (*al-tajribah al-tārīkhiyyah*) of the Arab-Islamic community’.¹⁰⁷ In this way, *ijtihād*, as so often in modern Islamic thought, takes on a different meaning to how it is used in the *fiqh* tradition, being transformed from the expenditure of mental effort to derive *legal* norms from the *scriptural* sources (as it is defined in *uṣūl al-fiqh* texts), into the expenditure of mental effort to derive *political* norms from the *historical* sources. History, for Jābirī, thus replaces jurisprudence as *the* primary method of ‘understanding’ (*fiqh*) God’s will for the organization of society, and in this way, he seems implicitly to deny Ḥanafī’s proposal to turn to *uṣūl al-fiqh* for guidance on contemporary questions and a basis for renewal.

Third, if we turn, then, to the early decades of Islamic history, we find a wide range of ‘opinions and theories’ (*ārā’ wa-naẓariyyāt*) about the correct form of government in Islam. After the Battle of Ṣiffīn between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiyah, Jābirī observes, many such opinions and theories were put forward, from the Shi‘ah, who wanted to limit the caliphate to the descendants of ‘Alī, to the Khārijites, who initially said that it was the right of every free Arab, and then that it was the right of every righteous Muslim, to the Umayyad caliph Mu‘āwiyah, who established a ‘state of politics’ (*dawlat al-siyāsah*).¹⁰⁸ The implication of this observation seems to be that the answer to the question of what form government in Islam should take is *not* to be found at the very beginning of the Islamic period, for the experiences and perspectives of the earliest Muslims were too diverse to provide any clear guidance on the issue.

Nevertheless – and here we reach the fourth point and the climax of al-Jābirī’s argument – there *is* a consensus (*ijmā‘*) among Muslims about the history of government in Islam: namely that the true caliphate lasted for only thirty years, after which it was transformed, in the reign of Mu‘āwiyah, into what some have called – pejoratively – a ‘biting kingship’ (*mulk ‘aḍūḍ*) and others – less pejoratively – a ‘political kingship’ (*mulk siyāsī*). The nature of this transformation, as Jābirī sees it, is explained in the ‘realistic and precise’ account written by the 12th-century Andalusian Mālikī jurist and judge Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī, who, Jābirī notes, ‘represents the “perspective of the Maghrib” [quotation marks his] on the subject’. Jābirī summarizes this account in the following terms: while ‘the state in the age of the Prophet and the [Rightly-Guided] Caliphs was a conquest state (*dawlat futūḥāt*)’, led by military leaders who were at the same time religious scholars, and in which the subjects were all soldiers and there was no distinction between ‘political society’ (*al-mujtama‘ al-siyāsī*) and ‘civil society’ (*al-mujtama‘ al-madanī*), from the time of Mu‘āwiyah, the state was transformed into a ‘state of political kingship’ (*dawlat al-mulk al-siyāsī*), in which princes

¹⁰⁵ Abu-Rabi‘, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 271.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq, *al-Islām wa-uṣūl al-ḥukm* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Miṣr, 1925), 103.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Jābirī and Ḥanafī, *Ḥiwār*, 43.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

were distinct from religious scholars and soldiers from subjects, with the result that ‘political society’ became distinct from ‘civil society’.¹⁰⁹

Notably, the transformation of the caliphate into a kingship therefore involved, in al-Jābirī’s account, a process by which the religious institution – represented by the religious scholars (*al-‘ulamā’*) – was separated from the ruling institution. This transition might reasonably be described as the establishment of a form of secularism, though al-Jābirī, keen as he is to distance himself both from Ḥanafī’s description of Islam as an essentially secular religion and from the Western Christian notion of secularism as the separation of church and state, avoids using this term here. As a result, we arrive at the seemingly paradoxical situation whereby Ḥanafī applies the term ‘secularism’ to Islam while rejecting the separation between religion and politics in the Islamic context, while Jābirī accepts the fact of the separation of religion and politics in Islamic history (which he deems the proper source for *ijtihād* on the form that the modern state should take) but rejects the application of the term ‘secularism’ to Islam.

The transformation from caliphate to kingship, Jābirī observes, was accepted by the majority of Muslims; it is thus ‘a historical reality (*wāqī’ tārikhī*), which is a part of Islam, because it is a reality that the Muslims – with the great Companions among them – affirmed’ – a framing, it might be noted, which co-opts Ḥanafī’s notion of *al-wāqī’* as the key criterion of true Islam. What is more, according to Jābirī, the Sunni majority not only accepted the transformation, but agreed that it was impossible to reject it – some of them on the basis that it was an inevitable feature of development, in accordance with what Ibn Khaldūn called ‘the nature of human civilization’ (*ṭabī‘at al-‘umrān al-basharī*).¹¹⁰ Here again, in invoking the term *ṭabī‘ah* Jābirī seems not only to be signalling the basically rationalist orientation of Maghribī thought, but also to be self-consciously co-opting Ḥanafī’s key terminology and putting it into the service of his own position. Indeed, and unsurprisingly given his high regard for Ibn Khaldūn, Jābirī indicates that he subscribes to this dominant Sunni view: the transformation from caliphate to kingship, he writes, was an ‘inevitable matter’ (*amr maḥtūm*), because, first, the preservation of the old system would have required all the religious scholars to join the ranks of princes, and all Muslims to become soldiers, and there were soon too many of each group for this to occur, and second (and relatedly), because Mu‘āwiyah and his successors were not able to be as involved in the daily lives of their subjects as Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān had been, owing again to the massive growth in the number of Muslims and the size of the caliphate.¹¹¹

This historical fact indicates, as Jābirī sees it, the way forward for contemporary Muslims. While the Rightly-Guided Caliphate, he explains, will remain the ‘highest model of government in Islam’ (*mathal^m a‘lā li-al-ḥukm fī-al-islām*), nevertheless it cannot be ‘realized again anew as it was’, because it requires historical conditions – the era of conquest – that are now impossible to meet. The *tajdīd* of the caliphate, in other words, is impossible. Rather, he concludes, ‘all that is possible, in the foreseeable future, is one thing: the establishment of a state on the basis of the common interest and public benefit (*al-maṣlaḥah wa-al-manfa‘ah*)’. Like *ijtihād*, these terms are taken from the context of theoretical jurisprudence – indeed, we encountered them in Ḥanafī’s reinterpretation of *uṣūl al-fiqh* – but are used in a largely non-technical sense here as in Jābirī’s other writings and in much other

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

modern Islamic literature.¹¹² For Jābirī, this modern state should be established not in the manner of Mu‘āwiyah – who established his state on the basis of tribalism and nepotism – but ‘in the way that our age requires, the way that aims for the participation of the whole community in choosing the rulers and watching over them, according to legal and constitutional principles and systems’.¹¹³ Here we come back to the ideals affirmed at the beginning of al-Jābirī’s contribution, to which the 19th-century Syro-Lebanese Christian secularists paved the way, and which were reinforced by Islamic secularists such as ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq: namely, democracy, rationality, and pluralism.

Al-Jābirī’s analysis of the historical development of government in Islam can thus be summarized in the following way: Islam is a political religion, for the Prophet established a state. Nevertheless, since the Qur’an and Ḥadīth do not give guidance on what form an Islamic state should take, Muslims should turn to their history for guidance on this question, history, not scripture, being the only possible basis for *ijtihād* on this question. When we turn to Islamic history, we find that the caliphate was quickly transformed into a ‘political kingship’, in which the religious and ruling institutions were separate. This transformation, as Ibn Khaldūn rightly discerned, was inevitable, and so rather than seeking to re-establish the caliphate or renew the political dimension of the Arab-Islamic tradition, modern Muslims should seek to establish a political system that meets the common interest and contemporary needs, respects the rights of individuals and groups (including minorities), and is governed democratically, constitutionally, and rationally.

Several points in al-Jābirī’s analysis are worth highlighting here. As noted above, both here and elsewhere in the *Ḥiwār*, Jābirī tends not to engage directly with Ḥanafī’s lines of reasoning. He offers no comment, for instance, on Ḥanafī’s linguistic analysis of the term ‘*almāniyyah*’; nor does he really engage with Ḥanafī’s discussion of Christian secularism and its roots in the Gospels; nor does he seem to be concerned with whether the penetration of Western secularism caused, by way of a reaction, the rise of the Islamist movements and their doctrine of the sovereignty (*ḥākimiyyah*) of God; nor does he discuss Ḥanafī’s naturalistic reinterpretation of the legal categories. He seems eager not to allow Ḥanafī to set the terms of the dialogue, preferring to reframe the issue as he sees fit. While this enables him not to get bogged down in debate and to present himself as operating on a higher level of analysis than his interlocutor, it sometimes makes for a somewhat frustrating ‘dialogue’ – a point noted later in the *Ḥiwār* by Ḥanafī, who observes that the dialogue has often gone ‘cold’ and that the two have tended to talk past one another.¹¹⁴ At the same time, we have seen that Jābirī co-opts a number of Ḥanafī’s key concepts – *al-wāqi‘*, *ṭabī‘ah*, and *al-maṣlaḥah wa-al-manfa‘ah* – thus signalling to the attentive reader that the proper interpretation and use of these concepts will lead not to Ḥanafī’s position, but to his own.

Notwithstanding these terminological echoes, Jābirī’s unwillingness to engage directly with Ḥanafī seems to be part of an attempt to shift the focus of the discussion onto what he calls ‘the perspective of the Maghrib’, which he regards as the superior perspective and, in the particular context of this chapter, the basis for a correct analysis of the relationship between Islam and politics, which is a prerequisite for successful political renewal. It is no accident that his analysis of the transformation of the caliphate into a kingship – the centrepiece of his historical analysis of government in Islam – is based on the account given by the Andalusian

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 43–44.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

jurist Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī, who, we are explicitly told, represents the Maghribī perspective, nor that his explanation of the inevitability of this transformation is rooted in the North African thinker Ibn Khaldūn’s philosophy of history. In neglecting these Maghribī perspectives, Jābirī seems to be implying that Ḥanafī, like many other Mashriqī thinkers, has failed to properly understand the issues being debated. As we saw earlier in his analysis of Ibn Ḥazm’s critique of the Hadith of the ‘saved sect’, for al-Jābirī, it is only by turning to the Maghrib that the democracy, rationality, and pluralism which the Arab world is in dire need of can be established.

To sum up, Jābirī calls on Arab Muslims to look to Islamic history – rather than to theoretical jurisprudence – for guidance on how to order their societies, and implies that the best way to understand that history is to see it from the Maghribī perspective represented by Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī and Ibn Khaldūn. The lesson that these Maghribī authors teach us, in his reading, is that religion has no direct role to play in politics, for the caliphate has inevitably devolved into kingship.¹¹⁵ This being the case, the ordering of Arab-Islamic societies has been left, as in ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq’s theory of Islamic secularism, to the independent judgement and experience of Arab Muslims. For Jābirī, independent judgement and experience lead to the inescapable conclusion that democracy, rationality, and pluralism – the ideals introduced into the Arab world by Syro-Lebanese Christian secularists in the nineteenth century, and anticipated in the medieval period by the representatives of the Maghribī tradition – are the values on which a modern and flourishing Arab-Muslim society can be built and the public interest best achieved. Yet, while secularism might embody those values, secularism itself is not required in order for those values to flourish.¹¹⁶ This is not only because secularism is meaningless in an Islamic context, where there is no church to be separated from the state, but also, and more fundamentally, because those values are, at root, quintessentially Maghribī. The apparent convergence between the values advocated by modern Westernizing secularists and the Maghribī intellectual tradition can be explained by the fact that the modern Western values adopted by those Arab secularist intellectuals are themselves rooted in ‘the Averroist spirit’ that first appeared in the Maghrib. It is by recovering the spirit of Ibn Rushd and his fellows Maghribī rationalists, in other words, not by uncritically emulating the West, that politics in the Arab-Muslim world can be renewed.

Conclusion

The dialogue on Islam and secularism in *Ḥiwār al-mashriq wa-al-maghrib* exemplifies the way in which two prominent ‘heritage thinkers’ use the Arab-Islamic heritage (*al-turāth*) to solve contemporary problems. Embracing the modern liberal values of freedom, rationality, progress, and democracy, Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī argue that those values are not simply to be uncritically adopted from the modern West, which, they think, represents a very different context from that of the Arab-Islamic world; rather, those values are to be found within the heritage itself. For both heritage thinkers, the best of the heritage anticipates the best of modernity, so the solution to the problems facing the contemporary Arab-Muslim world lies in recovering those elements of the heritage that are themselves ‘modern’. In making this argument, both Ḥanafī and Jābirī embrace the basic argument of the

¹¹⁵ Compare Campanini, ‘Mohammed Abed al-Jabri and Ibn Khaldun’, 32, where the author notes that for Ibn Khaldūn, the renewal of the caliphate is impossible.

¹¹⁶ In this respect, as in many others, Jābirī’s perspective is diametrically opposed to that of his leading critic, Georges Tarabichi, who, regards secularism, in the sense of the separation of religion and politics, as the starting point for democracy and other modern values to flourish. See Wasim Salman, *Le Califat et la laïcité: Perspectives syriennes* (Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 2023), 78–84.

earlier Islamic modernist movement led by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, and Rashīd Riḍā, that true Islam is essentially modern, just as true modernity is essentially Islamic. In this sense, ‘heritage thought’ is best understood as being in continuity with that earlier modernist movement, even if the focus on the term ‘heritage’ is new.

As Ḥanafī and Jābirī see it, the act of recovering the ‘modern’ elements of the heritage is possible, because the heritage is not simply a past empirical phenomenon, but is also a metahistorical reality awaiting rediscovery in the minds of contemporary Arab-Muslims. Just as, for Ḥanafī, the *turāth* is ‘a living presence in contemporary reality’,¹¹⁷ so too Jābirī writes of ‘the living presence of [the Arab-Islamic] past in the consciousness (*wa‘y*) and souls (*nufūs*)’ of contemporary Arab Muslims.¹¹⁸ Once this ‘living presence’ has been discerned, and the ‘modern’ features of the heritage sifted from those elements of the heritage that have held the Arab-Muslim world back, those modern dimensions can be manifested in the world. This, as they see it, is the meaning of ‘renewal’ (*tajdīd*), which is less a matter of programmatic reform than of cognitive recognition and assent, and thereafter the transmission of a correct intellectual stance towards the heritage.

Where the two thinkers differ, besides their disagreement on the substantive issue of the relationship between Islam and secularism, is in which elements of the heritage they deem to be ‘modern’. Whereas Ḥanafī finds modernity in *uṣūl al-fiqh*, and specifically in a ‘naturalistic’ interpretation of the legal categories (*aḥkām*), Jābirī finds it in what he regards as the quintessentially Maghribī tradition of rationalist philosophy and historiography, which he regards as the foundation of the rationalist tradition in the West and ultimately, therefore, of Western modernity. In making this argument for the Maghribī heritage, Jābirī turns the debate with Ḥanafī, despite the latter’s best efforts at upholding the idea of Arab-Islamic unity, into a true *Ḥiwār al-mashriq wa-al-maghrib*.

¹¹⁷ Daifallah, ‘Turath as Critique’, 294.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 289, citing Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa-al-turāth*, 24 (adapted).