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Sectarian Tolerance in the Islamic Maghreb during the Early Hijri Centuries

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Abstract

After the Islamic conquests, the Islamic Maghreb witnessed the arrival of various doctrinal and intellectual currents that had developed in the Mashriq. These currents reached the region through the work of missionaries and through Maghrebi journeys to the East in pursuit of knowledge. As a result, the Islamic Maghreb became home to diverse intellectual currents. By the beginning of the second half of the second Hijri century, the region had lost the coherence of its earlier political and doctrinal unity. States with different political affiliations emerged. The Maghreb consequently became a mosaic of different political and theological groups, each with its own intellectual frame of reference.

At first glance, this new situation may suggest that the Islamic Maghreb was a land of strife and war. The picture was different in several periods. Maghrebi society became familiar with difference in a way that opened space for a new future shaped by free intellectual competition. Such competition contributed to civilization and urban development. Political conditions stabilized at certain times, and some rulers adopted a policy of sectarian tolerance. This study focuses on the following points:

- The intellectual and cultural situation of the Islamic Maghreb up to the third Hijri century.
- Examples of policies of sectarian tolerance.

Keywords: sectarian tolerance; Maliki school; Hanafi school; Ibadism; Shi'ism.

Introduction

Like other regions of the Islamic world, the Islamic Maghreb received various legal and theological doctrines during the first three Hijri centuries. The second Hijri century was the most important period in shaping the doctrinal map of the region. Its first half was marked by the Sufri, Ibadi, and Wasilite currents. From around the middle of the second Hijri century, Sunni schools also spread. The Hanafi school was adopted by the Aghlabid state, which worked to promote it. Some schools later maintained a stronger and more lasting presence, especially the Maliki school. By the end of the third Hijri century, Shi'ism prevailed politically with the establishment of the Fatimid state.

This doctrinal situation created intellectual competition. In many cases, it developed into bloody conflict. Politics and government often fueled such conflict by supporting one position in order to preserve authority and privilege. General historical works, biographical dictionaries, and works on scholarly classes record many forms of this struggle, both peaceful and violent. In the end, these struggles helped determine the legal and theological character of the Islamic Maghreb.

At first glance, this new political scene may suggest that the Islamic Maghreb was a land of strife and war. Yet the historical picture was not always so. Maghrebi society became accustomed to difference in a way that created space for free intellectual competition. Political conditions stabilized during certain periods, and rulers adopted policies of sectarian tolerance. Scholars then addressed theological questions through rational and transmitted proofs. They used teaching and instruction, formal disputation, written refutations, and scholarly composition.

The Cultural Policy of the Aghlabids

Recognition of Intellectual Difference and Broadening Participation

The Maghreb kept pace with the intellectual movement taking place in the Mashriq because it formed part of the Islamic state. This political connection required Maghrebi society to remain within the broader intellectual unity of Islamic civilization between East and West. Political leaders and scholars in the Mashriq were eager to spread their views and doctrines throughout the Islamic world. They did so through missionaries¹ and through governors who managed the affairs of the population administratively, judicially, and militarily.

Political conditions stabilized during certain periods in the Islamic Maghreb, especially in its major urban centers after the completion of the Islamic conquests. Some Aghlabid princes also adopted policies of sectarian tolerance, accepted the presence of different schools, and encouraged dialogue and disputation among them. These factors stimulated intellectual competition. Scholars therefore needed skill in argument and proof in order to persuade opponents and influence the wider public. Refutations and debates became prominent, and this had a positive effect on the development of theological and legal studies².

Some Aghlabid princes adopted an urban and intellectually open outlook in imitation of the Abbasid caliphs in the Mashriq. Prince Ibrahim ibn Ahmad al-Aghlabi (261-289 AH/875-902 CE) established a House of Wisdom in Kairouan. Its curriculum emphasized the rational sciences, including philosophy, medicine, astronomy, translation, and arithmetic. During his reign, these disciplines received greater attention than jurisprudence and hadith.

Although Hanafi jurisprudence was the school of the state, its scholars enjoyed a privileged position under the Aghlabids. The rulers also enabled Mu'tazili thought to flourish and adopted some of its views. This helped produce an intellectual transformation in the Maghreb.³ This did not prevent the presence of other groups and schools. Each group had its own circle in the Great Mosque of Kairouan. There, its members discussed their ideas and developed arguments to defend and spread them. This continued until the Maliki scholar Sahnun ibn Sa'id al-Tanukhi (d. 240 AH/854 CE)⁴ became an Aghlabid judge in 234 AH/849 CE. He ordered these circles in the mosque to be dispersed. They included Sufri, Ibadi, and Mu'tazili circles⁵.

Difference and Communication in the Pursuit of Coexistence

¹ Among the most important of these missionaries were the delegation of ten jurists sent by Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz in 100 AH/718 CE; the Sufri and Ibadi missionaries 'Ikrima ibn 'Abd Allah, the client of Ibn 'Abbas (105 AH/723 CE), and Salama ibn Sa'd (135 AH/752 CE); the Shi'i missionary 'Isa ibn Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya; and 'Abd Allah ibn al-Harith, the Mu'tazili missionary of Wasil ibn 'Ata'. These missionaries arrived within very close periods, mainly in the first decades of the second Hijri century, between 100-110 AH/718-728 CE. See: al-Maliki, Abu Bakr 'Abd Allah (d. 449 AH/1057 CE), *Riyad al-Nufus fi Tabaqat 'Ulama' al-Qayrawan wa-Ifriqiya wa-Zuhhadihim wa-Nussakihim wa-Siyar min Akhbarihim wa-Fada'ilihim wa-Akhbarihim wa-Awsafihim*, ed. Bashir Bakkush, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 2nd ed., 1994, vol. 1, pp. 99-117; 'Abd al-Majid ibn Hamda, *Al-Madaris al-Kalamiyya bi-Ifriqiya ila Zuhur al-Ash'ariyya*, Matba'at Dar al-'Arab, Tunis, 1st ed., 1986, p. 162; Alfred Bel, *Al-Firqat al-Islamiyya fi al-Shamal al-Ifriqi*, trans. 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 3rd ed., 1987, p. 97.

² Alfred Bel, *Al-Firqat al-Islamiyya fi al-Shamal al-Ifriqi*, p. 102.

³ Yahya Huwaydi, *Tarikh Falsafat al-Islam fi al-Qarra al-Ifriqiyya*, p. 185; 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Majdhub, *Al-Sira' al-Madhhab fi Ifriqiya ila Qiyam al-Dawla al-Ziriyya*, pp. 63, 65; al-Habib al-Janhani, "Lamha 'an al-Hayat al-Fikriyya fi al-Mujtama' al-Qayrawani al-Qadim," *Majallat al-Fikr*, no. 06, March 1966, Tunis, p. 25.

⁴ 'Abd al-Salam ibn Sa'id, known as Sahnun: he became the leading scholar of the Islamic West. He was of Syrian origin and was born in Kairouan. He was known for courage in defending what he believed to be right. He became an Aghlabid judge in 234 AH/849 CE. The sources agree on his role in consolidating the Maliki school and establishing its predominance over other schools. Maliki biographical works contain extensive accounts of his life. One of his most important works is *Al-Mudawwana* on Maliki jurisprudence. See Qadi 'Iyad, *Tartib al-Madarik wa-Taqrif al-Masalik li-Ma'rifat A'lam Madhhab Malik*, ed. Muhammad Salim Hashim, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut, 1st ed., 1998, vol. 1, pp. 339-362; al-Maliki, op. cit., pp. 345-375.

⁵ Qadi 'Iyad, *Tartib al-Madarik wa-Taqrif al-Masalik*, vol. 2, pp. 347-348; 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Majdhub, *Al-Sira' al-Madhhab fi Ifriqiya ila Qiyam al-Dawla al-Ziriyya*, p. 69.

Prince Ziyadat Allah III al-Aghlabi (290-296 AH/903-909 CE) held councils of disputation and personally expressed his views in them. One such debate took place between Abu 'Uthman Sa'id ibn al-Haddad (d. after 302 AH/914 CE)¹ and the Mu'tazili figure 'Abd Allah ibn al-Ashajj (d. 286 AH/899 CE). Ibn al-Haddad defeated him in argument over the createdness of the Qur'an. This led Prince Ibrahim ibn Ahmad to intervene and continue the debate with Ibn al-Haddad. The exchange ended with the prince saying to him: "You do not compel me to adopt your doctrine, and I do not compel you to adopt mine." This is a clear indication of the spirit of sectarian tolerance shown by some Aghlabid princes².

Among those known for disputation during the Aghlabid period was al-'Anbari (260 AH/874 CE).³ He debated al-Ja'fari al-Sunni (3rd Hijri century/9th century CE)⁴ in the presence of the Aghlabid prince Ziyadat Allah I (201-223 AH/818-838 CE), who supported the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an⁵.

The Aghlabid judge Abu al-'Abbas 'Abd Allah ibn Ahmad ibn Talib (d. 276 AH/889 CE) also encouraged scholarly councils of debate. He gathered jurists who disagreed on legal questions and encouraged debate among them.⁶ He even brought scholars from the Mashriq to debate the scholars of Ifriqiya.⁷ Muhammad ibn Sahnun (d. 256 AH/870 CE), for example, was summoned by the Aghlabid minister 'Ali ibn Humayd al-Tamimi (d. 251 AH/865 CE) to debate the Mu'tazili grammarian Abu Sulayman on the createdness of the Qur'an. Al-Maliki recorded the details of this debate in *Riyad al-Nufus*⁸.

¹ Sa'id ibn al-Haddad (217-302 AH/832-915 CE) studied under Sahnun but disagreed with him. He was known for disputation, debate, and strong argument. He became famous for his debates with Shi'is and for his boldness. The Ibadiis regarded him as one of their own, perhaps because of his courage in debating the Hanafi and Shi'i schools. He wrote refutations of the views of 'Abd Allah ibn Yazid, an authority of the Nukkariyya in theology. He called Sahnun's *Mudawwana al-Maduda*, which made him the object of Maliki resentment. This may have been another reason for the Ibadi claim concerning him, although the early sources do not allow a firm conclusion. His works included *Kitab al-Maqalat*, in which he responded to all schools, and *Kitab al-Istiwa'*. See al-Dabbagh, Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ansari (d. 696 AH/1297 CE), *Ma'alim al-Iman fi Ma'rifat Ahl al-Qayrawan*, ed. Muhammad al-Ahmadi Abu al-Nur and Muhammad Madi, *Maktabat al-Khanji*, Egypt; al-Maktaba al-'Atiqa, Tunis, n.d., vol. 2, p. 295; al-Khushani, Muhammad ibn al-Harith (d. 361 AH/972 CE), *Tabaqat 'Ulama' Ifriqiya*, ed. Muhammad Zanhum, *Maktabat Madbuli*, Cairo, 1st ed., 1994, pp. 61-62; Hady Roger Idris, *Al-Dawla al-Sanhajiyya*, trans. Hammadi al-Sahili, *Dar al-Gharb al-Islami*, Beirut, 1st ed., 1992, vol. 2, p. 362, footnote 3. Muhammad Hasan, editor of al-Shammakhi's *Kitab al-Siyar*, considers it unlikely that this was a different person from Sa'id ibn Muhammad ibn al-Haddad. See al-Shammakhi, Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad ibn Abi 'Uthman (d. 928 AH/1522 CE), *Kitab al-Siyar*, ed. Muhammad Hasan, *Dar al-Madar*, Beirut, 1st ed., 2009, vol. 3, p. 940.

² 'Abd al-Majid ibn Hamda, op. cit., p. 52.

³ Qadi 'Iyad wrote a biographical notice on al-'Anbari and stated that he studied under Sahnun ibn Sa'id and enjoyed standing with Ziyadat Allah I. He may have been Ibadi, although some sources identify him as Mu'tazili because of his closeness to Ziyadat Allah I and his debate with al-Ja'fari in the second decade of the third Hijri century on the createdness of the Qur'an. He came from Qastiliya, which was known as one of the Ibadi regions of the Lower Maghreb. Abu Hassan al-Yahsubi (d. 226 AH/841 CE) criticized engagement in this type of question. Sahnun was among those who studied under him; he was eloquent, quick in argument, strong in debate, a defender of the Sunna, and showed little awe toward kings. The authors of *Mu'jam A'lam al-Ibadiyya* counted al-'Anbari among the Ibadi disputants, but their sources are modern. Any judgment on his affiliation therefore remains a matter of probability. See Qadi 'Iyad, *Tartib al-Madarik*, p. 441; al-Maliki, *Riyad al-Nufus*, vol. 1, p. 286; 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Majdhub, *Al-Sira' al-Madhab fi Ifriqiya ila Qiyam al-Dawla al-Ziriyya*, p. 142; Muhammad Baba 'Ammi et al., *Mu'jam A'lam al-Ibadiyya*, *Qism al-Maghrib al-Islami*, *Dar al-Gharb al-Islami*, Beirut, 2nd ed., 2000, p. 322.

⁴ The author did not find a biographical notice for him.

⁵ 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Majdhub, op. cit., p. 141.

⁶ Al-Dabbagh, Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ansari, *Ma'alim al-Iman fi Ma'rifat Ahl al-Qayrawan*, ed. Muhammad al-Ahmadi Abu al-Nur and Muhammad Madi, *Maktabat al-Khanji*, Egypt, n.d., vol. 2, p. 159.

⁷ Najm al-Din al-Hantati, *Al-Madhab al-Maliki bi-l-Gharb al-Islami*, *Tibr al-Zaman*, Tunis, 2004, p. 99.

⁸ Al-Maliki, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 449.

The reigns of ‘Abd Allah II (289-290 AH/902-903 CE) and Ziyadat Allah III (290-296 AH/903-909 CE) were no different in their interest in the rational sciences. They brought an elite group of scholars from the Mashriq. These scholars contributed to the development of rational studies. This development was also a reaction to the control that Maliki scholars exercised over intellectual life in Ifriqiya during the second half of the third Hijri/ninth century CE¹.

The House of Wisdom included many scholars in rational disciplines such as medicine and philosophy. Among them was the Baghdadi physician Ishaq ibn ‘Imran (d. 295 AH/907 CE). He accepted the invitation of Prince Ibrahim II (261-289 AH/875-902 CE), arrived in Ifriqiya in 264 AH/878 CE, and settled there. Through him, medicine and philosophy became known in the Lower Maghreb.² His student Abu Ya‘qub Ishaq ibn Sulayman (d. 320 AH/932 CE) was likewise known for medicine and philosophy. He came to Ifriqiya from Baghdad in 291 AH/903 CE at the request of Prince Ziyadat Allah III³.

The Cultural Policy of the Rustamids

Freedom of Belief and Acceptance of the Other

In historical sources, especially Sunni sources, the name of the Kharijites was associated with violence, intellectual rigidity, and religious extremism. These two characteristics, violence and extremism, were reinforced by the role of Kharijite movements in inciting the Berbers against Umayyad and Abbasid governors in the Islamic Maghreb. Sectarian conflict among the different groups in the Maghreb was also accompanied by political support. Political rivalry shaped propaganda and rumors directed against opponents. The Ibadis were among the victims of this image, even though they rejected the acts of the Kharijites and dissociated themselves from them.

The religious and cultural tolerance of the Ibadis in the Islamic Maghreb can be seen, first, in their principles and, second, in their relations with others. The description of Tahert, capital of the Rustamid state, as the “Iraq of the Maghreb” reflects the high level of this tolerance and the intellectual atmosphere that prevailed there. Different groups and schools were allowed to conduct their intellectual activities freely.

The political stability of Rustamid Tahert affected economic, social, and intellectual life. The city attracted different groups. It also became a center for different schools and sects, including Malikis, Hanafis, and Mu‘tazilis. This produced a society with diverse theological and legal orientations. Such an atmosphere encouraged debate among the different currents that formed Rustamid society.⁴

Ibn al-Saghir described this atmosphere as follows: “The jurists exchanged questions among themselves and debated. Each group wished to know the consequence of the matters in which it differed. Whoever came to the Ibadi circles was brought close and debated with the utmost courtesy.”⁵ He also wrote: “Whoever from outside the Ibadis came to their circles was brought close and debated with the utmost courtesy. Likewise, when an Ibadi came to the circles of others, he was treated in the same way.”⁶ This reflects the cultural situation in Rustamid Tahert, which was known as the “Iraq of the Maghreb.”

This was not surprising among the imams of the Rustamid state because they were themselves scholar-imams. It was reported that Imam Abu al-Yaqzan Muhammad ibn Aflah (261-281 AH/874-894 CE) attained a high level of learning and wrote forty books on human capacity (al-istita‘a). His father, Aflah ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (208-258 AH/823-871 CE), had not yet reached full maturity when three study circles were already held around him: one on theology, one on language, and one on jurisprudence⁷.

¹ Najm al-Din al-Hantati, *ibid.*, p. 99.

² Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri, *Nahnu wa-l-Turath*, Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-‘Arabiyya, Beirut, 1st ed., 2006, p. 225.

³ Ibn ‘Idhari al-Marrakushi, Abu al-‘Abbas Ahmad ibn Muhammad (d. 712 AH/1312 CE), *Al-Bayan al-Mughrib fi Akhbar al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib*, ed. G. S. Colin and E. Levi-Provençal, Dar al-Thaqafa, Beirut, 3rd ed., 1983, vol. 1, p. 141.

⁴ Alfred Bel, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150; ‘Abd al-Qadir Bu‘Aqada, *Al-Haraka al-Fiqhiyya fi al-Maghrib al-Awsat bayna al-Qarnayn 7 wa-9 H/13 wa-15 M*, PhD dissertation in Medieval History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Algiers 2 Abu al-Qasim Sa‘d Allah, 2014/2015, pp. 187, 190.

⁵ Ibn al-Saghir (third Hijri/ninth century CE), *Akhbar al-A‘imma al-Rustamiyyin*, ed. Muhammad Nasir and Ibrahim Bahhaz, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 1986, p. 117.

⁶ Ibn al-Saghir, *ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷ Al-Wisayani, Abu al-Rabi‘ Sulayman ibn ‘Abd al-Salam (sixth Hijri/twelfth century CE), *Kitab al-Siyar*, ed. ‘Umar Bu‘Asbana, Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, 1st ed., 2009, vol. 1, p. 327.

The Rustamids pursued a policy of sectarian tolerance toward different schools, especially the Hanafis.¹ The Hanafi presence continued during the Rustamid period. Their number does not appear to have been small, as a mosque in Tahert was built specifically for them and became known by their name². The same general policy applied to the other schools and sects.

The Malikis enjoyed complete freedom to practice religious rites according to the school of Imam Malik, except in the congregational mosque³.

Although these examples come from separate historical periods and do not represent the entire reality of relations between the two sides, moderation and sectarian tolerance appear to have characterized much of that relationship.⁴ Ibn al-Saghir's testimony in his account of the imams describes the justice and tolerance of the Rustamid imams. Other examples include the good relations between the Rustamids of Tahert and the Umayyads of al-Andalus. Ibadi students also studied with Maliki scholars in al-Andalus and Kairouan, while Maliki students studied with Ibadi scholars in Tahert. These are further indications of this relationship.

This pattern continued even after the fall of the Rustamid state. One of the clearest examples of intelligent tolerance toward the other was recorded by al-Darjini concerning the Ibadi shaykh Abu Muhammad Jamal al-Maduni, who was alive after 354 AH/967 CE.⁵ He led a congregation whose members were mostly followers of another school and practiced qunut in the dawn prayer.⁶ He therefore recited Qur'anic verses containing supplications as qunut. In this way, the prayer remained valid according to the Ibadi school. The worshippers thanked him and praised him.⁷

Disputations

The Mu'tazilis, despite their rebellion against Rustamid political authority, held debates with the Ibadis on the banks of the Mina River.⁸ The sources do not mention any Shi'i intellectual activity in Tahert. Yet Shi'is were present with leading members of other schools when Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i entered Tahert in 296 AH/909 CE. This suggests the strong spirit of sectarian tolerance that characterized intellectual life in the Rustamid state. For this reason, Tahert was regarded as one of the major cultural centers of the Islamic Maghreb.

In the Central Maghreb, the Mu'tazilis were among the subjects of the Rustamid state. Al-Bakri (d. 487 AH/1094 CE), in his account of Tahert, described its imam as "the head of the Ibadis and their imam, and the imam of the Sufris and the Wasilites. He was greeted with the title of caliph. The Wasilite community was near Tahert, and their number was about thirty

¹ Hanafi jurisprudence relies extensively on hypothetical cases, such as "if the case were such and such," in the form of a series of successive questions. This led Imam Malik ibn Anas to direct Asad ibn al-Furat to Iraq after he asked too many hypothetical questions of this kind. The purpose was to prepare for legal cases that might arise. A clear effect of this method can be found in Maghrebi Ibadi legal and theological works in formulations such as "If someone asks, we say." This suggests that Ibadi scholars may have been influenced by Hanafi jurists in their methods of argument. This is especially relevant because Hanafis in the Islamic Maghreb were often associated with the Mu'tazila, and scholars of schools and sects recognize that they shared many principles. See Najm al-Din al-Hantati, op. cit., p. 35.

² Jawdat 'Abd al-Karim Yusuf, *Al-'Alaqat al-Kharijiyya li-l-Dawla al-Rustamiyya, al-Mu'assasa al-Wataniyya lil-Kitab*, Algiers, 1984, p. 95.

³ Ibn al-Saghir, op. cit., p. 77.

⁴ Alloua Amara, "La structuration des ibadites-wahbites au Maghreb (XIe-XVe siècle)," p. 262.

⁵ Al-Darjini described him as "a jurist of the ancestors ... comprehensive in what he gathered from dispersed knowledge ... and among the foremost in learning, piety, and generosity." He served Abu Khazar Ya'la ibn Zaltaf in Warjalan when the latter rose against the Fatimids after the killing of Abu al-Qasim Yazid ibn Makhlad. A force was prepared in Warjalan and sent toward Baghaya, but Abu Khazar hastened to depart before the reinforcements from Warjalan arrived. He and the Ibadis with him were defeated in 354 AH/967 CE. See al-Darjini, *Tabaqat al-Masha'ikh*, vol. 2, p. 345; Mu'jam A'lam al-Ibadiyya, *Qism al-Maghrib*, vol. 2, p. 114.

⁶ The reference is undoubtedly to the Malikis. They practice qunut in the dawn prayer, unlike the Ibadis. This is a disputed juristic issue.

⁷ Al-Darjini, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 347.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 82-83.

thousand.”¹ Ibadi historical sources also give extensive accounts of debates between the Ibadis and the Mu‘tazilis on the banks of the Mina River near Tahert.²

In Akhbar al-A‘imma al-Rustamiyyin, the Maliki author Ibn al-Saghir recorded the details of a debate in which he himself participated with a leading Ibadi scholar of Tahert. The subject was the requirement of a marriage guardian.³ Although this debate presents the Sunni side as superior, it also reflects the broad sectarian and intellectual tolerance that marked cultural life in the Rustamid period. The spread of disputation, the frequency of debates, and the participation of different schools show that these encounters aimed to persuade others of a particular doctrine.

Ibadi debates did not always take this form. Abu al-Qasim ibn al-‘Amudi, a Sufi shaykh who had come from Tozeur, visited the judge of Nefta, ‘Umar ibn ‘Azuz al-Nafti. The judge honored him and invited Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn al-‘Azzabi to attend the gathering.⁴ When Ibn al-‘Amudi learned that al-‘Azzabi was an Ibadi, he asked whether he belonged to those who hated ‘Ali, meaning ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, may God be pleased with him. Al-‘Azzabi asked, “Who told you this, shaykh?” Ibn al-‘Amudi replied, “This is what is said about you.” Al-‘Azzabi answered, “No. My father was one of the jurists of the Wahbiyya,⁵ and he named me ‘Ali.” They then discussed other subjects. Al-‘Azzabi won his affection, and before they parted Abu al-Hasan was told: “I want you not to leave me during my stay in this town.”⁶

The Cultural Policy of the Fatimids

Tolerance and the Management of Conflict

The Fatimid period in the Maghreb was not entirely a period of military and political conflict. It also included periods of sectarian tolerance, especially in the early stages of the state. Tolerance may sometimes have been used as a means to achieve political goals. Even so, the Fatimids initially sought to present themselves as tolerant rulers who did not discriminate among schools, even when this position was political rather than doctrinal.

From the beginning of their state and mission, the Fatimids sought the means needed to establish their creed and consolidate their school in the Maghreb. They developed methods of theological argument by opening themselves to different fields of knowledge, especially the rational sciences. They encouraged engagement with philosophy and disputation in order to justify their political and doctrinal choices.⁷

¹ Al-Bakri, Abu ‘Ubayd Allah (d. 487 AH/1094 CE), *Al-Masalik wa-l-Mamalik*, ed. André van Leeuwen and André Ferré, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1992, vol. 2, p. 735.

² Abu Zakariyya Yahya ibn Bakr (d. 471 AH/1078 CE), *Siyar al-A‘imma wa-Akhbaruhum*, ed. Isma‘il al-‘Arabi, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 2nd ed., 1982, pp. 102-107; al-Darjini, Abu al-‘Abbas Ahmad ibn Sa‘id (d. 670 AH/1271 CE), *Tabaqat al-Masha’ikh*, ed. Ibrahim Tallay, Matba‘at al-Ba‘th, Constantine, n.d., vol. 1, p. 57; Ibn al-Saghir, op. cit., p. 82; al-Shammakhi, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 362; Ibrahim Bahhaz, “Al-Mizabiyyun al-Mu‘tazila: Qira’a Jadida li-Nusus Qadima,” *Majallat al-Hayat*, no. 01, January 1998, published by Jam‘iyyat al-Turath, Ghardaia, p. 129.

³ Ibn al-Saghir, *Akhbar al-A‘imma al-Rustamiyyin*, p. 104.

⁴ Malikis used this designation for followers of the Ibadi school after the establishment of this system. Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali al-‘Azzabi was close to the judge and was a jurist. He may have been invited to the gathering for the purpose of debate.

⁵ The Wahbi Ibadis were the main Ibadi community from which the other groups branched after internal Ibadi conflicts. Historians differ over the origin of this name. Some attribute it to Imam ‘Abd al-Wahhab ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Rustam because the designation appeared after the Nukkari schism. They argue that the form Wahhabiyya was changed to Wahbiyya to suit Amazigh pronunciation. Others attribute it to ‘Abd Allah ibn Wahb al-Rasibi, arguing that if the name had derived from ‘Abd al-Wahhab ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman it would have been Wahhabiyya rather than Wahbiyya. The term was applied to the main Ibadi community in order to distinguish it from the groups that broke away from it. See Ibn al-Saghir, *Akhbar al-A‘imma al-Rustamiyyin*, p. 37; al-Wisayani, *Siyar*, vol. 1, p. 280; ‘Amr Khalifa al-Nami, *Dirasat ‘an al-Ibadiyya*, trans. Mikhail Khuri, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1st ed., 2002, pp. 195-169. This is the only group that has survived in different parts of the Maghreb to the present day. The other groups survived for different periods but did not acquire enough strength or intellectual influence to become a major current capable of competing with the Wahbi current that dominated Maghrebi Ibadism. The Nukkariyya survived the longest, until the end of the ninth Hijri century.

⁶ Al-Darjini, *Tabaqat al-Masha’ikh*, vol. 2, pp. 516-517.

⁷ Najm al-Din al-Hantati, op. cit., p. 157.

They relied in particular on Greek philosophy¹ and on Mu'tazili methods in establishing doctrinal positions. The two traditions agreed on several theological questions, including the createdness of the Qur'an and the denial of the vision of God in the hereafter.² Fatimid theological heritage therefore displays a clear philosophical character. This also corresponds with their doctrine, which relied on esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna. In this way, they directly enriched intellectual life with new doctrines that stimulated the flourishing of theological disputation in the Islamic Maghreb.

When their missionary Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i (d. 298 AH/911 CE) entered Kairouan in 296 AH/909 CE, he maintained the tradition of disputation among schools and sects at the Aghlabid House of Wisdom. He encouraged debates, attended them, and participated in them. He was himself skilled in disputation and eloquent in speech. He was presented as a thoughtful man who knew how to defend his doctrine through convincing argument, sophistry,³ and skillful rhetorical evasion.⁴ Hasan Husni 'Abd al-Wahhab counted about forty debate sessions between Isma'ili missionaries and Sunnis.⁵ According to the same historian, the number of theologians active during the third Hijri century reached about thirty.⁶

The Fatimids in the Maghreb directly contributed to lifting the restrictions that Maliki scholars had imposed on intellectual life, especially on discussion of theological questions. One example was Sahnun ibn Sa'id (d. 240 AH/855 CE), who in 234 AH/849 CE dispersed the circles of rival doctrinal groups. Such restrictions continued until the end of the Aghlabid period⁷.

Abu 'Abd Allah's brother, Abu al-'Abbas al-Makhtum (d. 298 AH/911 CE), also presided over a court filled with debates between Fatimid missionaries and scholars of other schools, especially Malikis. He was known for strong attachment to his school, haste, excessive speech, and weak judgment.⁸ This led his brother Abu 'Abd Allah to rebuke him, saying: "You have damaged for us the affairs of the town and its people, which we then had to repair."⁹ Abu 'Abd Allah also rejected his brother's proposal to exile the Maliki jurists from Kairouan. He said: "Our state is a state of exposition and proof, not a state of coercion. Leave the people to their schools." These debates were sometimes held under the personal supervision of Fatimid rulers, including Abu 'Abd Allah and 'Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi (297-322 AH/934-909 CE).

Among the theological questions discussed in these debates were the imamate and prophethood. Sa'id ibn al-Haddad (d. 302 AH/915 CE) took part in them. Al-Dabbagh (d. 696 AH/1297 CE) recorded their details in *Ma'alim al-Iman*.¹⁰ These debates did not cease until Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i was assassinated.

Dialogue between Rigidity and Instrumentalization

The Fatimid caliph al-Mansur (334-341 AH/945-952 CE) was said to be attracted by no pleasure except the pleasure of wisdom.¹¹ The last Fatimid caliph in the Maghreb, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (341-365 AH/952-975 CE), maintained a court for legal discussions and theological debates among different schools and sects. He raised questions for debate, brought scholars

¹ Muhammad Jadidi, "Al-Hukm al-Fatimi min al-Bahth 'an al-Hurriyya ila Mumarasat al-Sulta," in *Min Qadaya al-Tarikh al-Fatimi fi Dawrihi al-Maghribi*, coordinated by Buba Majani, Publications of the Laboratory for Research and Studies in the Civilization of the Islamic Maghreb, Dar Baha' al-Din lil-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 1st ed., Constantine, 2007, pp. 114-115.

² 'Abd al-Majid ibn Hamda, op. cit., p. 243.

³ It is a practice of persuasion based on the ability to employ language through eloquence and rhetorical skill. It constructs an argument from premises that appear sound and truthful while being false in their inner content. This produces claims that resemble truths in forms that appear clear and certain. Its purpose is to mislead the opponent and silence him. See Jamil Saliba, *Al-Mu'jam al-Falsafi, al-Sharika al-'Alamiyya lil-Kitab*, Beirut, n.ed., 1994, vol. 1, pp. 658-660; al-Jurjani, *Al-Ta'rifat*, ed. Muhammad al-Siddiq al-Minshawi, Dar al-Fadila, Cairo, 2004, p. 287.

⁴ Ibn 'Idhari, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 124; Musa Laqbal, *Dawr Kutama fi Tarikh al-Khilafa al-Fatimiyya mundhu Ta'sisiha ila Muntasaf al-Qarn al-Khamis Hijri*, al-Sharika al-Wataniyya lil-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', Algiers, 1979, p. 418.

⁵ Hasan Husni 'Abd al-Wahhab, *Waraqat 'an al-Hadara al-'Arabiyya bi-Ifriqiya al-Tunisiyya*, part 1, p. 259.

⁶ Ibid., part 1, p. 219.

⁷ Najm al-Din al-Hantati, op. cit., p. 146.

⁸ Ibn 'Idhari, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 150.

⁹ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 155.

¹⁰ Al-Dabbagh, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 298-308.

¹¹ Qadi al-Nu'man, *Al-Majalis wa-l-Musayarat*, ed. al-Habib al-Faqi and Ibrahim Shabbuh, Dar al-Muntazar, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1996, p. 442.

close to him, and included them in gatherings of knowledge and wisdom, as Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 363 AH/973 CE) called them. He set aside regular times for these gatherings and spent much of the night reading books, studying the sciences, and writing.¹ The Fatimids had become aware of the dangers produced by sectarian intolerance. They therefore adopted greater gentleness and conciliation toward followers of other schools, especially the Ibadis, even when this was a form of taqiyya.

Ibadi scholars participated in debate sessions organized by Fatimid princes and ministers. Abu Tamim al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (341-365 AH/952-975 CE) gathered scholars of different schools before him and had them debate one another. Ibadi sources refer to several such debates and state that Ibadi scholars prevailed in them, a point they report as acknowledged by their opponents.² The Ibadi shaykh Abu Nuh Sa'id ibn Zanghil (4th Hijri century/10th century CE) said of himself: "I debated on behalf of this community before Abu Tamim and Abu Mansur [Buluggin ibn Ziri al-Sanhaji] (361-373 AH/972-984 CE), and there was no school that I did not overcome."³ Abu Tamim al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah did not conceal his admiration for the arguments of Ibadi scholars. They were treated with respect and esteem. He described Ya'la ibn Zaltaf (d. 380 AH/990 CE) as "a learned and pious man" and Sa'id ibn Zanghil as "a young disputant".⁴

Conclusion

The ability of some doctrinal movements to establish political entities in the Islamic Maghreb from the end of the second Hijri century, together with their geographical separation from central authority in the Mashriq, may suggest that doctrinal difference was expressed through violence more than through dialogue and disputation. This could lead to the view that the primary goal was to establish a state rather than to spread a doctrine. Yet this stereotypical view is not always correct. The spread of disputation and debate during many historical periods was linked to political stability and to the creation of an atmosphere of sectarian tolerance.

Under these conditions, Maghrebi scholars became more ambitious in seeking a deeper understanding of religion. They engaged in interpretation and hermeneutics. Religious belief was no longer expressed in a simple form. It increasingly rested on the construction of arguments and the formation of convictions. This occurred after the ideas of these groups had spread and some had gained a foothold in the Maghreb. By the beginning of the fourth Hijri century, the first works devoted specifically to creed and theology had appeared in the region.

The effective implementation of dialogue, away from violence, attempts to eliminate the other, and ethnic fanaticism, appeared most clearly in the following forms:

- The appointment of individuals from different groups to political offices and the entry of some notable figures into the service of rulers who differed from them doctrinally.
- The study of some students under scholars who belonged to different schools.
- The use of disputation as a form of scholarly activity through which scholars of different schools defended their doctrines against opposing schools and sects. They showed considerable ability in responding to their opponents and a high level of skill in the techniques of disputation. The theological questions discussed by the disputants, together with the works they composed in this field, show that Maghrebi scholars developed an important body of scholarship comparable to that of scholars in the Mashriq in the development of legal and theological studies.

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