Why do humans have religion? Many years ago I was surprised to discover that there were people in both antiquity and the Islamic world who thought they knew why. That is what I shall talk about here, or rather I shall talk about the Muslim case, with occasional reminders of the Greek precedent.

So let me start with al-Jāḥiẓ, a famous litterateur and theologian who died in 868. He tells us that human beings need a God-given law in order to survive. He notes that there is a big difference between what he calls “original nature” (الـٍّـتاـبـعـالاـوـوال) and acquired habit which, as he says, becomes second nature (تـُـباـنثـانـيـيـٍان). As regards our original nature, he explains that God has given all living beings a strong desire to secure benefits for themselves and to avoid harm. That is built into all of them, humans and animals alike, he says, but he only discusses the case of humans. It is in the nature of the self to crave wealth and ease, power, influence, high status and so on, and if God left people alone to follow their own natural habits, the result would be disastrous, for there would be nothing but rivalry. There would be no mutual affection or kindness (الـٍّـتاـبـرـ), and without that, there could be no society: people would stop reproducing, and mankind would die out. But God knew that mankind would not be able to have any social life without discipline (تـٍّـداـبـ) , so he issued commands and prohibitions—meaning a revealed law. He also knew that his commands and prohibitions would not
have any effect without reward and punishment, so he instituted hell to restrain people from following their own desires and paradise as a compensation for all the many things they have to renounce in this world in order to obey him. In short, Jāḥīẓ is saying that God made civic life possible by giving people laws to suppress their anti-social tendencies and by instituting paradise and hell as the carrot and the stick to ensure that His law would be obeyed.

So here we have a ninth-century author wondering what a revealed law is for. In effect, he is asking why human beings need religion, or more precisely religion of the type variously called positive or conventional, for revealed law (sharʿ) and positive religion (dīn) were practically synonymous concepts in medieval Islam. What's more, Jāḥīẓ formulates his answer in terms of functional sociology: a religious law has certain social functions that enable human groups to survive; it serves to curb human selfishness; it makes people sacrifice their own individual interests for the sake of the common good. In effect, that is also the explanation that the sociologist Durkheim offered in 1912. The reason that Jāḥīẓ could think like a sociologist is that he shared two fundamental presuppositions with his contemporaries.

The first is that prophets are lawgivers, not spiritual figures. (Prophets are not actually mentioned in the epistle, but they are presupposed, as they are the intermediaries though whom God's law is transmitted to mankind.) Their role is to get people together in a single community and subject them to the same law, so that they can escape from moral, social and political anarchy. Religion means unity and order. It brings people together in the same vehicle of salvation and makes them obey rules that enable them to travel together in peace and quiet to their destination in this world and the next. This is modelled on Muḥammad, who united the Arabs in a polity. It also fits Moses, who organised his people for the exodus from Egypt. But it does not fit Jesus, and modern Westerners do not usually think of religion as a synonym for law and order either. To them, religion is first and foremost an individual relationship with God, a source of spiritual sustenance, direction and support, and its social functions are what the sociologist Merton called latent functions, that is to say side-effects that people do not notice, though they may be exceedingly important in practice. But these functions were not latent at all to Muslims of al-Jāḥīẓ's time, for to them, religion was first and foremost about community formation. As a tenth-century work tells us, no religion was ever instituted for the benefit of the individual, or as another says, religion is collective obe-

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5 Ibid., i, 104f.