

## Small Theological Differences, Profound Philosophical Implications:

Notes on Some of the Chief Differences between the Ash‘arīs and  
Māturīdīs

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### Abstract

In this article, focusing primarily on Abū ‘Udhba’s (d. 1125/1713) *al-Ravḍa al-hahiyya* and Shaykhzāde ‘Abdurrahīm’s (d. 1148/1735) *Naẓm al-farā’id*, I discuss some of the chief doctrinal differences between the two largest Sunni *kalām* schools, namely, the Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs. On the basis of three exemplary topics: knowledge of God, God’s attributes of action (*al-ṣifāt al-fi‘liyya*), and the relationship between divine predestination and human free will, I analyze philosophical implications behind certain theological differences.

**Keywords:** Ash‘ariyya, Māturīdiyya, Knowledge of God, God’s attributes of action (*al-ṣifāt al-fi‘liyya*), Divine predestination, Human free will

### Özet

**Küçük Kelâmî Farklar, Derin Felsefî İmâlar: Eş‘arîler ve Māturīdîler Arasındaki Bazı Temel Farklılıklar Üzerine Mülâhazalar**

Bu makalenin ana konusu Ehl-i Sünnetin iki büyük itikādî mezhebi arasındaki İslam kaynaklarında zikredilen temel kelâmî farklar hakkındadır. Bu farkları konu edinen klasik İslâmî eserlerin ifadesine göre sözkonusu iki kelâm mezhebinin aralarındaki farklar teferruata daırdır ve ciddi bir ehemmiyete haiz değıldir. Bu makale, seçilen üç ana kelâmî mevzu (İlâhî bilginin mahiyeti, Allah’ın fiilî sıfatları, kader ve kesb meselesi) çerçevesinde bu farkların muhtevalarının ne gibi felsefî sonuçlar doğurabileceğı üzerinde mütalalar ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Eş‘ariyye, Māturīdiyye, İlâhî bilginin mahiyeti, Allah’ın fiilî sıfatları, Kader, Kesb

In Muslim theological (*kalām*) tradition, two contemporary theologians, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936) and Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) are regarded as the founders of two major Sunni *kalām* schools, the Ash‘ariyya and Māturīdiyya. The former adhered to the doctrines of Ḥanbalī traditionalism, and his followers established and transmitted his principles in Iraq, while the latter espoused the principles of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) and his Samarqandian followers propounded his teachings in Transaxonia. Accordingly, the Ash‘ariyya has been embraced mainly by the Shāfi‘ī and other members of Islamic legal groups, while the Māturīdiyya has been followed by mainly the Ḥanafīs. Both al-Ash‘arī and al-Māturīdī took a position primarily against the Mu‘tazilī doctrines, but to a different extent, though they both were influenced by the Mu‘tazilī *kalām* arguments, which, in fact, laid the foundation of this science and made lasting contributions to its development. Al-Māturīdī initiated criticism of the Mu‘tazilī doctrines in the East, where the Baghdadian group of the Mu‘tazilī teachings were influential in the intellectual domain, and wrote against his contemporary Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd Allāh al-Ka‘bī (d. 317/929). Al-Ash‘arī launched a similar criticism against the Basran group of the Mu‘tazilī theories in Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

In the Muslim theological discussions, on the basis of their dogmatic or rational argumentative methods, the Māturīdī school has generally assumed a middle position between the Ash‘ariyya and Mu‘tazila. Although the Mu‘tazilī influence on al-Māturīdī’s concepts and technical terminology is less apparent than its influence on al-Ash‘arī, whose former Mu‘tazilī affiliation is clearly known, due to the more rationalistic character of his doctrines, al-Māturīdī’s teachings are considered closer to the Mu‘tazila than those of al-Ash‘arī.

In this article, focusing primarily on Abū ‘Udhba’s (d. 1125/1713) *Kitāb al-Rawḍa al-bahiyya fī-mā bayn al-Ash‘ariyya wa-al-Māturīdiyya* and Shaykhzāde ‘Abdurrahīm’s (d. 1148/1735) *Naẓm al-farā‘id wa-jam‘ al-fawā‘id fī bayān al-masā‘il allatī waqa‘a fī-hā al-ikhtilāf bayn al-Māturīdiyya wa-al-Ash‘ariyya*, I will attempt to discuss some of the chief doctrinal differences between the Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs. Abū ‘Udhba, for instance, maintains that the Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs agree on the main principles of the Sunnites (*ahl al-sunna wa-al-jamā‘a*), but disagree on certain details. He asserts that

<sup>1</sup> Ayyub Ali, “Māturīdism,” M. M. Sharif (ed.), in *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: 1963), vol. 1, p. 262.

the two schools differ in thirteen points, seven of which are “verbal” (*lafẓī*) and the six “objective” (*ma‘nawī*).<sup>2</sup>

Similar to Abū ‘Udhba, an Ottoman scholar, Shaykhzāde ‘Abdurrahīm (d. 1148/1735) wrote on the topic of comparison between the Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs. Shaykhzāde, however, enumerates the differences under the names of the Ash‘ariyya and Ḥanafīyya. He does not call the latter group the Māturīdiyya, but Ḥanafīyya. This interesting point appears in various other treatments seeming to imply that al-Māturīdī obtains his authority from his Ḥanafī affiliation. In his *Naẓm al-farā‘id*, Shaykhzāde lists forty points on which the two *kalām* schools embraced divergent views<sup>3</sup>.

I do not intend to address all points examined by Abū ‘Udhba and Shaykhzāde; rather, I will highlight certain major discussions on the difference between Ash‘arī and Māturīdī schools and rearrange their writings surrounding these topics. I will focus on three exemplary topics: knowledge of God, God’s attributes of action (*al-ṣifāt al-fi‘liyya*), and the relationship between divine predestination and human free will. Through this analysis, finally, I will attempt to question the consistency of Abū ‘Udhba’s argument that the two theological schools differ only in minor points. I will argue that although the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī explanations have common characteristics as Abū ‘Udhba writes, there are, nevertheless, significant philosophical implications behind certain differences. Throughout the article, I will attempt to clarify al-Māturīdī’s arguments in a descriptive style; thus my examination is more oriented toward al-Māturīdī.

### Knowledge of God

Al-Māturīdī is regarded as the first Sunnite Muslim theologian who introduced epistemological principles in his introductory chapter of *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. We know of no theologians before al-Māturīdī who begin their work with a theory of knowledge; after him, almost every theologian introduces his work with such a theory.<sup>4</sup> Al-Māturīdī argues that senses (*‘iyān*), testimonies (*akhbār*) and reasoning (*naẓar*) are indispensable means of acquiring knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Each of these means has its peculiar character that acquires a certain kind of knowledge. Therefore he attempts to establish his system on a reliable philosophical basis.<sup>6</sup>

2 Abū ‘Udhba, *al-Rawḍa al-bahīyya* (Haydarabad: 1904), p. 5.

3 Shaykhzāde ‘Abdurrahīm, *Naẓm al-farā‘id* (Egypt: 1899).

4 Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, (ed.) Fathalla Kholcif (Beirut: 1970), p. xx.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

6 Ali, p. 261.

Al-Māturīdī maintains that by means of reasoning man should contemplate on divine wisdom embedded in creation and conclude the existence of its eternal (*al-qadīm*) Creator, Who is ultimately different from all temporal things. In a more general context, he criticizes those (al-Sūfiṣṭā'iyya) who maintain that true knowledge is not attainable at all.<sup>7</sup> He insists that senses and reason have an intimate power to acquire knowledge. Al-Māturīdī asserts that reason is naturally able to draw the conclusion that this world is a product of an eternal Creator.<sup>8</sup> It is the reason that occupies a crucial position in al-Māturīdī's epistemology, because without its assistance neither senses nor testimonies can give real knowledge. Furthermore, reason is the faculty that distinguishes man from animal; this is the real reason for the Qur'anic emphasis on reasoning. At the same time, al-Māturīdī argues that reason cannot attain every sort of knowledge, because like the senses, it is subject to certain inherent limitations.<sup>9</sup> This reason-oriented argument seems to support the Mu'tazilī position that man is able and even obliged to acquire knowledge about the existence of God by reasoning independent of prophetic revelation.

Abū 'Udhba, however, tries to avoid this conclusion. He affirms that the Māturīdīs consider the knowledge about the existence of God an obligatory conclusion on the basis of reasoning (*'aql*), while the Ash'arīs necessitate prophetic revelation (*sam'*) for the same conclusion. Both groups introduce the Qur'anic testimonies to support their arguments. The Ash'arīs, for instance, maintain that since the Qur'an reads, "Messengers of good news and warning in order that mankind might have no argument against God after the messengers." (4: 165) and "We do not punish until We have sent forth a messenger." (17: 15), knowledge of God and other religious prescriptions are dependent on prophetic revelation rather than on reason. Abū 'Udhba continues his discussion quoting an explanation by al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr [al-Baqillānī (d. 403/1013)] in his *I'jāz*. According to that explanation, religious prescriptions are of three types (*ḍarb*): the first type can only be understood by means of reasoning such as the createdness of the world and its temporal character; the second type can only be understood by means of prophetic revelation such as knowledge about religious duties (*wājib*), prohibitions (*ḥarām*), and permitted things (*mubāḥ*); and the third type can be understood sometimes by reasoning and sometimes

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7 Al-Māturīdī, p.153.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

9 Ali, p. 265.

by prophetic revelation such as knowledge about attributes of God. Abū 'Udhba attempts to de-emphasize the differences in position and concludes that even though the Māturīdī argument of the knowledge about God is dependent on reason and thus shares common points with the Mu'tazilī position, in fact, it posits that reason is a means (*ālah, wāsīta*) for obligation, rather than asserting that reason itself is independent of revelation as maintained by the Mu'tazila.<sup>10</sup> Abū 'Udhba's compromise between the Māturīdiyya and Ash'ariyya, however, does not seem convincing enough to consider al-Māturīdī's position as closer to that of al-Ash'arī than of the Mu'tazila.

Al-Māturīdī agrees with the Mu'tazilīs that reason is responsible for acquiring knowledge of the existence of God even if no prophet was sent by God for this purpose. He also agrees with them, in opposition to the Ash'arīs, that reason on the basis of its natural power can discern whether things are intrinsically good or evil (*ḥusn-qubḥ*), and it can distinguish right from wrong, while the Ash'arīs argue that things are good or evil on the basis of prophetic revelation (*sam'*). Al-Māturīdī, however, embraces a different position when he argues that the basis of religious duties is prophetic revelation, not reason.<sup>11</sup>

Another disputed point between the Māturīdīs and Ash'arīs involves the responsibility of a teenager who reaches intellectual maturity (*'aql*), but not physical maturity (*rushd*) i.e., the case of the *ṣabī 'āqil*. The Māturīdīs maintain that such a person is responsible for his faith and acquiring knowledge of God, while the Ash'arīs do not share this view. The difference, again, stems from the Māturīdī emphasis on reason as an essential faculty in all activities of mankind. On the other hand, in accordance with their general inclination to declare prophetic revelation as the primary means for acquiring knowledge of religious matters, the Ash'arīs maintain that the *ṣabī 'āqil* is not responsible for religious prescriptions in general, nor for knowledge of God in particular. Al-Māturīdī further argues that the case of the *ṣabī 'āqil* is similar to people who are not addressed by a true prophet and, for him, both groups must possess knowledge of God on the basis of their reason. In order to reduce the difference between the two *kalām* schools Abū 'Udhba repeats that in the case of the Māturīdīs, reason is not independent of the divine revelation to make the responsibility obligatory, as it is in the case of the Mu'tazila.<sup>12</sup>

10 Abū 'Udhba, pp. 34-36; Shaykhzādc, pp. 35-37.

11 Shaykhzādc, pp. 31-35; Ali, p. 266.

12 Abū 'Udhba, p. 37.

An interesting point worth mentioning here is the fact that the Māturīdīs and Ash‘arīs embrace basically opposite positions when they present their ideas surrounding the validity of blindly following another’s opinion (*taqlīd*). It is quite possibly expected that the Māturīdīs might emphasize personal reasoning in the matters of faith (*īmān*). They, however, argue that such *īmān* is valid, unlike the Ash‘arīs’ disapproval of the validity of the *muqallid’s* *īmān*<sup>13</sup>. This Māturīdian argument seems to contradict their general, reason-oriented tendencies. Although they strongly encourage people to reason and seek the truth personally in matters of belief, they take, nevertheless, a passive position when they approve the validity of *muqallid’s* *īmān*, which is obviously not an encouragement for personal reasoning. On the other hand, it is the Ash‘arīs, who are generally regarded as assuming a more dogmatic position than the Māturīdīs, who require acquisition of true knowledge through personal investigation.<sup>14</sup>

In a more general context, during the course of Māturīdian epistemological journey, the terms *taqlīd*, *dalīl* (knowing by means of proof), *‘ilm* (knowledge), *naẓar* (reasoning), *īmān* (faith), *taṣḍīq* (assent) and *ma‘rifa* (recognition) are given special attention, because each term possesses its own particular characteristics and powers to acquire knowledge. The conclusion of this journey can be summarized as follows,

Al-Māturīdī thus presents a rational view of faith, not in the sense that he sees it limited to the professional intellectual or philosopher, nor in the sense that reason is its cause, but in the sense that he does not see intellect and religious assent as opposing forces. For al-Māturīdī, intellect and religious assent are both God’s command.<sup>15</sup>

Otherwise, al-Māturīdī does not maintain that reason may acquire every sort of knowledge; for instance, he argues that human intellect falls short of perceiving God’s wisdom in all creation (*lā yablughuhā ‘aql al-bashar*).<sup>16</sup>

Another relevant point of discussion, which refers to the Māturīdian rational argumentative method in opposition to the Ash‘arīs’ dogmatic approach, is the matter of possibility and permissibility of God’s imposing something

13 Shaykhzāde, pp. 40–42.

14 On the other hand, al-Māturīdī himself criticizes *taqlīd* in religious matters, see for instance, *Tawhīd*, pp. 3–4. Such arguments indicate that in the course of their establishment, Muslim *kalām* schools were not free from later theoretical influences and changes, which were not established by the founders themselves.

15 J. Meric Pessagno, “Intellect and religious assent: the view of Abū Maṣū‘ūr al-Māturīdī,” *The Muslim World*, January (1979), p. 27.

16 Al-Māturīdī, p. 37.

beyond man's capacity (*taklīf mā-lā yuṭāq*). Abū 'Udhba states that in the views of the Māturīdīs the *taklīf mā-lā yuṭāq* is an inadmissible theological concept,<sup>17</sup> while the Ash'arīs disagree. Relying on the Qur'anic principle, "God does not charge a person with more than what he can bear" (2: 286), the Māturīdīs maintain that such an imposition is not reconcilable with divine wisdom (*ḥikma*). They compare such cases to impose on a blind man the duty to see and on a cripple the duty to walk, which are obviously outside of the spirit of religious prescriptions. Such an imposition is not required by even an ordinary man, let alone by God Who has all perfections at ultimate degree.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, the Ash'arīs maintain that God possesses the ultimate power; He can do whatever He wants. He may never be questioned in His doings. No one can limit His power. They try to support their argument through Qur'anic quotations, including "He taught Adam the names and then asked them to Angels: 'Tell Me the names of these, if you are truthful.'" (2: 31) The Ash'arīs maintain that since God addressed the Angels about the names taught Adam before, in fact, giving any information concerning them to the Angels in advance, the imposition by God of anything is admissible.<sup>19</sup>

The crucial point in the argument between the Māturīdīs and Ash'arīs does not seem to lie in this specific consideration directed to the idea of the *taklīf mā-lā yuṭāq*. Rather, the main concern seems related primarily to the two different attributes of God, i.e., the *qudra* and *ḥikma*. While the Ash'arīs try to highlight the unlimited power of God and His absolute independence in His acts, the Māturīdīs emphasize the nature of divine wisdom (*ḥikma*) and justice (*'adl*). In fact, the term *ḥikma* plays a significant role in al-Māturīdī's theological explanations. For him, *ḥikma* denotes "putting each thing in its proper place" (*waḍ'u kulli shay'in mawḍi'ahu*). That is also the meaning of the *'adl* from which God's actions do not deviate.<sup>20</sup> Thus, al-Māturīdī argues that God's creation does not deviate from *'adl* and it is equitable with *ḥikma*.<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, neither the Ash'arīs maintain that God performs aimless acts, nor do the Māturīdīs deny the omnipotence of God.

17 Al-Māturīdī himself declares that the affirmation of the idea *taklīf mā-lā yuṭāq* is an invalid (*fāsid*) argument. *Tanvīhīd*, pp. 266-269.

18 Abū 'Udhba, pp. 53-57; Shaykhzāde, pp. 25-27.

19 Abū 'Udhba, pp. 53-57.

20 Al-Māturīdī, p. 97.

21 For a more detailed treatment of *ḥikma*-*'adl* concepts in the context of Māturīdīan concept of evil, see J. Meric Pessagno, "The uses of Evil in Māturīdīan Thought," *Studia Islamica*, LX (1986), pp. 59-82.

Given above remarks, it appears that in the course of their theological discussions, the Māturīdīs embraced a more rational argumentative method than that of Ash‘arīs. They regard reasoning as the fundamental means to acquire knowledge. Their epistemological discussions surrounding knowledge of God in general, and the *ṣabī ‘āqil* and *taklīf mā-lā yuṭāq* in particular, have a more rational character than Ash‘arīs’ arguments related to these topics. In the case of *muqallid’s imān*, however, the Māturīdīs seem to hold a more dogmatic position than the Ash‘arīs, unlike al-Māturīdī’s own disapproval of the validity of the *muqallid’s imān*.

### God’s attributes of action (*al-ṣifāt al-fi‘liyya*)

Al-Māturīdī maintains that the problem of the relationship between God’s essence and attributes is, in fact, too complicated to be solved satisfactorily by human reason. His final conclusion concerning this relation is formulated as “the attributes are not identical nor other than God’s essence” (*lā huwa wa-lā ghayruhu*).<sup>22</sup> Regarding the eternity or temporality of the attributes of God, al-Māturīdī asserts that all attributes of God are eternal. He does not make a distinction between the attributes of essence (*al-ṣifāt al-dhātiyya*) and attributes of action (*al-ṣifāt al-fi‘liyya*).<sup>23</sup>

According to the Māturīdīs, God’s attributes of action such as “creating” (*takhlīq*), “providing” (*tarzīq*), “giving life” (*iḥyā*), “giving death” (*imāta*), and “bringing into existence” (*takwīn*) are all eternal attributes of God. They are neither identical to God, but nor other than His essence. The Māturīdīs do not make a distinction between the attributes of action and attributes of essence with respect to their eternity or temporality. On the other hand, the Ash‘arīs assert that the attributes of action are not eternal. They maintain that before the real act of creating (*khalq*), providing (*rizq*) and the like, such attributes are not found in God, and thus they are not called eternal.<sup>24</sup>

This subtle point of difference can be considered as one of the significant doctrinal differences that have profound implications in the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī traditions. Both schools affirmed that God possesses attributes, including knowledge (*‘ilm*), by this attribute, He knows. In this way, they took a position different from the Mu‘tazilīs who denied the individual reality of

22 Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, *Sharḥ al-fiqh al-abṣaṭ*, ed. Hans Daiber (Tokyo: 1995), p. 149.

23 Alī, p. 270.

24 Nūr al-Dīn al-Ṣābūnī, *al-Bidāya min-al-hidāya*, ed. Fathalla Kholcif (Egypt: 1969), p. 67.

the *ṣifāt* and maintained that God knows by His essence. The Māturīdīs and Ash‘arīs further adopted the Mu‘tazilī distinction between the attributes of action and the attributes of essence, yet beyond this point their philosophies split. While the Māturīdīs maintained that all attributes are eternal, the Ash‘arīs assert that the attributes of action are not eternal. The latter argued that God cannot be “creating” (*khāliq*) or “providing” (*rāziq*) before creatures exist, thus they do not say, “God is eternally creating”<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the Māturīdīs, primarily against the Mu‘tazilīs, considered divine attributes such as knowledge and power as eternally subsisting in His essence (*qā‘im bi-dhātihī*). While they observed the terminological distinction between the attributes of essence and attributes of action, they considered attributes of action as equally eternal and subsistent in Divine essence.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, they maintained that the prepositions stating that “God is the Creator” and that “God has been creating since eternity” are equally true, though the created things (*mukawwanāt*) are temporal. As a natural conclusion to this process the Māturīdī doctrine of bringing into existence (*takwīn*) became a famous point of controversy with the Ash‘arīs, because the former embraced the attribute of *takwīn* as eternal and distinct from the existent things (*mukawwanāt*).<sup>27</sup> The Māturīdīs, as opposed to Ash‘arīs, also assert that the Divine order “Be” (*kun*) must be considered in figuratively (*majāzan*), for if it had been a real (*ḥaqīqa*) address, it would have been directed either to the non-existent (*ma‘dūm*) or to an existent thing (*mawjūd*) after its coming into existence. The Māturīdīs reject both possibilities, because for them, it is inconceivable to apply the order *kun* to a *ma‘dūm*, nor is it reasonable to address a *mawjūd*, which already has an existence within this Divine order. Therefore, the Māturīdīs do not accept the idea of addressing non-existence in eternity. Similarly, concerning the divine attribute of power (*qudra*), the Ash‘arīs argue that the attribute of *qudra* is not identical to things that *qudra* has given the existence (*maqḍūrāt*), thus they assert, *maqḍūrāt* have a temporal character. The Māturīdīs, however, maintain that *qudra* is an eternal attribute subsisting

25 Montgomery Watt, *The formative period of Islamic thought* (Edinburg: 1973), p. 316.

26 Al-Māturīdī, pp. 53-55, and 55-59; al-Samarqandī, pp. 141-160; A famous Māturīdī theologian Abū al-Yusr al-Bazdawī argues, “This is a profound doctrinal problem (*mas‘ala ‘aẓīma*) between us and the Mu‘tazila,” al-Bazdawī, *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, (ed.) Hans Peter Linss (Cairo: 1963), p. 35; see also Abū al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī, *Baḥr al-kalām*, (ed.) Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Farfūr (Damascus: 1997), pp. 90-94; al-Ṣābūnī, pp. 67-73.

27 Wilferd Madelung, “al-Māturīdī,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, second edition (EI2), (ed.) C. E. Bosworth... (et al.) (Leiden: 1980- 2004), vol. 6, p. 846; Ali, p. 270.

in God's essence, and *maqdūrāt* do not necessitate the temporality of attribute of *qudra*. In a later context, al-Māturīdī criticizes the Mu'tazilī theory that the non-existent is a thing (*al-ma'dūm shay'*) and he argues that this idea is only an implicit affirmation of the eternity of the world, which obviously contradicts the Qur'anic doctrines of creation and unity of God.<sup>28</sup>

Al-Māturīdī also argues that God describes Himself as "He is God, the Creator (*Khāliq*), the Originator (*Bāri'*) and the Modeller (*Muṣawwir*)" (59: 24). This follows, for him, that if the creating and modeling were not His eternal attributes, God would have praised and described Himself with temporal attributes that refer to imperfections of Him, Who in fact absolutely free from such limitations.<sup>29</sup>

In the understanding of the doctrine of the attributes of God, al-Māturīdī's principal adversaries are the Mu'tazilīs. Since the latter group maintained that aside from the eternal Divine essence no other eternal essence can exist, thus denying the existence of eternal divine attributes, al-Māturīdī repeatedly affirmed the reality of the eternal divine attributes subsisting in His essence (*al-ṣifāt al-azaliyya al-qā'ima bi-al-dhāt*). Al-Māturīdī further argued that the eternal attributes are completely different from the creature (*tanzīh*). Therefore, in accordance with His essence, He is the living One but every other living thing is alive only through a life which is different from Him. These divine attributes are, ultimately, neither identical to His essence, nor different from Him.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, al-Māturīdī does not accept the causal connection between God's action and its object, and on the basis of this, he concludes that attributes of action are also eternal, just as the attributes of essence are. For him, therefore, "God is the Creator since eternity" (*lam yazal al-khāliq*) and "He is creating since eternity" (*lam yazal khāliqan*).<sup>31</sup> Similarly, al-Māturīdī's explanation for "creating" (*takwīn*) differs from that of al-Ash'arī. The latter argues that although God potentially possesses the attribute of creation since eternity, its actualization takes place in time, because it follows the Qur'anic command *kun fa-yakūn*. As for al-Māturīdī, he argues that God has possessed the attribute of *takwīn* since eternity, thus He is an eternal *mukawwin*. Nevertheless, for him, the difference between the attribute of *takwīn* and *mukawwan*

28 Al-Māturīdī, p. 86.

29 Al-Ṣābūnī, p. 68.

30 Manfred Götz, "Māturīdī and his *Kitāb al-Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*," Andrew Rippin (ed.), in *The Qur'an: formative interpretation* (Brookfield: 1999), pp. 22-24.

31 Al-Samarqandī, p. 143.

does not necessitate the temporality of attribute of *takwīn*. Therefore, “God is both the Creator and creating since eternity.”<sup>32</sup>

Although I am not able to examine more elaborately the real philosophical motives behind the Ash‘arī argument on the attributes of action, it seems to me that their position has certain disparities compared to their other related arguments. In the case of their arguments concerning the nature of the Qur’an, for instance, they deny the Mu‘tazilī idea of the createdness of the Qur’an, and affirm that the Qur’an is the uncreated Word of God (*Kalām Allāh*). In the present case, however, they take an opposite position. Their idea that the attributes of action are not eternal follows naturally the affirmation of the Qur’an’s createdness. For if they argue that only the attributes of essence such as knowledge (*‘ilm*), and life (*ḥayy*) deserve to be called eternal, and since it is obvious that in this sense the Qur’an does not have an eternal nature, they should have logically concluded that the Qur’an is created. The Mu‘tazilīs, at least in this case, embrace a logically more consistent argument when they deny the idea of uncreatedness of the Qur’an, because they initially maintain that the attributes are not eternal. Therefore, since at the beginning of their discussions on the attributes of action the Māturīdīs assert that these are eternal attributes of God just as the attributes of essence, their conclusion concerning the Qur’an’s createdness seems more convincing and logically consistent than that of Ash‘arīs.

### **Divine predestination (*qadar*) and human responsibility: the case of *kasb* (acquisition)**

The discussions surrounding the predestination (*qadar*) and human free will (*irāda juz‘iyya*) represent another point of distinction between the Māturīdīs and Ash‘arīs. On these discussions, al-Māturīdī’s position is considered to be intermediate between the Ash‘arīs and Mu‘tazilīs. Al-Ash‘arī states that man’s acts are created by God and his power to act is dependent on a divinely decreed power by which the act simultaneously comes into existence (*al-istiṭā‘a ma‘a al-fi‘l*), while the Mu‘tazilīs assert that “the power is before the act.” Al-Māturīdī, on the other hand, tries to highlight the idea of human choice (*ihkiyār*), and take a middle position between the Ash‘arīs and Mu‘tazilīs. Nevertheless, he concludes that human acts are created by God and dependent on His will (*irāda*) and decree (*mashī‘a*).<sup>33</sup>

32 Shaykhzāde, pp. 17-20; Götz, pp. 22-24.

33 Watt, p. 315.

The discussions on this matter can be traced back to the Qadariyya and later carried on by the Mu'tazilīs, that man is entirely free in his actions; he is even "creator of his activities" (*khāliq al-af'āl*). Al-Māturīdī naturally opposed such an argument, because for him, it is an overemphasis of human free will, and it is not reconcilable with the Qur'anic omnipotent God. Between these ideas of divine predestination and human free will, al-Māturīdī sought a way out of this dilemma when he argued that God is the Creator of all things including human acts, but He also creates a free choice (*ikhtiyār*) in man which enables him to choose between divinely commanded and forbidden things. This also means that man is able to choose the acquisition (*iktisāb*) of the activity which God has created for him. Furthermore, al-Māturīdī distinguishes between human action performed under duress (*iḍṭirāran*), such as the trembling of an old man's hand, and freely chosen activity, because man is responsible for his acts as long as he has a choice. Thus he does not speak of man's *iktisāb* and responsibility in such activities.<sup>34</sup>

According to al-Māturīdī, in one respect (*jīha*) human acts are acts of God, but in another respect, they are man's acts and his *ikhtiyār*. He further maintains that God's knowledge of human action has a descriptive character, rather than determinative one, thus God does not compel man to act. God's knowledge encompasses the knowledge of who will choose the wrong way and the straight path. Thus, for al-Māturīdī, the initial choice is man's –not God's– as argued by al-Ash'arī. God has given to man a power by which he is able to choose between in courses of action. The capacity of man (*istiṭā'a*) has two aspects, one precedes the act and the other is simultaneous with it.<sup>35</sup>

Abū 'Udhba states that the Ash'arī theory of the *kasb* is so complicated that the saying "This is even more complicated than Ash'arī's *kasb* theory" (*hādihā adaqq min-kasb al-Ash'arī*) became a wide spread proverb. The Ash'arīs interpreted the *kasb* as saying that when a man firmly decides (*'aẓm muṣammam*) to act in a certain way, God creates that act for him, and this decision is also created by God.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, in the Ash'arī *kasb* treatment, a man's role in his actions is greatly overshadowed by God's role; in the Māturīdian context, *kasb* has greater element of human free will.

Al-Māturīdī's own formula between the arguments by the Jabarites (*jabriyya*) and Mu'tazilīs is based on the principle of divine wisdom (*ḥikma*). He

34 Shaykhzāde, pp. 51-53; Götz, pp. 24-28.

35 Madclung, "al-Māturīdiyya," *EI2*, vol. 6, p. 847.

36 Abū 'Udhba, p. 26; Shaykhzāde, pp. 53-54.

does not approve both arguments, which regard God or man as the solely independent real actor in man's acts respectively. He tries to establish a certain amount of freedom for man, but without denying the ultimate power of divine will and decree. The *ḥikma* means placing a thing in its own place and divine wisdom encompasses both justice (*'adl*) and grace (*faḍl*). Therefore, al-Māturīdī argues that the influence of divine will is always accompanied with divine wisdom, which by its very nature does not overburden man.<sup>37</sup>

Abū 'Udhba argues that the discussion also has a linguistic-theological aspect, i.e., whether man's acts properly (*ḥaqīqatan*) or metaphorically (*majāzan*) belong to him. This naturally follows the discussion whether man is only a means (*wāsiṭa*) of God in all his performances, or whether he is a subject in real sense.<sup>38</sup> The Māturīdī tradition is inclined to make man responsible for his acts, thus it gives preference human free choice, while the Ash'arī tradition is inclined to highlight God's omnipotence as a unique Actor in all creation. At the same time, the two schools are aware of the fact that if man did not have any power in his actions, the fundamental religious idea that this world tests mankind for the world to come, would have been meaningless. Similarly, all divine commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would have lost their basic purpose. Furthermore, such an understanding would have not been reconcilable with the Qur'anic God, Who has ultimate justice (*'Ādil*) and wisdom (*Ḥakīm*), and without human free choice and power imposing responsibilities on man is not among the characteristics of the Qur'anic God. Therefore, "the conception of *kasb* is a way of saying that a man is responsible for his acts, at least to the extent that he may justly be punished for them if they are wrong."<sup>39</sup>

The matter of *kasb* is subtly interrelated to human knowledge. Al-Māturīdī argues that on reason, by which one differentiates right from wrong, man distinguishes from other creation. Al-Māturīdī also maintains that man is supported by special faculties such as thinking, feeling, judging, as well as by revealed books and messengers for his guidance. Man can choose one of the alternatives that may benefit or harm him through reasoning. During this process, al-Māturīdī argues, man feels freedom when he desires, chooses and acts without compulsion by any external agent. The denial of this freedom naturally leads to the conclusion that God is wholly responsible for human actions. Such a

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37 Ali, p. 266.

38 Abū 'Udhba, p. 28.

39 Watt, pp. 192-193.

conclusion is obviously irreconcilable with the Qur'anic definition of the most merciful, wise and just God.<sup>40</sup> According to al-Māturīdī, therefore, by means of the freedom of choice (*ikhtiyār*) and freedom to acquire an act (*iktisāb*), man intends to perform a certain action and God creates that action which is at the same time, known by Him from eternity. This process, for al-Māturīdī, makes man responsible for his actions, and it does not imply any compulsion on the part of man, especially after his *ikhtiyār* and *iktisāb*. On the other hand, al-Ash'arī also used the term *kasb*, yet his interpretation of the term places great stress on the God's power, rather than highlighting the idea of man's freedom of choice (*ikhtiyār*). For al-Ash'arī, even the desire and power of the acquisition are created by God, and acquisition simply means "a general coincidence of the divine power and human actions". This conclusion obviously has a more deterministic character than that of al-Māturīdī. Thus some succeeding prominent Ash'arī scholars including Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) and Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) did not agree with al-Ash'arī on this point.<sup>41</sup>

The concept of *kasb* is closely related to the concepts of *irāda*, *ikhtiyār* and *qudra*, since the process of human actualization of an act follows this path. Both al-Ash'arī and al-Māturīdī introduced arguments surrounding these notions when, for instance, al-Ash'arī's approach is taken into account,

He discusses both the object of the acquisition, broadly describing it as "the thing" and also explains the reason for the use of the term *kasb*, i.e., because the act occurs by means of a *qudra muḥdatha*. The point of this expression is to emphasize that the term *kasb* is to be understood as descriptive of the mode of the act, that it is accomplished by means of a power that does not flow *per se* from the particular agent, but that must be brought into being in time by the power of another. The term *kasb*, as a technical expression, must here then be understood as relevant manner of acting, not in respect, strictly speaking, either to the act or to the moral consequences of the act.<sup>42</sup>

So far as the term *irāda* is concerned, al-Māturīdī equates it with the term *ikhtiyār*. For him, "will" means a rejection of compulsion and non-intentional action. He introduces a parallel argument for choice when he discusses that choice can neither be compelled nor happen by chance, thus it is a "willed" and "intend-

40 Ali, p. 267.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 267-269.

42 Pessagno, "Irada, ikhtiyar, qudra, kasb the view of Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 104 (1984), p. 179.

ed” action. In the final step, however, all actions are dependent on God’s creation, because He is the unique Creator (*khāliq kull shay’*). Therefore, any treatment of human will or choice is also created and dependent on the Divine *kun*.<sup>43</sup>

According to al-Māturīdī, the concept of *irāda* also plays an essential role in belief (*īmān*); he argues that belief under compulsion is not reconcilable with the Qur’anic notion of *īmān*:

Since according to the Qur’an, belief is the supreme example of man’s choosing, it follows that necessarily one must apply to this choice in particular the definition of willing, i.e., that choice means the rejection of force and non-intentional action. Forced and non-intentional actions, as descriptions, may both be analyzed in terms of the agent’s use of his own understanding (*al-‘aql*) in relation to the action spoken of. In the case of forced action, the agent’s *‘aql* is ignored or overridden by some external agency, with the result that what is done cannot be said to have “chosen”. In the case of non-intentional act, the flaw lies in particular agent himself. He either did not use his *‘aql* at all or used it in a negligent manner. Here, too, one cannot call the act performed “willed” or “chosen” because there was a basic deficiency in the chronologically and logically prior act of thought. This freedom from overwhelming external agency and debilitated internal practice specifically constitutes belief as something fully chosen, i.e., one’s own act and belief.<sup>44</sup>

As for *ikhtiyār*, al-Māturīdī argues that everyone naturally knows that he freely chooses (*mukhtār*) what he does and that he is an agent (*fā’il*), and acquirer (*kāsib*).<sup>45</sup> At the same time, however, freedom of choice is given and “its truth is subject only to verification, not to proof.” For him, only through the divine creative act can human freedom be established. Nevertheless, on the basis of this notion of *ikhtiyār*, al-Māturīdī does not hesitate to call man a *fā’il*.<sup>46</sup>

Following the concepts of *irāda* and *ikhtiyār*, the term *qudra* occupies a significant place in the course of realization of human acts. In the Māturīdian argument, the performance of certain actions follows the course that at the beginning, the man himself is a God’s creation. Upon this man God bestows *qudra* in two senses, i.e., creating within him inner powers (*asbāb*) and external means (*ālāt*) that man will need. This process can be articulated as follows,

43 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

45 Al-Māturīdī, p. 226.

46 Pessagno, “*Irada, ikhtiyar, qudra, kasb* the view of Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī,” p. 183.

Present also within this man is *irāda*, inchoate free choice. Left in this condition, man would always be in the position of ineffective choice or, at best, faced with immense difficulties in effecting his wish. For the sake of ease of effective action, God endows man with the power of effective free choice... If one restricts oneself to the reading of the text, the final genesis of the human act, according to al-Māturīdī, is man's willing in the sense of wishing. When this takes place, God thereupon creates for man in this state a power, one which elevates the wish to an act, the act of free choice, by which one clearly and finally prefers one thing to another. Concomitant with this final elevation of willing to its highest state is the act itself. This act in its final sense, is, in its ontological structure also a divine creation which man, for his own motives, has wanted to do, the power being given. Such, for al-Māturīdī, is the proper description of human act in which he believes he is preserving divine power, while explaining the impact of human choice.<sup>47</sup>

Al-Māturīdī argues that as a consequence of this process, divine reward and punishment are attached to the act of free choice, and similarly, human responsibility is based on this choice.<sup>48</sup> This process implies that Māturīdian concept of human responsibility is established, in fact, before the concept of *kasb*, i.e., on the concept of human free choice. Accordingly, God's creation of *qudra* has a specific character. He does not create "a power which imposes on man an alien act. Rather, He creates the power for man to do what man wants done, but is unable to do on his own because of his radically subordinate nature."<sup>49</sup> Consequently, in the Māturīdian context, the *kasb* is a natural concept that man is acquainted with in the process of acting, alongside its theological character, in which God is characterized as only *khāliq*. Since, in the theological context, only God deserves to be called *fā'il khāliq*, man should be described as *fā'il kāсіб*, "an agent who acquires his power to act as distinct from The Agent Who has the power to act essentially."<sup>50</sup>

In sum, it seems that both the Māturīdīs and Ash'arīs try to find a safe explanation for this subtle matter between the ideas introduced by the Mu'tazilīs and Jabarites. The Mu'tazilīs maintained that man has freedom of action, while the Jabarites asserted that God is the only actor in man's acts. According to the Māturīdīs and Ash'arīs, both arguments equally share extreme considera-

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47 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

tions in opposite poles. It seems that in order to emphasize God's absolute will and power, the Ash'arīs took a position closer to the Jabarites, while in order to highlight human responsibility in his acts, the Māturīdīs embraced a position closer to the Mu'tazilīs. Otherwise, both arguments ultimately regarded predestination as an effective factor in man's actions, though according to al-Māturīdī, in the process of human acts, the process of human free will lasts longer than in the Ash'arīs' argument.

### Conclusion

Al-Ash'arī and al-Māturīdī are considered to be the founders of two Sunni *kalām* schools. In the Muslim theological discussions, their respective positions are generally characterized as follows: while al-Ash'arī attempted to take a middle path between the Mu'tazilī rationalism and the Ḥanbalī traditionalism, al-Māturīdī tried to place his method between the doctrines embraced by the Ash'arīs and Mu'tazilīs.

In general, Sunni Muslim theologians, such as our study case, Abū 'Udhba, argue that although there exist certain minor points of difference between the argument of Ash'arīs and Māturīdīs, their explanations for fundamental theological concepts share the same spirit. I agree with Abū 'Udhba that the two *kalām* schools introduced basically similar arguments for essential theological matters. On the other hand, it seems to me that al-Ash'arī's and al-Māturīdī's different explanations for certain problems, especially in the case of God's attributes of action (*al-ṣifāt al-fi'liyya*), divine predestination and human free will, as well as knowledge of God reveal significant doctrinal, philosophical and theological implications. In the case of God's attributes of action, for instance, the discussion can be traced back to philosophical arguments concerning the eternity of the world and its coming into existence. Again in the case of divine predestination and human free will, the arguments share similarities with philosophical—in particular Avicennan—discussions on determinism in the world and God's relation to creatures, as well as the nature of God's knowledge and its impact on worldly affairs, because the related data are open to philosophical speculations. Nevertheless, the Muslim theologians who examined the theological differences between the two *kalām* schools, generally, do not consider them as profound problems.

At the same time, it seems to me, however, that in the course of Muslim theological discussions, some popular problems were not purely theologically-ori-

ented matters. The prevalence of such problems is dependent also on other contemporary political and sociological considerations which influenced the formation and structure of these theological arguments. In the case of the Mu'tazila, for instance, it was probably the famous *miḥna* (inquisition) that kept Muslim thinkers away from the Mu'tazilī arguments, rather than their purely intellectual conclusions about such Mu'tazilī theories. Therefore, some theological problems might protrude only in the context of certain historical experiences. Since we know of no comparable tragic historical instances between the Ash'arīs and Māturīdīs, their theoretical rivalry was confined mainly to the intellectual arena. This historical background seems also to underlie the arguments of theologians, such as Abū 'Udhba, who de-emphasized the doctrinal differences between the two *kalām* schools. This fact, nevertheless, does not necessarily mean that such differences do not entail significant philosophical implications.

Thus, though I agree in general that the Ash'arī and Māturīdī explanations have similar character, I am not inclined to disregard or underestimate philosophical differences which, I believe, may make noteworthy contributions to Muslim philosophical discussions.

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