# On How to Discern the Truth of Religion

Hunayn ibn Ishaq (AD 809–873)

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Hunayn ibn Ishāq, On How to Discern the Truth of Religion [Translated by Stephen J. Davis] Based on the critical edition by Samir Khalil Samir, "Maqālat unayn ibn Is āq fī 'Kayfīyat idrāk aqīqat al-diyāna'," al-Mashriq 71.2 (1997), 345-63; see also Paul Sbath, Vingt traités philosophiques et apologétique d'auteurs arabes chrétiens du IX au XIV siècle (Cairo: H. Friedrich and Co., 1929), 181-5. The respective paginations of Samir's and Sbath's editions are marked in the translation with the symbols Sm (= Samir) and Sb (= Sbath). N.B. The italicized headings in bold and in brackets were supplied by Samir for the presentation of his edition; they are not part of Hunayn's original text.

**(Sm349/Sb181) On how to discern the truth of religion, by the wise Hunayn ibn Ishāq, the Nestorian physician (may God have mercy upon him).**
He said, (2) From where does a person know that what he believes is the truth, and that what someone else believes is falsehood? [I. Introduction: A Basic Premise] (3) Indeed, if someone says that that belief has come to him by way of his ancestors, (4) or if he says that that belief (Sm350) has come to him by way of a book, (5) or from a prophet who has performed miracles, (6) or from his own opinion, since he holds to a certain viewpoint and to him his own religion is confirmed to be true through it, (7) all the adherents of the religions who disagree with him would be able to say something similar. (8) If that response is common among all the adherents of the (different) religions, (9) it must be necessary then for whoever accepts his religion on the basis of this argument to embrace any other religion on account of this same argument.

(10) But if he does not accept such an argument from those who disagree with him, then he should not accept this argument from the followers of his own religion. (Sm351) [II. The Distinction between Truth and Falsehood] (11) To the one who says this, we say that truth and falsehood, among all utterances, (12) are known by the reasons that prompted their acceptance in the first place. (13) The reasons why a lie is accepted are different from the reasons why the truth is accepted. [II.1. Reasons for the Acceptance of Falsehood] (14) The reasons for the acceptance (Sb182) of a falsehood are six in number. (15) The first reason is that the one who accepts falsehood is forced to accept that which is made compulsory

for him against his will. (16) The second reason is that a person willingly tries to escape from hardship and oppression, (Sm352) since he was not able to bear them, (17) so as to be delivered from them to what he hopes is ease and comfort.

(18) The third reason is that a person favors great might over humiliation, honor over inferiority, and power over weakness, (19) so that he leaves his religion and converts to another. (20) The fourth reason is that the one who speaks (falsehood) is a wicked man, deceitful in word, (21) with the result that he beguiles and overwhelms whomever he invites (to accept falsehood). (22) The fifth reason is that (the one who invites to falsehood) exploits the ignorance of his invitees and their lack of literacy. (23) The sixth reason is that there is (Sm353) a natural kinship between the invitee and the inviter, (24) so that the invitee, not wishing to sever that shared kinship, agrees with him in his religion. [II.2. Reasons for the Acceptance of Truth] (25) Now, the reasons for why truth is accepted are four in number. (26) The first reason is that the one who accepts the truth beholds miracles that the human faculties are incapable of (performing).

(27) (Sm354) The second reason is that the manifest aspect of the truth to which the inviter offers an invitation is (in fact) evidence that testifies to the truthfulness of its hidden aspect. (28) The third reason is the (decisive kind of) proof that obliges one to accept it. (29) The fourth reason is when the end of something corresponds to its beginning, (30/31) and when its origin (i.e. the valid statement following its valid precedent) is indisputable due to the validity of what preceded it. [III. The Application of These Criteria to the Different Religions] [III.1. How the (Different) Religions Stand in Relation to these Reasons] (32) This induces us to observe (Sm355) how we may know (33) that all the other religions have been accepted on the basis of those (first) six characteristics, whereas the true religion has been accepted on the basis of the (latter) four. (34) It would take too long to mention every single one of the religions: (35) those religions that were ancient (Sb183) but became defunct along with everything that had given them subsistence, (36) as well as those religions that have come about more recently but whose subsistence has rested on the subsistence of those (defunct religions); (37) for, insofar as we can know that one of these religions has been invalidated, it is indeed proven invalid, just as the other religions before it were invalid.

(38) It is incumbent upon anyone who wants to understand (Sm356) (in the first place) which of these reasons has led to the acceptance of his (own) religion, (39) and whether it was one of the reasons for the acceptance of falsehood or one of the reasons for the acceptance of the truth, (40) to do the following: First, he must observe who it is who accepts that religion now and for what reason he accepts it—(41) whether it is on account of one of the reasons for accepting the truth or one of the reasons for accepting falsehood—(42) until he understands (from the acceptance of what is held to in his own time) what the reasons were for its acceptance in times past, since its very beginning. (43) And second, he must perceive that the truth is something that is accepted spontaneously, (44) and that falsehood requires reasons through which it becomes established in the mind of the one who accepts it, (Sm357)

(45) for indeed whoever contemplates this, at the very moment that he contemplates it, perceives which forms of religious observance are true and which are false.

[III.2. Presentation of the Idea: The Reasons for the Acceptance of Christianity are Contrary to the Reasons for the Acceptance of Falsehood] (46) Now I will refrain from mentioning the remaining forms of religious observance, and instead I will expound on my own religion, asserting that it has been accepted (47) for the (same) reasons that truth is accepted, whether it be for all of those reasons or (only) some of them. (48) And I say that it is incomprehensible that people should accept a particular form of religious observance (49) without (at least) one of the reasons why every religion is accepted. Indeed, it is unimaginable, apart from the ten characteristic reasons (Sb184) that I have enumerated, (51) with six of them being the reasons for the acceptance of falsehood, (Sm358) and four being the reasons for the acceptance of truth. (52) If it is correct that not one reason for the acceptance of the (true) worship of God is found among the reasons for the acceptance of falsehood, (53) then the reason for the acceptance of this (true) worship must be found among the four reasons why truth is accepted, whether it be all of them or (only) some.

(54) And if the reason for the acceptance of the (true) worship of God (that which we ourselves hold to) in fact is not (the same as) the reason for the acceptance of falsehood, (55) but rather it is the case that the reasons for the former are opposed to the latter, as far as it can be from its opposite, (56) then the truth of the matter is established and obligatory. (57) We find the matter to be just so. (Sm359) [IV. Proof that the Reasons for the Acceptance of Christianity are Contrary to the Reasons for the Acceptance of Falsehood] (58) Examination of each of the reasons: (59) With regard to the first reason (for the acceptance of a lie), the true religion is in fact not accepted through the great might of a king, nor through subjugation by a ruler. (60) But rather all the kings and rulers of the earth have been hostile to it (61) and have forbidden all the people from (accepting) it by means of all kinds of torture and unseemly killing, (62) and (thus) they have wiped them off (the face of) the earth. (63) And yet this true religion has vanquished all of those rulers and has remained unshakeable.

(64) With regard to the second reason, the true religion has not invited (people) to flee from a life of hardship and difficulty to a life of plenty and ease. (65) But rather, it has called (them) (Sm360) from all the more plentiful and easier forms of life (66) to the life that is harder and more difficult, to that which is almost an object of loathing. (67) And yet, it has been accepted in the most excellent way! (68) With regard to the third reason, the true religion has not invited (people) from lowliness to high standing, or from humiliation to great might. (69) But rather, it has called (them) from great might to humiliation. (70) And yet, it has been accepted, even to the extent that whoever has accepted it would rather die than live at its cost. (71) With regard to the fourth reason, the true religion was not received from wicked people (Sb185) and from the eloquent in speech. (Sm361) (72) Rather, it is received from the ignorant and speech-impaired, and from fishermen (who might even be considered more silent and speech-impaired than the fish).

(73) With regard to the fifth reason, those who have accepted the true religion have in fact been neither ignorant, nor stupid, nor common, nor barbarian. (74) But rather, they have been people of logic and philosophy more than all the (rest of the) world, (75) and (they have been) people of discernment and scholarship, those who surpass the rest of the people in wisdom. (76) With regard to the sixth reason, it was not the case that whoever accepted the true religion (Sm362) was joined with those he loved and with his friends as a result of that acceptance. (77) But rather, once that person accepted it, for its sake he typically parted ways with everyone with whom he had common kinship—whatever that kinship might be, whether through close family ties or through loving affection. (78) Now if you would like to add a seventh characteristic reason, then look and see (79) what the apostles made public knowledge about this religion, (80) in comparison to which nothing appears more difficult.

[Conclusion] (81) No one at all ought to say (Sm363) that if all of these matters were like this—(82) and hence our acceptance of whatever we believe apart from the display of signs and wonders—(83) then (proving the truthfulness of religion) would be impossible except by an opponent who presents (it) out of his own expertise. (84) If you say this, then seek for yourself (with respect to your religion as well as the others) what corresponds to what I have described to you regarding our religion. (85) Indeed, you will notice that there is no comparison between us and them.

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