KASTAMONU ÜNİVERSİTESİ

IV. ULUSLARARASI
ŞEYH ŞA'BÂN-I VELÎ SEMPOZYUMU

-HANEFÎLİK-MÂTURÎDÎLİK-

05-07MAYIS 2017

CİLT 2

Kastamonu Üniversitesi
IV. Uluslararası
Şeyh Şa'bân-ı Velî Sempozyumu
-Hanefîlik-Mâturîdîlik-

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THE POTENTIAL IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE OF ABU MANSUR AL-MATURIDI'S THOUGHT FOR MUSLIMS IN THE WEST

(Abu Mansur El-Maturidi'nin Fikirleri, Batı'daki Müslümanlar ile Potansiyel İlişkisi ve Önemi)

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ABSTRACT

Although Imam Maturidi is held in high esteem in Turkey and scholarship about him has been increasing, especially in Turkish, many Muslims beyond Turkey do not see adequately the potential of aspects of his thought to be highly relevant and important for Western Muslims. While many only know of historical Islamic thinkers as names and descriptions and as superficial caricatures, a closer and deeper examination of Maturidi's thought shows ethnic and cultural elements that will be of particular interest to Western Muslims insofar as they are concerned with the future representation, outreach, and growth of their minority communities. Such questions as the Qur'an, Arabic and indigenous Muslim languages, and the relationship between Arab and non-Arab Muslims are of interest in this respect and Imam Maturidi presents credible and authoritative thinking and opinion that can make a contribution to the resolution of Western Muslims' problems. This thought may also be relevant and useful for other Muslims for their relations with Western Muslims and for the process of formation of the Western Muslim communities.

Özet

İmâm Mâturîdî Türkiye'de büyük bir saygı görmesine ve onun hakkında özellikle Türkçede çalışmalar artış göstermesine rağmen, Türkiye dışındaki Müslümanlar onun düşüncesinin kimi yönlerinin potansiyelinin Batılı Müslümanlar için oldukça uygun ve önemli olduğunun yeterince farkında değildir. Pek çok kimse tarihteki İslam düşünürleri ile ilgili olarak isim, tasvir ve genel çizgiler nispetinde bilgi sahibi iken, Mâturîdî'nin düşüncesi daha yakından ve derinden incelendiğinde, onun düşüncesinin Batılı Müslümanlar için, kendi azınlık cemaatlerinin gelecekteki temsili, el uzatması ve gelişimi itibarıyla, dikkat çekici birtakım etnik ve kültürel unsurlar içerdiği görülecektir. Kur'ân, Arapça ve yerli Müslüman diller, Arap ve Arap olmayan Müslümanlar arasındaki ilişki (Arap-Acem ilişkisi) gibi konular bu bakımdan oldukça ilginçtir ve İmâm Mâturîdî Batılı Müslümanların problemlerinin çözümüne katkıda bulunabilecek güvenilir ve muteber düşünce ve görüşler sunmaktadır. Genel mânâda Mâturîdî düşüncesi Batılı Müslümanlarla ilişkileri ve Batılı Müslüman cemaatlerin oluşum süreci sebebiyle diğer Müslümanlar için de uygun ve yararlı olabilir

My intention in this paper is to suggest directing attention to the importance and relevance of work with Imam Maturidi's material for Muslims in the West and also for Turks representing Islam with Muslims and others in the West. Although Imam Maturidi (Abu Mansur Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Mahmud Maturidi d. 944) is held in high esteem in Turkey and scholarship about him has been increasing, especially in Turkish, many Muslims beyond Turkey do not see adequately the potential of aspects of his thought to be highly relevant and important for Western Muslims. A closer and deeper examination of Maturidi's

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thought shows ethnic and cultural elements that will be of particular interest to Western Muslims insofar as they are concerned with the future representation, outreach, and growth of their minority communities. Such questions as the Qur'an, Arabic and indigenous Muslim languages, and the relationship between Arab and non-Arab Muslims are of interest in this respect. Imam Maturidi presents credible and authoritative thinking and opinion that can make a certain contribution to the resolution of Western Muslims' problems in reaching the mainstream. This thought may also be relevant and useful for Turkish Muslims for their relations with Western Muslims and for the process of formation of the Western Muslim communities. If the thinking of Maturidi can be relied upon authoritatively by Muslims making representation of Islam in the West, certain aspects of Maturidi's thought can be highly relevant for overcoming barriers and limitations that have kept Islam in the West marginalized and obscure.

A major barrier and limitation for representation of Islam in the West is the issue of language. Anwar G. Chejne noted that,

"….to the Muslims in general and to the Arabs in particular, Arabic had been for long regarded as a God-given language, unique in beauty and majesty, the best equipped and the most eloquent of all languages for expressing thought and emotions. Such beliefs have prevailed up to the present time, particularly, in the Arab world where the pietists and the nationalistically-minded consider it the mainstay of the faith, the pillar of nationality and nationalism, and the determining factor of differentiation among people who otherwise have much in common."[2]

The problem here is not the use of Arabic but a tendency that can be observed by non-Arab Western Muslims of a superiority of Arabic over indigenous languages such as English. Arabic is seen throughout many Western Muslim communities as superior over other languages as the "Islamic lingua franca" or "language par excellence of Islam." Westerners going into mosques are regularly told that they must learn Arabic or that their knowledge is inferior: in short, they are second-class Muslims because they don't speak Arabic.

Possibly providing a solution to this problem of Arabic language as a barrier to reaching many more Westerners with the message and meaning of Islam would be certain aspects of Maturidi's thought. As Turkish scholar Tahir Uluç describes,

"Maturidi, İblis'in Allah'ın Adem'e secde etme emrine karşı çıkması ile alakalı konuyu farklı kelimeler ve cümleler ile anlatan ayetleri zikrettikten sonra şu sonuca varır: "Allah bu olayı farklı lafızlarla zikretmiştir. Bilinmektedir ki bu O'nun İblis'e hitabı birden fazla değil, tek bir kez gerçekleşmiştir… Bunda lafızların farklı olmasının ve değişmesinin hükmü farklılaştırmadığına ve anlamı değiştirmediğine delalet vardır. Bu da haberin lafzının farklı olmasına ragmen anlamı ifade ettiği takdirde caiz olduğuna delalet eder. **Benzer şekilde eğer indirildiği dil dışında okunursa, anlamını ifade ettiği takdirde caiz olur."[3]**

Translated to English, this statement by Tahir Uluç can be read as, "Maturidi gives the conclusion after evaluating the different verses of the Qur'an about Allah's command to İblis to prostrate himself to Adam : "Allah mentioned about this incident by using different words. It is known that His address in this matter to İblis was done only one time, not more than once…There is also evidence that different words or changing the way of saying the same incident does not change the last decree and the meaning. This gives the conclusion that even if the ways of describing are different, as long as the meaning is the same, it is permissible. In

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[2] Anwar G. Chejne, Arabic: Its Significance and Place in Arab-Muslim Society, Middle East Journal, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Autumn, 1965), p.449.

[3] Tahir Uluç (2016) *İmam Maturidi Düşüncesinde Etnik ve Kültürel Unsurlar* in "Günümüz İslam Dünyası'nda Meseleler ve Çözüm Yolları , Uluslararası Sempozyum Bidiriler," 10-12 Ekim 2016, Şen Yıldız Yayıncılık, İstanbul, page 386: Tahir Uluç references (footnote number 57) Maturidi, Te'vilat, Hicr Süresi, 15/31-33, c. 3, s. 49, Ayrıca bkz. İsra Süresi 17/61, c.3, s. 172.

a similar way if the Qur'an can be read with different languages other than the language that it came with, if the meaning is the same it is permissible also. "

This quote above means that the meaning and truth of Islam can be explained in foreign languages, not necessarily in Arabic. This point alone can make the authoritative scholarship of Maturidi and studies about Maturidi potentially highly important and relevant for Muslims in the West and for Turkish scholars of Maturidi making representation to those Western Muslims.

What can be said of Maturidism is that it has had a historical representation widely and in relation to or coexistence with Asharism.[4] There has been a utilization of Maturidi's thought in various Muslim contexts, setting precedents for use of Maturidi in a contemporary setting. This is described somewhat by Rudolph who states,

"And thus a new tradition was established, which henceforth set the tone for posterity. It still bore the name of aṣḥāb Abī Ḥanīfa, but really referred back to the man from Samarqand, such that it could truthfully be called Māturīdīya. Our last considerations then, end up back at the Ashʿarites, since they were the ones who provoked al-Nasafī to place al-Māturīdī's legacy in the foreground. However, this was not undertaken in the spirit of harmony with al-Ashʿarī, but actually on the basis of a standing rivalry in the context of unmistakable disputation. Thus, one can maintain as the final facet of our study that Ḥanafite theology in Transoxania was shaken up twice, changing qualitatively both times as a result: first, at the beginning of the fourth/tenth century through the rise of the Muʿtazila, against whom al-Māturīdī formulated his own kalām; and second, in the fifth/eleventh century through the Ashʿarite challenge, which contributed to the formation of the Māturīdites as a distinct theological school."[5]

Although there is historical precedent for the widespread reach and influence of the Maturidi school, in the West, the Maturidi school appears to have been mainly obscured by Ashari thought or other thought such as Salafist thought and culture, which is the more extreme example that effectively places more emphasis on Arabic language over and at the expense of the use of indigenous languages.

In describing Salafism and its relationship to indigenous culture, it is useful to consider the words of Henri Lauziere,

"The idea of a single set of beliefs was of particular interest to Islamic nationalists who had purist Salafi inclinations. To varying degrees, they hoped to strengthen all Muslims worldwide and bring them together against colonial rule on the basis of their conformity to the one true Islam of the pious ancestors. Put differently, they sought to achieve national unity and political power through the standardization of Islam according to their criteria of religious purity."[6]

"Standardization of Islam" appears to be imposition of a certain Arabic culture and Arabic language and rejection of indigenous language and culture. While culture is hardly a simple matter to analyze, the preference for and emphasis on Arabic in Salafi-dominated mosques and other mosques in the West is clear for any observer.

It is difficult to point to or clearly identify one cause and effect but this emphasis on Arabic language and rejection of indigenous culture would be consistent with a number of phenomena that have been happening in the North American community. One result is the

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[4] For more on the spread of Maturidi thought historically, see Phillip Bruckmayr (2009) "The Spread and Persistence of Māturīdī Kalām and Underlying Dynamics," Iran & the Caucasus, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 59-92

[5] Ulrich Rudolph (2015) Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand, Translated by Rodrigo Adem, Brill Publishers, Leiden, Netherlands, page 323.

[6] Henri Lauziere (2016) The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century, Columbia University Press, New York, New York, Page 101

divided nature of the North American Muslim community.[7] African Americans overwhelmingly are part of a different grouping of African American-controlled mosques.[8] These mosques and the movements that preceded them have their own history which is differentiated from that of immigrant Muslims from South Asia, Europe and the Arab world.[9] Curtis describes an African-American "particularism" vis a vis Islamic claims to universalism.[10] The American Black Muslim communities are differentiated in organization, ethnic makeup and ideology from those mosques and Muslim organizations started by immigrant Muslims from South Asia, Europe and the Arab world. Rejecting their culture and devaluing their language does not help to establish solidarity and cooperation with the members of these African American Muslim organizations and movements.

Another example of the indigenous Muslims affected by the emphasis on Arabic over indigenous languages and also the rejection of indigenous culture would be the Western members of Sufi movements in the West. These are often White Americans and had been largely overlooked by the few sociological studies of American Muslim communities and, in many cases, adherents do not attend mosques.[11] These previously overlooked or ignored Sufi movements should be one of the ultimate subjects of interest for scholars of Maturidi as Hermansen opines that, "These Sufi movements are worthy of attention and their impact in terms of both the Muslim community and American culture is significant and increasing."[12]

Scholars and students of Maturidi who rely more on Maturidi's opinion that indigenous language can be used should find interesting potential with Afro-American Muslims and other American followers of Sufi movements. With African American Muslims, a main point of interest is as Curtis opines hopefully that, "Wallace Muhammad's methodology suggests that the tension between universalism and particularism might become a source for a dynamic interpretation of Islam that consciously balances views of the human community as one and many."[13] The potential is one of a dynamic renewal. Alternatively, Hermansen opines that, "we can describe a trend amongst American Sufi orders of approaching "authenticity Sufism," where these Sufi movements are integrated in broader Muslim and non-Muslim American outreach.[14] The character of Sufism in North America is becoming more Islamic; ties with major Islamic organizations are more "comfortable" so a transition has happened in American Sufism towards orthodoxy.[15] In the case of African

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[7] The differentiation of North American mosques is described by Ihsan Bagby's "The American Mosque 2011: Report Number 1 from the US Mosque Study 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque: Attitudes of Mosque Leaders, published by the Council on American Islamic Relations, January 2012.

[8] This point about African American Muslims being primarily located in African American mosques is my own observation. However it must be noted that the picture is not so clear-cut. The publication, "The American Mosque 2011: Report Number 1 from the US Mosques Study 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque," describes a "diversity" in American mosques (see page 14). According to this mosque report the African American mosques draw the most new converts to Islam (see page 12) but "the majority of African American converts (52%) chose Islam in non-African American mosques" (see page 12). The percentage of all participants in all mosques that are African American has diminished between 2000 and 2011. Nonetheless, the African America Muslims as a block of indigenous Muslims are still significant (24%) according to the study findings (see page 13).

[9] For more on this history of African American Islam, in addition to the work of Edward E. Curtis IV (2002) see Jane I. Smith (2000) Islam in America, Columbia University Press, New York, New York and also Robert Dannin (2002) Black Pilgrimage to Islam, Oxford University Press, New York, New York.

[10] Edward E. Curtis IV(2002) "Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought," State University of New York, Press, Albany, New York, Pages 12-20.

[11] Marcia Hermansen (2002) "Hybrid Identity Formations In Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements," The Muslim World Volume 90 , Spring 2000, DOI: 10.1111/j.1478-1913.2000.tb03686.x page 158

[12] Hermansen (2000), page 158

[13] Curtis (2002) Page 20.

[14] Marcia Hermansen (2014) "American Islamic Movements" in The Oxford Handbook of American Islam, Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith, editors, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, page 132-133.

[15] Ibid.

American Muslims and American Muslims in Sufi movements, there is potential for more cooperation with non-American Muslims such as Turkish Muslims and scholars. Unnecessary emphasis of Arabic at the expense of indigenous language and unnecessary rejection of indigenous culture can prove to be a barrier to cooperation. Scholars of Maturidi can draw attention to and remind a wider population of Muslims of the non-necessity of this language and culture barrier, emphasizing increased cooperation with indigenous North American Muslims.

As a special emphasis for Turkish scholars and Muslims who might take an interest in the successful representation of Turkish Islam, this utilization of Maturidi's opinion can be of particular interest. Turks and Turkey have been the target of anti-Turkish sentiment and propaganda for more than a century.[16] This is an old Turcophobia. Together or merging with this pre-existing Turcophobia, a new Islamophobia has also been emerging in a planned and calculated way on the part of a warren of Islamophobic groups and networks.[17] The danger for Turks is that the old Turcophobic sentiments will be made much worse by newer Islamophobia in North America. This gives good reasons for Turkish Muslim scholars to take an interest in cooperating with Western and American Muslims, to remove unnecessary barriers to cooperation and work towards a true representation that will achieve peace-building and peaceful coexistence.

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[16] This is described by Justin McCarthy (2010) "The Turk in America: Creation of an Enduring Prejudice", The University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, Utah.

[17] See Wajahat Ali, Eli Clifton, Matthew Duss, Lee Fang, Scott Keyes, and Faiz Shakir (2011) "Fear, Inc. The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America," Center for American Progress, Washington, DC, August 2011; See also "Confronting FEAR: Islamophobia and Its Impact on the United States," Council on American Islamic Relations/ UC Berkeley Center for Race and Gender, Washington DC and Berkeley CA, 2016.

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