Monotheism constitutes one of the central doctrines of Islam. The notion is again and again voiced in the Qur’an, for example in sura 112 (entitled “Sincere Religion”) which, in the translation of Arthur Arberry, reads “Say: ‘He is God, One (ashhab), God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and equal to Him is not any one.” While initially it was apparently mostly a refutation of pre-Islamic polytheism in Arabia, the text was later on interpreted as primarily directed against the Christians. The notion of tawhid is also central to the doctrinal thought of Ibl Abд al-Wahhāb (1703–92), a Hanbali scholar from central Arabia whose theological vision was put into practice as a result of his allegiance with the central-Arabian amir Muhammad b. Sa‘īd, the founder of the Wahhābī-Sa‘ūdī state that eventually resulted in the modern state of Saudi Arabia, a country that has been instrumental in spreading the ideas of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb far beyond its borders. Taking his cue from the thirteenth century neo-Hanbalite theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb drew a distinction between tawhid al-riḥiyya, the affirmation that God is the sole creator of the world, and tawhid al-ḥašiyā or tawhid al-liḥida, the notion that God is the sole object of worship according to the divine law. The second notion was condemned according to Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is Islamic unity, and any kind of sectarianism or diversity is therefore to be rejected. During the twentieth century, Islamic activists increasingly singled out the notion of tawhid to be the one defining doctrine of Islam, a development that was perhaps ushered in by the publication in 1897 of Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s (1849–1905) renowned Risālat al-Tawḥīd. Considering tawhid as the main organizing principle of human society, numerous activist organizations and Islamist parties adopted the term such as the “Dar al-Tawhid” (“Abode of Unity”), a Shi‘ī organization in the Gulf region, the Sunnī “Harakat al-Tawhid” (“Unity Movement”) in Palestine, or the “Hizb-ur Tawhid” (“Party of Unity”) in Bangladesh. Another central feature of the movement according to Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb is Islamic unity, and any kind of sectarianism or diversity is therefore to be rejected. During the twentieth century, Islamic activists increasingly singled out the notion of tawhid to be the one defining doctrine of Islam, a development that was perhaps ushered in by the publication in 1897 of Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s (1849–1905) renowned Risālat al-Tawḥīd. Considering tawhid as the main organizing principle of human society, numerous activist organizations and Islamist parties adopted the term such as the “Dar al-Tawhid” (“Abode of Unity”), a Shi‘ī organization in the Gulf region, the Sunnī “Harakat al-Tawhid” (“Unity Movement”) in Palestine, or the “Hizb-ur Tawhid” (“Party of Unity”) in Bangladesh. But what does the notion of tawhid, “monotheism” or “unity,” in fact stand for? The above-quoted Qur’ānic sūra conveys the notion of divine oneness, i.e., that God does not have a partner, no equal besides Him. This is also the understanding of the concept of tawhid as expressed in the first half of the shahāda, the Islamic profession of faith developed during the post-Qur’ānic period, but is already implied in a series of Qur’ānic verses (2:255; 27:26; 28:70; 47:19, etc.). This shahāda, which constitutes the first of the so-called Pillars of Islam, is in fact the act of declaring “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” The renowned mystic Muhḥī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165–1240) laid the foundation for what became later the doctrine of the “unity of being” (wahdāniyya / wahhidīyya) that proved influential ever since. Ibn al-ʿArabī distinguishes three levels of tawhid: the absolute, undelimited, and exclusive reality of the divine essence (al-ḥadīyya / al-liḥāyya) that is devoid of any multiplicity as the highest level of tawhid; inclusive unity (wahdāniyya / wahhidīyya) constituting the next layer in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s system that comprises the divine names and attributes, each one pointing to another aspect of the Divine. These are also the cause for the multiplicity of created beings, the loci in which God manifests Himself. The tawhid al-dalīl finally constitutes the lowest level of unity in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s system and corresponds to the orthodox Islamic definition of tawhid, i.e., the denial of polytheism as expressed in the Islamic profession of faith. Among rational theologians, the mutakallimīn, it was primarily the question of the divine attributes and their ontological status and the manner in which they relate to the divine essence that was at stake. The Qur’an asserts God’s omnipotence (“Indeed, God is over all things competent—innā Llāh ‘alā kull Shayṭān gāsher” as is stated in Q 2:220 and elsewhere) as well as His omniscience (“God is ever Knowing and Wise—wa-iḥkāma Llāh allāma ḫakīma,” Q 4:17 and elsewhere), as well as other attributes, and it states that God has “power” (qadr) and “knowledge” (ilm), etc. This gave rise to the controversial discussion of whether “power,” “knowledge,” etc., constitute eternal attributes that are distinct from God’s essence or not. Assuming they were not, in what manner would His being powerful be distinct from His being knowing? Conversely, if they were distinct eternal attributes, they would constitute separate eternal ontological entities and, therefore, a plurality of eternal beings, rather than the one eternal God. Furthermore, with these eternal entities inhering in God, God himself would be compound, which would undermine the notion of a self-sufficient, all-powerful God—a clear violation of the doctrine of divine unicity. While traditionalist theologians considered any rational speculation over the dicta of the revealed sources to be impermissible and willingly accepted the evident contradiction between divine unity and a multiplicity of eternal attributes attached to the Divine by referring to the dogmatic injunction that the revealed sources need to be accepted “without asking about them” (la kāya), the issue took center stage among the rationalist theologians who were unwilling to compromise on the doctrine of tawhid. The principal defenders of monotheism were the so-called Mu‘tazīlīs, the “People of Justice and Monotheism” (ahl al-idīl wa-l-tawḥīd) as their adherents called themselves, a theological movement that flourished between the eighth and thirteenth century C.E. As is the case with many aspects of Islamic religio-intellectual history, discursive theology in general and Mu’tazilī dialectical reasoning in particular were closely related in their evolution and development to parallel phenomena among the followers of other religions that were present in the Muslim world. The earliest preserved manifestations of discursive theology, “kalām” in Arabic, in Muslim circles can be traced back to the mid- or late eighth century. In two groundbreaking publications in 1980 and 1981, Michael Cook pointed out that characteristic features of Muslim kalām argumentation are already present in seventh-century Syriac Christological disputations and have some parallels in anti-Chalcedonian Syriac material as well. His findings have since been further refined.1 The methodological tools of discursive theology began to leave their mark on Jewish thinkers writing in Arabic since the ninth century, and it seems that it was again the Christian kalām tradition that proved influential for the formation of Jewish medieval theology. The earliest extant Jewish kalām work is the ‘Iḥrīn maqāla, Twenty Chapters, of Dāwūd b. Marwān al-Muqammās, a student of the Syrian-Orthodox theologian Nonnus (Nīnā) of Nisibis, who apparently flourished during the first half of the ninth century—so far the earliest theological summa in Arabic that we possess. As has aptly been shown by Sarah Stroumsa, it was primarily Nonnus’s characteristically Syriac Christian kalām—Aristotelian logic put to the service of Christian theology—that had “influenced and shaped al-Muqammās’ thought.” Against the backdrop of the glaring absence of previous Jewish systematic philosophy—al-Muqammās “launched what was to develop into a remarkable tradition of Jewish rational thought,” to paraphrase Sarah Stroumsa’s evaluation of al-Muqammās’s pioneering role in the evolution of a Jewish kalām tradition.2 The Kitāb al-Amānāt wa-l-tiqādāt—that is, The Book of Beliefs and Opinions—of the tenth-century Rabbannite Jewish scholar Sa‘adīya Gaon (882–942) seems likewise to have been inspired by Christian theological literature as well as Islamic models. The Kitāb

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Holberg Prize Symposium: Ancient Religions, Modern Disent. Bergen, June 2014.

2 The work has recently been reedited. See Dāwūd b. Marwān al-Muqammās’s Twenty Chapters (Iḥrīn maqāla), an edition of the Judeo-Arabic text, translated into Arabic characters, with a parallel English translation, notes, and introduction by Sarah Stroumsa (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2016).
al-Ash’arī or Ashā’ira after its eponymous founder Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash’arī (d. 936), which “Jewish Mu’tazila” dominated Jewish theological thinking for centuries to lite Islamic ideas, such as theodicy and human free will, as well as the stress on , of Sa’adya’s Karaite contemporary Ya’qūb Rayy, the most important center of Baṣran Mu’tazilism during the vizierate

Maimonides writes in the Book of Blessing, of the Karaite Levi ben Yefet (in Arabic Abū ʿAlī Saʿūd Lāwī b. Ḥasan al-ASHBOARD) [late tenth to early eleventh century], the son of the prominent Karaite Bible exegete and legal scholar Yefet ben Eli ha-Levi (whose Arabic name was Abū ʿAlī Ḥasan b. ʿAlī Lāwī al-AbSH) [d. after 1006], Levi wrote the book at the request of his father as a vindication of Judaism on the basis of Mu’tazilite rational theology, but unlike his father, who disapproved of Islamic Mu’tazilite theology, Levi adopted the doctrines of the Mu’tazila and implicitly recognized Muhammad as a prophet of God endowed with prophethood, though ranking below Moses. Further evidence as to when (and why) Jewish thinkers began to adopt Mu’tazilite thinking can be gleaned from the extant Jewish copies of Mu’tazilite works of Muslim representatives of the movement, as preserved in the various Genizah collections, most specifically the Abraham Firkovitch collection in St. Petersburg. Although a full inventory of the relevant collections and its Mu’tazilite materials is still a major desideratum, it seems that the writings of the Būyid vizier and patron of the Mu’tazila, al-Ṣāḥib b. ‘Abbād (938–95), who was himself an adherent of the movement, constitute the earliest Muslim Mu’tazilite works, copies of which can be traced in the various Jewish collections. Moreover, it is attested that Jewish theologians regularly participated in the maja’il convened by Ibn ʿAbbād at his court in Rayy, the most important center of Bāyan Mu’tazilism during the vizierate of Ibn ʿAbbād (976–95), although we do not possess any names of the Jewish theologians who flourished there.

While these observations do not shed any light as to why Jewish thinkers started to adopt Mu’tazilite doctrines, they suggest, however, that the major turn toward Mu’tazilism occurred during the later decades of the tenth century, i.e., only some few decades after the lifetime of Sa’adya Gaon. Levi ben Yefet’s summa was soon eclipsed by the theological writings of the Rabbanite Samuel ben Ḥofni Gaon (d. 1013) and his Karaite opponent and joined forces to work on the relevant materials. Other works of his were either not transmitted or preserved as paraphrastic renderings (for example his al-Kiṭāb al-Maḥīṭ, which only came down to the Zaydi of Yemen as the al-Maḥīṭ fi l-maḥīṭ of Ibn Mattawayh).

By contrast, the Jewish Mu’tazilites preserved an earlier layer of Bāyan Mu’tazilite literature, namely numerous writings of ʿAbd al-Jabbār, many of which are otherwise only known by title, including commentaries by ʿAbd al-Jabbār on a work by Abū Ḥashim al-Jabbārī on natural philosophy and on a theological text by Ibn ʿAbbād. In addition to this, extensive fragments of what seems to have been a voluminous theological summa by Ibn ʿAbbād have been preserved, as well as a work on natural philosophy by ʿAbd Allāh b. Saʿīd al-Labbād, another prominent student of ʿAbd al-Jabbār whose works soon fell into oblivion among the Zaydi Mu’tazilites.

By way of illustration, I shall briefly refer to the case of Ibn ʿAbbād’s theological summa, possibly his Kiṭāb Nahj al-uṣūl fi l-ṣīḥ, The Book of the Procedure Along the Way on the Principles of Religion. Islamic historical sources inform us that Ibn ʿAbbād had composed comprehensive theological works, but none of these have been preserved in the Islamic world. So far we only possess some concise theological tracts in a variety of the written as introductions to the doctrine of the school. That he was widely read within Jewish Mu’tazilite circles is evident from two extensive fragments of a theological summa of his that are both written in Hebrew characters. Unlike the concise tracts that are preserved in Islamic collections, these fragments (which are now available in critical edition3) clearly show that al-Ṣāḥib was not only an adherent of the Mu’tazila but a theologian in his own right. Moreover, as I suggested before, his writings may have played a decisive role in the formation of the Jewish Mu’tazila.

This example—one out of many—also illustrates what scholars of Muslim intellectual history can gain by looking for relevant source material beyond strict denominational borders. The scholarly investigation of the Jewish Mu’tazila, its historical connection to Muslim counterparts, and a systematic exploitation of the Islamic primary materials preserved in Jewish collections, are still in their infancy. While representatives of the “Wissenschaft des Juden- tums” (“Science of Judaism”) toward the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, such as David Kaufmann, Martin Schrenker, or Arthur Biram, were aware of this important episode, the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany and World War II put an end to this early attempt to study Muslim and Jewish Mu’tazilites as part and parcel of one single intellectual phenomenon and to analyze the historical relations between them. It was only later that scholars of both Jewish and Islamic studies “rediscovered” this important field and joined forces to work on the relevant materials. 4

Sabine Schmidtke, Professor in the School of Historical Studies, has played a central role in the exploration of heretofore unexplored and unknown theological and philosophical writings. Schmidtke has applied rigorous study to the edition and critical analysis of manuscripts in Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Persian, and her work extends from Arabic-speaking countries to Israel, Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Prior to joining the Institute Faculty in 2014, Schmidtke came to the Institute as a Member in the School during the 2013–14 and 2008–09 academic years.

4 ʿAbd al-Shābih Ibn ʿAbbād Promoter of Rational Theology: Two Muṭṭāζīlī kallām texts from the Cairo Geniza, ed. Wolfdorf Madelung and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2010).