

THEOLOGY AND THE FRAGMENTATION  
OF THE *UMMAH*: TOWARDS  
A THEOLOGY OF UNITY

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**Introduction**

Many Muslims, laymen and scholars alike, are proud of that the population of Muslims worldwide is increasing rapidly. In addition to their large and relatively youthful populations, Muslim nations are also blessed with abundant natural resources. Ironically, they occupy the lowest positions on most indices of human development and well-being. Most Muslim societies are afflicted with the diseases of disunity, sectarianism, and fragmentation. In principle, Muslims are supposed to be of one body, whereby if one member is hurt, the entire body is supposed to be afflicted with pain and fever. Unfortunately, while Muslim scholars devised ingenious approaches for dealing with the diversity of legal opinions, the same did not happen with respect to theological matters. Although most orthodox theologians emphasized the principle of Muslim unity, in reality, divergent ideas were considered deviant aberrations, if not outright disbelief, and their proponents were subjected to draconian sanctions. Even in cases where the disagreement appears to be about practical day-to-day matters (such as the extreme literalist positions of the Hanbalites and Salafis), the actual issues are more theological than legal. A Hanbalite will not excommunicate anyone on practical matters, but would quickly do so on theological grounds. A good example of the extreme Muslims could go to on theological grounds is the incessant sectarian violence in Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon and Iraq. Apparently, leaders are sowing seeds of discord on both sides of the divide. How did Muslims get fragmented and what should we do to rekindle the spirit of unity among them? This paper, after reviewing the nature and development of Sunni Muslim theological thought, argues that the way forward lies in adopting a new approach to theological discourse, akin to that used by the jurists, in what one might call "a theology of unity" which is the true spirit of *tawhīd*.

### Theological Discourses in Islam: A Historical Overview

Islamic Theology has been defined as "the science which enables one to affirm the doctrines of religion [and to prove them] to others by adducing proofs and eliminating doubts (*daf al-shubah*)."<sup>2</sup> Its subject matter includes whatever is helpful in establishing, affirming and defending religious doctrines, like the affirmation of the eternity (*al-qidam*) and unity (*al-wahdāniyyah*) of God. Generally speaking, Islamic theology is divided into two antagonistic and potentially irreconcilable approaches: Rationalist or Speculative theology (*kalām*) and Traditionalist theology (the approach of *ahl al-Ḥadīth*). Whereas the former is based on certain proofs (*dalā'il yaqīniyyah*) which are derived from reason and corroborated by tradition (*al-naql*) sometimes interpreted allegorically (*ta'wīh*), the latter is based directly on traditional reports, often sticking to a literal understanding of the texts.

In all schools of thought, theology is considered to be at a higher level than all other religious sciences. Having the establishment and affirmation of the basis doctrines of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*) as its aims and defending them against the contrary arguments of the opponents, theology is, therefore, the foundation (*aṣl*) on which all other religious sciences such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tafsīr* (exegesis of the Qur'an) are based. If we cannot prove the existence of a Creator Who is Omniscient (*'alim*) Omnipotent (*qadir*), and Who charges human beings with responsibility (*mukallif*), sent messengers and revealed Books, we cannot imagine the existence of such sciences as exegesis (*tafsīr*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) or the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). Since all the other religious sciences are based on the principles which are laid down by the science of *kalām*, it is, therefore, the chief of all religious sciences.<sup>3</sup>

2 Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī. *Sharh al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafiyyah*, ed. Ahmad Hijāzi al-Saqā, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyat al-Azhariyyah, 1987), pp.10-11. [A *Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, trans. Edgar Elder, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1950), 7-8]. See also al-Taḥānawī. *Kashshāf Istilāhāt al-Funūn*, 22.

3 Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, *Sharh al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafiyyah*, 10-11, [A *commentary on the Creed of Islam*, trans. Edgar Elder, 7-8]. See also Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah* (New York: Patheon, 1958), 50. Wolfson commented that Ibn