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THE PROBLEM OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE AS THE MAJOR FACTOR IN THE MAKING OF MIEVEAL ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Ortaçağ İslam Düşüncesinin Oluşumunda Temel Bir Etken
Olarak Din Dili Problemi

Rahim ACAR, Prof. Dr.

Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi | Marmara University Faculty of Divinity

rahim.acar@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0913-0608>

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THE PROBLEM OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE AS THE MAJOR FACTOR IN THE MAKING OF MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Rahim ACAR

ÖZ

Bu makalede, teolojik dil meselesinin klasik İslam düşüncesinin şekillenmesinde önemli bir işlev gördüğünü dolayısıyla klasik İslam düşüncesindeki tartışmaları anlamada anahtar işlevi görebileceğini savunmaya çalışacağım. Klasik İslam düşüncesinde teolojik-entelektüel gruplar tasnif edilirken, çoğu zaman gerçek veya İskâfiyye, Sümâmiyye gibi sanal bir grubun liderinin adı dikkate alınır. Ancak farklı grupların tasnif edilmesinde, teolojik dil meselesinin dikkate alınması, muayyen teolojik problemlere dair tartışmaların daha kolay anlaşılmasını sağlayacaktır. İslam düşüncesinin klasik çağında farklı teolojik-entelektüel grupların ortaya çıkışı, birbirleriyle diyalektik bir etkileşim süreci ile anlaşılabilir. Bu diyalektik süreçte önce Mu'attılanın çıkışı, daha sonra buna bir tepki olarak sırasıyla, Müşebbihe ve Selefiyyenin çıkışı, farklı grupların oluşumunun birinci safhası olarak görülebilir. Daha sonraki kelim mezheplerinin ve filozofların bu husustaki görüşünün oluşumu ise birinci safhada ortaya çıkan grupların teolojik dilin husûsiyetine dair görüşlerinin tadili ve tashihi olarak düşünülebilir. Bu diyalektik etkileşim sürecinde, teolojik dil meselesi, yani Tanrı hakkında dini kaynaklarda yer alan ifadelerin nasıl anlaşılacağı meselesi, muayyen teolojik sorulara verilen cevabı yönlendiren, bir zemin işlevi görmektedir. Teolojik dil meselesinin klasik İslam düşüncesinin gelişiminde oynadığı bu rolü göstermek amacıyla, bu makalede öncelikle İslam düşüncesinin klasik çağındaki belli başlı teolojik-entelektüel grupların teolojik dile yaklaşımlarına genel bir bakış sunmaya çalışacağım. Daha sonra bazı muayyen problemlerdeki tartışmalara bakacağım. Tartışmaya dâhil olan kişilerin teolojik dil tasavvuru ile bu tekil problemlerdeki görüşlerinin ilişkisini göstermeye çalışacağım. Böylelikle, bu tartışmaların daha iyi anlaşılmasında tartışmanın taraflarının teolojik dil tasavvurunu dikkate almanın önemini vurgulamaya çalışacağım.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Teolojik Dil, Mu'attıla, Müşebbihe, Selefiyye, Mu'tezile, Eş'ariyye.

ABSTRACT

In this article, I am going to argue that one should pay attention to the problem of theological language to have a proper understanding of the debates concerning specific philosophical-theological issues. This is, because the conception of theological language played an important role in the formation and development of major theological-intellectual groups in the medieval Islamic thought. Historians belonging to the medieval Islamic thought sometimes classify real or virtual groups,

such as Isqāfiyya and Thumāmiyya according to the names of the leaders of those groups. However, taking the conception of theological language as the criterion to classify different groups may enhance and facilitate to understand specific theological problems and what was at stake thereof. One may conceive the emergence of different theological-intellectual groups in the classical Islam thought as a dialectical process of mutual interaction. In this dialectical process of mutual interaction, the emergence of Mu‘aṭṭila, Mushabbiha, Salafiyya may represent the first phase of the formative period. The emergence and formation of other theological schools and falāsifa may be considered as a result of the revision of the earlier positions regarding the nature of theological language. The dialectical process of mutual interaction seems to have resulted in either the refinement of the basic tenets of a group, or the emergence of a new one. The problem of theological language, i.e., proper understanding of the statements about God in religious sources, seems to function as the ground, on which one’s approach to many specific theological problems took shape. To clarify this function of the problem of theological language, in the development of the classical Islamic thought, I am going to provide, at first, a general picture of theological-intellectual groups with regard to their conception of theological language. Afterwards, I am going to look at some theological debates as example cases. I am going to try to show how debates regarding specific theological problems may be closely related to a certain conception of theological language. Thus I hope to highlight that taking the conception of theological language, assumed by warring parties, into account, provides a better understanding of the rival positions regarding specific theological problems.

Keywords: Theological Language, Mu‘attila, Mushabbiha, Salafiyya, Mu‘tazila, Ash‘ariyya.

INTRODUCTION

Coming up with a coherent understanding of religious texts emerged as a challenge before Muslim thinkers in the seventh century, after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Two factors may be distinguished in this regard: (1) the nature of the religious texts, i.e., the Qur’an and the prophetic traditions, and (2) encountering intellectual and theological heritage of other religious and cultural environments. In the Qur’an there are verses that state divine transcendence, confirming God’s otherness from creation, (*laysa ka mithlihi shay’un*). There are also verses that describe God in a way similar to creation. Given the existence of Qur’anic verses that may support an anthropomorphic conception of God, as well as verses that emphasize God’s otherness, people could put more emphasis on either side. However, the fact that people became aware of different implications of the Qur’anic verses may be connected to the second factor. That is, their encounter with the intellectual and theological traditions produced by other religious and cultural environments seems to push Muslim intellectuals to reflect upon the implications of their religious sources. Although in the Qur’an there are verses referring to teachings

of other religions, theological reflection on the Islamic religious texts seems to be facilitated after Muslims had closer socio-political relations to other cultures.

In this paper, I am going to argue that the problem of theological language may provide a more comprehensive account of the development of classical Islamic thought. Using human language to talk about and give information about God, is an important problem especially in the context monotheistic religions. This is, because monotheistic religions teach that God is transcendent and different from creation on the one hand, while there is no other means to give information about God to guide human beings towards Him, on the other. In the Islamic religious context, the problem of theological language seems to have played a major part in the formation of medieval Islamic thought. That is, the development, or emergence of, various scholarly groups and religious orders, the debates between various scholars may be closely connected to their conception of theological language. In this sense, the problem of theological language has a different status than many issues of debate. The problem of theological language seems to have functioned as the ground on which all other problems are based. For example, in order to understand one's position regarding the creation or the universe, whether it is a voluntary action or a natural one, whether the universe began to exist or not and the debates whether the Qur'an was created or not, you do not need to know what this person thinks about the atoms, matter and form. They may not be quite related to each other. However, in order to have a proper understanding regarding these discussions, one needs to know the position of the debating parties regarding the nature of theological language. Hence the problem of theological language may be treated as a key to understand various debates about other theological problems in medieval Islamic world. Hence in my paper, I am going to argue that (1) the problem of theological language may provide simpler paradigm to classify different groups, and (2) paying attention to position of scholars regarding the nature of theological language, may help us to have a better grasp of different theological debates.

Before starting to discuss the importance of the theological language in the formation of medieval Islamic thought, I need to delimit the scope of my discussion. I need to clarify what the term "medieval Islamic thought" in this context indicates, and which scholarly groups and religious orders, I am taking into account. In this paper, I am going to focus only on the intellectual groups designated with reference to theological problems in a limited sense. I shall neglect legal schools and groups or divisions based on political motives and struggles in the formation of various scholarly/intellectual groups in the Islamic thought. By doing this, I do not mean that legal discussions and political factors in the formation of various groups were unimportant. However, division of Muslims into various legal orders and theologico-political groups may be treated apart from the theological debates leading to the emergence of medieval Muslim scholarly groups. Thus I shall simply focus on the emergence of various intellectual, i.e., theological or philosophical, groups and claim that the problem of theological language played an important role in their formation.

Major intellectual groups, in this sense, include Mu‘attila, Mushabbiha, Salafiyya or Traditionism, Mu‘tazila, Ash‘ariyya, Māturīdiyya and Falāsifa.¹ Focusing the intellectual groups, first, I am going to draw a map of these scholarly groups. I shall highlight their conception of theological language and how their conception of theological language may help us to understand the emergence of individual groups and their interaction with others. I am going to trace the dialectical process in the formation of different theological groups with reference to the problem of theological language.

In this regard, first I am going to draw a general outline to highlight the importance of the problem of theological language in the development of the medieval Islamic thought. Since it is a general outline covering the intellectual activity participated by many people for many centuries, it will have its shortcomings and be open to objections as well. By taking general features of theological debates, I attempt to show that the problem of theological language may be the common ground of various philosophical and theological problems that affected the formation of different schools and groups. Despite its shortcomings, I think it is worth trying to discover the role of the problem of theological language in the development of medieval Islamic thought. Secondly, I am going to give some examples, highlighting how some fierce debates on specific theological issues are closely related to the problem of theological language. This would be helpful to have a better understanding regarding certain theological debates among different intellectual groups.

1. Theological Language and the Formation of Intellectual Groups

1.1 Mu‘attila

Examining the emergence of Islamic theology in the broader sense, it may be difficult to trace exactly which movement emerged earlier. However, taking the death-date of the representative figures into account, one may assume that Mu‘attila was the earliest theological group emerged in the medieval Islamic thought. The position of Mu‘attila—i.e., those who deprive God of his properties—may be associated with one of the main approaches to theological language. It is to emphasize divine transcendence. Two figures may be considered as representative of Mu‘attila: Ja‘d b. Dirham (d. 124/742 [?]) and Jahm b. Safwan (d. 128/745-46). Although the term was coined to indicate the position of early figures who

¹ For division of various Muslim intellectual groups see, Khalid Blankinship, “The Early Creed,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 45- 54; Nader el-Bizri “God: essence and attributes,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 121-140. W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 46-55, 64-111; W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 180-223, 231-250, 279-318. For the emergence of *Māturīdī* theological school and the intellectual environment in which it developed see, Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

emphasize divine transcendence, it is also used in a derogatory sense, to reject the position of later scholars (e.g., Mu'tazilite theologians) giving priority to divine transcendence in interpreting religious texts.

Ja'd b. Dirham emphasized divine transcendence. Accordingly, he rejected divine attributes other than God's essence.² If God had such attributes, or properties, then God's unity would be violated. Taking God's unity and transcendence into account, he maintained that the Qur'anic verses that attribute God human bodily organs, such as hand, face and eye cannot be taken literally. In this manner he also rejected that the Qur'an is uncreated, eternal and speech of God. Accordingly, he interpreted the Qur'anic verse, which mentions God's speech to prophet Moses, in a metaphorical sense.³

Another figure who was associated with Mu'attila is Jahm b. Safwān (d. 128/745-46). He emphasized to have a rationally coherent account of the scripture. What we know of his ideas came through writings of his rivals. According to the reports, he defended that God's transcendence must be the guiding principle to interpret the Qur'anic verses giving information about God. It seems that Jahm did not make any difference between the so-called perfection properties and properties with anthropomorphic implications. Thus none of the properties predicated of creation can be predicated of God in the literal sense with a positive meaning. He argued that God is not a "thing." God cannot have knowledge and power as eternal perfection properties, because the universe, i.e., everything other than God is created after non-existence. Since the universe is the subject of divine knowledge and power, divine knowledge and power are not eternal. In the same manner, Qur'anic verses, saying that God sat Himself upon the Throne (istawā 'alā al-'arsh, Qur'an 7: 54, 20: 5) must be interpreted metaphorically, because God is an infinite, limitless being who is not in space. Jahm argued that God did not have eternal properties as indicated in religious sources, i.e., the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions.⁴

1.2 Mushabbiha

Against the so-called Mu'attila position, one may point to the Mushabbiha, or *Mujassima*, position (i.e., taking God to be similar to creation, or bodily creatures. There is a certain amount of data, in religious texts that may be used to support such an anthropomorphic conception of God. The religious texts that may be used in this

² Mustafa Öz, "Ca'd b. Dirham," in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 6 (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 1992), 542-543.

³ 'Uthmān ibn Sa'īd Dārimī, *al-Radd 'alā 'l-Jahmiyya*, ed. Badr b. Abdullāh al-Badr (Kuwait: al-Dār Ibn al-Athīr, 1995), 21-23.

⁴ Cornelia Schöck, "Jahm b. Şafwān (d. 128/745-6) and the 'Jahmiyya' and Ḍirār b. 'Amr (d. 200/815)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 56-66. 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, ed. Aḥmad Fahmī Muḥammad, III vols., (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1992), p. 73. (Henceforth Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*).

regard includes expressions implying (a) that God has an outward appearance, and (b) that God does certain actions that we carry out through our bodily organs, such as speaking, seeing, and sitting⁵. Certainly in the Qur'an and prophetic traditions (authentic or not) there are expressions that may imply a bodily constitution for God, if they are taken in the literal sense with the assumption of univocal predication. There are verses referring to God's hand (al-Fath 48: 10, Yasin 38: 71) God's face (Baqara, 02: 115) and God's eyes (Hûd 11: 37). The Qur'an and prophetic traditions also attribute to God actions that we find in human beings, such as speaking and seeing. We carry out these actions through our bodily organs. In addition to religious data that may be used to support an anthropomorphic-corporeal conception of God, there are also texts that emphasize God's perfection, by attributing him perfection properties that may not require a bodily constitution, such as knowing and being powerful. Mushabbiha scholars obviously seem to take anthropomorphic expressions about God in religious sources (the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions) literally. And they tried to make sense of the literal, more properly the univocal, reading of the religious texts.

For example, Muqātil b. Suleymān (d. 150/767) conceived God as a body, in the form of a human being, having bodily constituents, such as meat, blood, hair, limbs, hand and foot.⁶ Muqātil also argued that God is not like other things.⁷ Another figure who is associated with Mushabbiha, is Dāwūd al-Jawāribī. "Dawud al-Djawaribi pretended, in contrast to Mukatil, that God can only be massive in His lower part. He has to be hollow from His waist upward, since His speech, i.e. revelation, comes forth from His mouth and His wisdom, namely, the Qur'an, from His heart, i.e. from His chest"⁸ Hishām b. Sālim al-Jawālikī (died approximately towards the end of the VIII.th century) had a similar conception of God. Apparently, he conceived God to be like a human being with a body with sense-perceptual organs and limbs. Upper part of God's body was hollow, lower part was solid-massive. However, he and his followers denied that God had meat and blood.⁹

In the Mushabbiha/ Mujassima approach one may trace the difficulties of taking all religious texts literally. They seem to take the material existence to be the only way of existence, and try to interpret religious texts accordingly. One may trace refinements and revisions of such an interpretation, in time, as scholars realized the difficulties inherent in such accounts. For example, Hishām b. al-Ḥakam's (d. 179/795) strategy is quite interesting in this regard. He is reported to consider God to be like a body, having bodily properties, like extension, color, taste. He said, God

⁵ Josef van Ess, "Tashbīh wa-Tanzīh," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam EP*, ed. P. J. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. Van Donzel and Wolfhart P. Heinrichs, vol. X (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 342-343.

⁶ Van Ess, "Tas_h_bīh wa-Tanzīh," p.342.

⁷ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Hellmut Ritter, 2nd edition (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980), p.153. (Henceforth Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*).

⁸ Van Ess, "Tas_h_bīh wa-Tanzīh", p.342.

⁹ Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, 34, 209; Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, 187-189.

is light glowing like silver, or pearl etc. After arguing various positions that confirm God is a body, and revising his position in time, he came to the conclusion that God is a body unlike other bodies.¹⁰ This expression reflects his effort to try to take the Qur'anic verses literally, the verses that predicate God some anthropomorphic properties as well as the verses that confirm God's difference from creation.

1.3. Salafiyya or Traditionism

Let me remind the fact that although there are some Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions to be used to support an anthropomorphic conception of God, there are also verses that strictly emphasize God's transcendence. They confirm God's being dissimilar to creation. In this regard, one may consider the Salafī or Traditionist position. Salafiyya may be defined as the group teaching that one should follow the example of earlier generations, i.e., the companions of the Prophet and the followers of the companions.¹¹ It is also called Traditionism indicating that it emphasizes the status of prophetic traditions as a source of religious authority. Salafiyya may be considered as an attempt to provide a comprehensive position taking into account not only religious texts that may imply anthropomorphism but also those that emphasize God's transcendence.

From the Salafī perspective, the Mushabbiha and Mu'attila positions are considered as deviation from the true, or proper, understanding of religious texts, which is considered as the position of early generations. Mu'attila's position may be considered as a deviation because they did not recognize the proper status of statements in which creaturely properties are predicated of God. The Mushabbiha position was not acceptable, either, because, it violated God's transcendence in understanding properties predicated of God. In this sense, Salafī position may be considered as an attempt to acknowledge the value proper to all theological statements. Thus they took religious texts that imply anthropomorphism "as they are" and did not want to move forward to explain them, by taking into account the religious texts that teach God's transcendence. This was considered to be the attitude of earlier generations (*Salaf*). Mālik b. Anas' (d. 795) interpretation of the

¹⁰ Ash 'arī, *Maqālāt*, 31-33, 207-208; Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, 93-96

¹¹ One should clearly state that the term Salafiyya, as it is commonly used, indicates a modern Islamic religious movement emerged in the 19th century. Scholars associated with this movement want to establish Islam as it is understood and lived by the "pious forefathers." P. Shinar, "Salafiyya," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. W. P. Heinrichs et alii, 2nd ed., vol. VIII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995) 900-906. Although this term is developed to indicate a modern Islamic religious movement, the idea of following the path of the "pious forefathers" was also highlighted by some medieval scholars. And the scholars who emphasized this idea in modern times are associated with the scholars who emphasized this idea in the middle ages. On this issue, see Jon Hoover, "Ḥanbalī Theology" in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 625-644. Taking the association between modern scholars and the medieval scholars, and their emphasis on following the path of the pious forefathers, one may extend the use of the term Salafiyya to indicate the position of medieval scholars. Another option to indicate their position is to use the term "Traditionism" taking their emphasis on the prophetic traditions. Another option may be to refer to this position as Hanbalism taking the role of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal into account in the development of this position.

throne verse may be reminded in this regard. The throne verse says: “The Most Gracious is firmly established (*istawā*) on the throne” (*istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh*, Qur’an 7: 54, 20: 5). Mālik ibn Anas, the master of the Medinan legal school, advised to believe it without asking how: “This establishment is known; but its mode is unknown; belief in it is a duty; but inquiring about it is a [reprehensible] innovation (*bid‘a*).”¹²

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) is an important figure representing the Salafiyya. According to some reports, for him, religious texts (scripture and traditions) must be taken literally and the texts the meaning of which are ambiguous (*mutashābih*) must not be interpreted metaphorically (*ta‘wīl*), at all. There are also reports about him confirming that he left the literal meaning of religious texts on some occasions. For Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal the (positive) attributes of God stated in religious texts (*naṣṣ*) must be taken literally. Understanding those texts literally does not mean anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*). It would be wrong to have an anthropomorphic conception of God as well as to negate the attributes predicated of God in religious texts. Exaggeration in negating the creaturely attributes of God leads to another form of creaturely conception of God. As the attributes found in human beings, such as seeing and hearing, if they are negated of God, then God would be similar to inanimate things that lack hearing and seeing. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal taking certain religious texts literally tried to show that God is in the heaven, in an upper place. He confirmed that the attributes predicated of God in religious texts, such as having a hand, face, soul, having anger, being pleased, must be taken literally.¹³

Another important figure, whose ideas we can highlighted in regard to Salafī movement, is Uthman b. Sa‘īd al-Dārimī (d. 280/894). He is a pupil of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. Al-Dārimī argued that God is a limited being, in the heaven and we can perceive God by our sense perceptual organs. As a textual support for this claim, he referred to the Qur’anic verses, which states that God shall speak to believers in the hereafter and he will be seen by them (al-Nisā’ 4/164; ‘Āl-i ‘Imrān 3/77; al-Qiyāma 75/22). He argues, similarly, that God is in the heaven, by referring, to the Qur’anic verses stating that God established Himself on the throne (*istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh*) and good words reach up to him (Tāhā 20/5; al-Mulk 67/16-17; Fāṭir 35/10).¹⁴ For al-Dārimī one must take literally the religious texts stating that God will come down

¹² ‘Uthmān ibn Sa‘īd Dārimī, *al-Radd ‘alā ‘I-Jahmiyya*, ed. Badr b. Abdullāh al-Badr (Kuwait: al-Dār Ibn al-Athīr, 1995), p. 66. (Henceforth Dārimī, *al-Radd ‘alā ‘I-Jahmiyya*).

¹³ Abū al-Faḍl al-Tamīmī, *I‘tiqād al-Imām al-Munabbal Abī ‘Abdillāh Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Abū Mundhir al-Naqqāsh Ashraf Salāh ‘Alī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2001), 14-54; Wesley Williams, “Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34: 3 (2002), 441-453. See also, Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Radd ‘alā ‘I-jahmiyya, wa’l-zanādiqa*, ed. Sabri b. Salāma Shāhīn (Riyad: Dār al-Thabāt lil-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 2003), 90-103.

¹⁴ Dārimī, *al-Radd ‘alā ‘I-Jahmiyya*, 32-70.

(*nuzūl, ityān*) on earth and be seen by Muslims. He thinks that this can be done without falling into anthropomorphism.¹⁵

In principle, the Salafī position regarding the character of theological language may be formulated as following: to take that which is included in religious texts (i.e., the scripture and the prophetic traditions) literally, and to avoid asking questions regarding the implications of those data (*bilā kayf*). Salafī people, or people of traditions, think that a Muslim must accept not only the Qur'an as a religiously binding text but also prophetic traditions, whether or not their authenticity is justified (*mutawātir*). Whatever is said of God in the religious texts (*naṣṣ/ nuṣūṣ*), such as God's hand, face, throne must be taken literally, even though they confirmed that God is unlike creatures in general terms. They acknowledged that one must take the religious data literally and acknowledge that the true meaning is known by God.¹⁶

Although Salafī scholars rejected the anthropomorphic interpretation of the religious texts, exemplified by Mushabbiha, they more or less shared a common ground with them. This common ground between the Mushabbiha and the Salafī position is that they tend to take all religious texts univocally with an implicit assumption that literal use of language has only two ways of predication, either univocal or equivocal. The challenge before them was to make sense out of the religious texts, when all of them are taken literally in relation to the principle of *mukhālaftun li'l-khawadith*. Salafī scholars seem to have differed from Mushabbiha scholars only in their limit of interpretation.

Could one take all religious texts literally, as examples of univocal predication, without drawing implications of what one believes? Could this strategy go straightforward? That is, could one consistently take religious texts literally without drawing the implications of words used in these texts? Looking for an answer to this question, one may, for example, pay attention to discussions whether the Qur'an was created or not. If the Qur'an is God's speech, is it created or not? Certainly in the Qur'an, it is stated that God speaks. For example, God spoke to prophet Moses. Speaking as an activity, if taken literally, in human case, is closely related to our bodily conditions. So one would expect that Salafī people or people of the traditions would say, "God's speech is known, belief in it is required, but asking questions about how, or about its implications, is a reprehensible innovation. Did the Salafī people follow this strategy, consistently?"

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), whom I just mentioned as an important figure representing the Salafī school, does not seem to follow this path consistently. He is

¹⁵ Dārimī, *al-Radd 'alā'l-Jahmiyya*, 81-129.

¹⁶ Ash 'arī, *Maqālāt*, 290-295; Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid, n.d., "Iljām al-A 'wām 'an 'Ilm al-Kalām," in *Majmū 'ātu Rasā'il-Imām al-Ghazālī*, ed. Ibrāhīm Amīn Muḥammad (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiya, n.d.), 319-326; Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, 79-81.

famous for his defense that the Qur'an, as God's speech, is uncreated. There are reports about him confirming that he left the literal meaning of religious texts on some occasions. For example, he interpreted the verse saying, "you can never see me" (A'rāf 7:143,) as following: "you can never see me in this world."¹⁷ He also interpreted Qur'anic verse saying "Wherever you are, He is with you" (Ḥadīd 57:4), and the verse saying "We are closer to him than his jugular vein" (Qāf 50: 16), as indicating that God knows, not in the sense of being closer in space. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal argued that God is eternal altogether with his essence and attributes, and that God has eternal attributes does not contradict the belief in the unity of God.¹⁸ It seems clear that Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal did more than what one would expect from a Salafī scholar, who is associated with Mālik b. Anas, who advised acknowledging the truth of the religious texts and keeping away from any interpretation whatsoever. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal seem to deviate from the strategy of taking religious text without asking how (*bilā kayfa*).

1.4 Mu'azzilite Position

In all these discussions, exemplified by Mu'azzila, Mushabbiha and Salafiyya, one may find a common assumption: when we talk about God and when we talk about creation, we use language univocally. Put it differently, literal use of language can be reduced to univocal predication, if it is meant to be informative. Equivocal predication is another option of literal predication. When we use a word equivocally in two statements, e.g., the meaning of each instance of the use of the word is totally different from the meaning of the use. Accordingly, when we predicate properties of God and creation equivocally, then they would not be informative about God. Thus, if God is said to have a hand, to have eyes, to speak, having a hand, an eye and speaking have one the same meaning when they are predicated of God and when they are predicated of creatures. Assuming that the literal use of language is univocal, early Muslim scholars seem to have pursued there alternative ways: (1) either to say that all talk about God is metaphorical, given the assumption of univocal predication of properties. Since we cannot take properties predicated of God univocally as they are predicated of creation, then we must take statements about God as negations. Thus the position of Mu'azzila, which may be considered as, negative theology seems to be based on the idea that properties are predicated of God and creation univocally. (2) The second alternative is to say that one may take them at face value, given the fact that religious texts include these descriptions and given the assumption of univocal predication of properties. This seems to be the strategy of the Mushabbiha. (3) The third alternative, the position of Salafiyya, is to say that one may have to accept them as they are stated without following their implications. Although religious texts include these descriptions, and one assumes

¹⁷ Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Radd 'alā l-jahmiyya, wa-l-zanādiqa*, 132-134 (Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 2003, 132-134)

¹⁸ Abū I-Faḍl Tamīmī, *l' 'tiqād al-Imām al-Munabbal Abī 'Abdillāh Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, 14-54; Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Radd 'alā l-jahmiyya, wa-l-zanādiqa*, 90-103.

univocal predication of properties, since God is unlike creation, then those properties, that are found in creation may be acknowledged without drawing their ordinary implications, i.e., their implications when they are predicated of creatures. However, as I discussed above it seems quite difficult to follow this option consistently. While the second option leads to violation of divine transcendence, the first option is considered to make the divine properties meaningless or inefficient.

The Mu‘tazilite approach to the theological language may be considered as the adoption of the first option with some revision. One strategy developed by the Mu‘tazilite theologians was to interpret the properties predicated of God as negations. For example, ʿAmmār b. ʿAmr (d. 200/815 [?]) and al-Nazzām (d. 231/845), two early Mu‘tazilite theologians of the Basra School, claimed that the names and attributes of God cannot give any positive sense of what God is. They must be understood simply as negations (*salb*). For example, to say that “God is knowing”, means that God is not ignorant”, or to say that “God is powerful” (*qadīr*) means that “God is not weak (or powerless).”¹⁹

Another strategy to confirm the divine transcendence, given the predication of creaturely properties of God in the Qur’an was to emphasize the identity of the properties predicated of God and God himself, or the divine essence (*dhātullāh*). There seems to be two aspects of the issue. The first aspect concerns predicating of God the properties that are found in creatures. These include, in principle, not only anthropomorphic properties, such as having a face, hands, sitting and speaking. They must also include the so-called perfection properties, such as having power, knowing and willing. Taking the principle that God is unlike creation (*mukhālafatun li’l-ḥavādis*) into account, one may interpret the anthropomorphic properties in the metaphorical sense. When it comes to perfection properties, obviously, we as human beings, conceive these perfection properties as they are displayed by human beings, which are included in the creation. The second aspect of the issue concerns the way properties exist in God. That is, when we talk about creation, we can separate any definite thing and the properties it has. Given the principle that God is unlike creation (*mukhālafatun li’l-ḥavādis*), can we apply the distinction between God and his properties, or the divine essence and His attributes?

If one does not simply negate the meaning of the essential attributes, with a positive sense, when they are predicated of God, how can one defend absolute divine unity given the multiplicity of the essential attributes? This was the major problem before Muslim theologians – at the second stage, when people realized in time the difficulties of Mu‘aṭṭila, Mujassima and Salafī positions. The Mu‘tazilite strategy, in general, seems to be to confirm the identity of the divine essence and the properties predicated of God. As human beings, we cannot avoid from

¹⁹ Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt*, 166-167, 183-185, 281; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*, ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm Uthmān, Cairo: Maktabat al-Wahba, 1996), 182-213.

separating a subject and the predicates predicated of the subject. And the Qur'an addresses human beings and speaks in human language. For example, God is said to be all-knowing and all-powerful. The properties of being all-knowing and all-powerful, are they distinct from God and additional to Him, or the divine essence (*dhat*), although it is quite intriguing to make a distinction between essence (*dhat*) and existence (being) in God? The mature Mu'tazilite position that seems to be shared by members of the two schools (Basra and Baghdād) seems to confirm the identity of the subject and its predicates, when we talk about God, even though, human thinking and speaking cannot get out of this complexity.

For example, Ash'arī reports the position of Mu'tazilite scholar Abū al-Ḥudhayl al-Allāf (d. 235/849-50 [?]) as following: For him, the knowledge of the Creator (*bārī*), the most high (*subḥānahu*) is that "it is identical to Him" (*huwa huwa*). That is, the divine knowledge is identical to God, Himself. His power, His hearing, His vision (*basaruhu*) and his wisdom are considered similarly. Al-Allāf thought that when somebody thought that God is knowing (*ālim*), this person confirmed knowledge of God and negated of God "ignorance." This person indicated something known, either already happened or that shall happen. When he said "The Creator is powerful" he confirmed that God has power, which is identical to God (*hiya Allāhu*), he negated of God "impotence." And he indicated something that can be done (*maqḍūr*), which is either already done, or will be done. Then Ash'arī reports that Allāf was refrained from answering certain questions. When he was asked, if God's knowledge which is identical to God is also identical to his power", he refrained from answering it. When he was asked, "if it is different from His power", he rejected answering it. Ash'arī indicated that arguing for the identity of the essence and attributes implies identity of attributes to each other. It may also imply reduction of God into a property. According to Ash'arī's report, Abū al-Ḥudhayl al-Allāf did not want to say that God is [the property of] knowledge, even though he said that God's knowledge is identical to God.²⁰

Despite the criticism raised by Ash'arī against Abū al-Ḥudhayl al-Allāf's position, emphasis on the divine simplicity was the major way followed by the Mu'tazilite theologians. It may be considered as a revision of the strategy of Dirar b. Amr and al-Nazzām, who argued for a negative interpretation of the meanings of the perfection properties. In this regard, Mu'tazilite theologians seem to have rejected the distinction between the divine essence and properties, or attributes. Obviously, identifying the divine perfection properties with God Himself implies certain difficulties. If divine properties are identical to God, then they must be identical to each other. Indeed, if God is identical to His properties, this implies that God is a property. In this regard, one may remind Abū Ḥāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. 321/933)—Jubbā'ī the son, and contemporary to Ash'arī—solution. In order to explain, why or how predication of certain properties with a positive meaning may

²⁰ Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, p. 484. See also, *Ibid*, 155-185.

not violate the divine unity, he argued that such properties are like states (*ahwâl*) of a being. Depending on how you consider them, if taken on their own, they do not really exist out there. But the fact that they do not exist out there does not mean their absolute non-existence. They exist only by the existence of a being that has them. Thus to say that “God is knowing” is to indicate God with reference to a certain state of God, or to say that “God is powerful” is to indicate God with reference to another state of God.²¹

Famous Mu‘tazilite theologian Qādī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) similarly defended the identity of essential attributes of God and God Himself. He divided the attributes predicated of God into two: (1) essential attributes and (2) attributes of action. Essential attributes are divided, in turn, into two (1.1) positive attributes (*thubūtī*) and (1.2) negative attributes (*selbī*).²² Predicating positive attributes of God, one may say, “God is living”, “God is powerful”, “God is knowing”, “God is hearing”, “God is seeing.” God is hearing and seeing in the sense that God knows that which is heard and seen.²³ Negative attributes include properties such as God’s being in-dependent, in-corporeal. ‘Abd al-Jabbār takes creaturely, or rather bodily, properties predicated of God, such as having a hand, eyes, a side (*janb*), coming down (*majr*), in a metaphorical sense.²⁴ Since essential properties are identical to the divine essence, for ‘Abd al-Jabbār, they must be eternal, they cannot be non-eternal (*ḥādīs*). They must not be thought as if they indicate any eternal meaning additional to the divine essence. As opposed to the essential attributes, attributes of action, such as willing, speaking, doing, creating and being just, they are non-eternal (*ḥādīs*) and God may have these attributes of action as well as their opposites.

1.5 Attempts to Balance out: Ash‘arīte and Māturīdite Theologians

In contrast to Mu‘tazilite theologians, who reduced divine properties to the divine essence Ash‘arīte and Māturīdite theologians wanted to affirm that divine properties, such as knowing, being powerful and willing may not be reduced to the divine essence. Reducing them to the divine essence obviously implied difficulties regarding the meaning of properties predicated of God. If they are identical to the divine being, then they must be identical to each other. And this would imply the loss of the distinctive meaning of each property. Identifying divine properties with God’s essence would also imply reduction of the divine essence to the status of a property, or an attribute. Both of them would be difficult to accept. To avoid this difficulty, Ash‘arīte and Māturīdite theologians accepted a theory to the effect that

²¹ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*, 128-129, 182; Sabine Schmidtke, “The Mu‘tazilite Movement (III): The Scholastic Phase,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 162-164.

²² ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*, 182-213.

²³ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*, 167-169.

²⁴ ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*, 216-261.

properties predicated of God have some positive connotation—properties that are not simply negations—are neither different, nor identical to the divine essence. They argued that the meaning of each property must be acknowledged. We use terms such as living, knowing, being powerful and willing to indicate different meanings. Thus, if we say that “God is knowing” the referent of the term “knowing” (the meaning that is referred by the term knowing) must be found in God.²⁵ However, if the referent of each and every attribute must be found in God distinctly, then it may violate divine unity and result in multiplication of eternals (*ta’addud al-qudamā*).

Two major answers were provided responding to the criticism of multiplicity of eternals. That is, if one affirms the existence of attributes in God, as distinct from the divine essence, one must affirm multiplication of eternals. Bāqillānī and Juwaynī, two Ash‘arīte theologians belonging to the earlier generations (*mutaqaddimūn*) tried to adopt the theory of states developed by the Mu‘tazilite theologian Abū Ḥāshim al-Jubbā‘ī (d. 321/933). Thus when one says that “God is knowing or powerful”, he does not indicate a separate existence of “knowledge” and “power” but rather he indicates God’s state of knowing, or having knowledge, and God’s state of having power. However, their attempt to appropriate the theory of states (*aḥwāl*), a theory associated with the Mu‘tazilite position, was criticized and rejected by the majority of Ash‘arīte theologians, such as al-Shahrastānī.²⁶

Another alternative in this regard was to argue that the attributes predicated of God are neither identical to, nor different from the divine essence.²⁷ This way of conceiving the relationship between God and His attributes may go back to Hisham b. al-Hakam (d. 179/795). He is considered among those who had an anthropomorphic conception of God, as he interpreted some Qur’anic verses attributing God creaturely properties, such as having face, hand etc. However, when Ḥisham discussed the divine knowledge of things, he argued that God would not know things eternally. God would know things later on, after not knowing them. “[Having] knowledge is an attribute of Him. It is not Him, nor is it different from Him, or some part of Him.”²⁸ Obviously Ash‘arīte and Māturīdite theologians took this formula of rejecting identity as well as difference, and used it to state a position that

²⁵ Sayyid Sharīf al-Jurjānī, *Ṣerhu’l-Mevâkif*, vol. III, Trans. Ömer Türker (İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2015), 76-82.

²⁶ Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, 82-83.

²⁷ ‘Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, *Kitābu Nihāyat al-iqdām fī ‘ilm al-kalām*, ed. Alfred Guillaume (Cairo: Maktaba Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2009), 193-195; Mas‘ūd ibn ‘Umar Taftāzānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam: Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī on the Creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī*, trans. Earl Edgar Elder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 51-52; Abū l-Mu‘īn Maymūn ibn Muḥammad Nasafī, *Tabṣirat al-adilla*, ed. Hüseyin Atay & Şaban Ali Düzgün (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2003), 261-263.

²⁸ Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt*, 37-38.

is intended to observe the divine transcendence as well as the meaningfulness of theological language.²⁹

Another strategy followed in this regard, i.e., observing divine transcendence and upholding the meaningfulness of theological language was this: to predicate an attribute of God and confirm that “God is not like others that has that attribute.” For example, al-Maturidī, in his *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*,³⁰ first confirms that God must be unlike creation, and criticizes the Mushabbiha position. He indicates certain shortcomings of a position conceiving God similar to creation. He confirms that when the words that we use to talk about properties of creation are predicated of God, they are used in such a way that all the creaturely implications are stripped off (p.37, prg. 1). He acknowledges that in order to know God, we must use the language that is used to talk about creatures. Accordingly, we predicate perfection properties of God, but also take into account the principle that God is unlike creatures. For example, one may say “God knows but his knowledge is unlike, knowledge belonging to creatures.”³¹ However, this way of talking about God may be open to discussions. On the one hand, if we interpret the modifier “unlike” in the strict sense, then theological language may lose its informative function. On the other hand, if we do not take the modifier “unlike” in a strict sense, then it may not be good enough to ensure divine otherness.

1.6. Philosophers Emphasizing Divine Transcendence

After highlighting the Ash‘arīte and Māturīdīte attempts to come up with a satisfactory account of religious texts giving information about how God is, let me just give a brief description of the position of philosophers such as Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. They seem to have a position similar to that of the Mu‘tazilīte theologians regarding the problem of theological language. They emphasized divine transcendence and simplicity that may be a confirmation of God’s difference from creation, *mukhālafatun li’l-ḥavādis*.³² For example, Ibn Sīnā argued that we cannot

²⁹ Mas‘ūd ibn ‘Umar Taftāzānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam: Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī on the Creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī*, trans. Earl Edgar Elder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 51-55.

³⁰ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, ed. Bekir Topaloğlu and Muhammed Aruçi (Ankara: İSAM, 2003), 43-47; Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, 282-284).

³¹ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, 43-47. This way of predicating attributes of God seems to have supporters among Mu‘tazilīte theologians as well. For example, Qādī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, in his *Sharḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*, offers the same formula and defends that it may allow only predication of perfection properties. For example, one may not say, “God is a body, but He is unlike other bodies.” ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*, 221 ff.

³² For discussions of the position of philosophers on the issue of theological language see for example, Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 168-177; Ali Kürşat Turgut, “Meşşai Felsefesinde Allah’ın Sıfatları Meselesi,” *Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 2, (2012), 1-21; Mehmet Sait Reçber, “Fârâbî ve Tanrı’nın Basitliği Meselesi,” *Uluslararası Fârâbî Sempozyumu Bildirileri Ekim 2004* (Ankara: 2005,), 213-222 and Zeynep İnal, “Fa‘ra‘bi Bu‘tu‘ncu‘l Bir Din Dili Teorisi O‘nermekte Midir?,” *Din ve Felsefe Araştırmaları* 3 / 6 (Aralık 2020), 232-253.

know God in Himself. All our knowledge concerning God's existence and properties is based on our knowledge of creation, i.e., the universe. On the basis of our knowledge of the universe, all what can be predicated of God is either negation of creaturely properties, or predication of perfection properties in relation to (*idafatan*) creation.³³ For example, by considering the diversity and order in creation we can say that God is knowing. But this does not indicate what God is in Himself. It only confirms how we could think about an agent who produced such and such an effect, within our human experience. Thus he predicated perfection properties of God. But he also emphasized divine simplicity. His strategy to confirm that God is absolutely simple despite the fact that we predicate many properties with positive meaning is as following: he identifies, knowledge with being. God is an intellect, intellectual apprehender and intelligible. This identification implies reducibility of an attribute to being. Having knowledge is pure immaterial existence. At a second stage, Ibn Sīnā seems to reduce other properties to knowing or having knowledge.³⁴

2. Specific Debates with Respect to Theological Language

After describing the emergence of various scholarly groups, now I would like to examine certain theological debates, as examples, to show that these issues of debate are closely related to the problem of theological language. Some of these theological debates among theological schools and an important part of accusations against philosophers seem to be closely related to issues concerning theological language. To justify this claim, let us consider, as the first example, the question whether the Qur'an is created. The debates on this question is closely associated the *miḥna* which is used to indicate "a series of interrogations that were inaugurated by the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma' mūn (d. 218/833) during the last months of his life."³⁵ There may be different explanations why *miḥna* happened, and about the hidden agenda of al-Ma' mūn. One may emphasize political and social factors behind the interrogations.³⁶ However, the subject-matter of the interrogation was, formally, "God's property of speaking." Since the Qur'an is a divine word, how can we understand the statement that "God speaks", and what is the ontological status of the Qur'an as a divine word? Can we predicate speaking of God in the literal sense, or not? One option is to accept that we can predicate speaking of God in the literal sense, just as God is eternal, and uncreated, the Qur'an as God's speech must be

³³ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Risāla al- 'Arshiyya*, ed. Sayyid 'Abdullah b. Aḥmad al- 'Alawī (Haydarabad: 1353 A.H.), 7-8.

³⁴ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Risāla al- 'Arshiyya*, 8-9; Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt fī l-ḥikma al-manṭiqiyya wa l-ṭabī 'iyyah wa-al-Ilāhiyya*, ed. Majid Fakhry (Beirut: Dār al-āfāqī l-Jadīda, 1985), 280-288. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 284-285.

³⁵ Nimrod Hurvitz, "al-Ma' mūn (r. 198/813–218/833) and the Miḥna," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 650; Nader el-Bizri "God: Essence and Attributes," 122-128.

³⁶ See for different explanations of why *miḥna* took place, see Nimrod Hurvitz, "al-Ma' mūn (r. 198/813–218/833) and the Miḥna," 650-660; Hayrettin Yücesoy, "Mihne" *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 30 (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2005), 26-28.

eternal and uncreated. However, one may also emphasize that we cannot predicate the act of speaking of God in the literal sense, given the fact that our act of speaking has something to do with our body. Consequently, one may justify that the Qur'an is God's speech in the sense that it consists of linguistic elements of the same kind as our speech. Then one may argue that the Qur'an is not eternal, is created, just as human speech is created. Thus although apparently there are political dimensions of the *mihna*, the positions of the parties, in response to the question whether Qur'an was created, are closely related to their conception of the nature of theological language.

Let me remind the debate whether God will be seen, as another example.³⁷ Apparently the rival groups had different positions on this issue. While some groups argued that God will be seen, hence the relevant religious texts must be taken literally, some others argued just the opposite. Why did different groups have different positions? For example, can we say that each group have different religious texts on which they rely? One may say that while one group considers some prophetic traditions authentic, another group rejects their authenticity. And this is why one group argues that God shall be seen, while the other group denies it. This is, because they do not consider some prophetic traditions authentic. Then one may further ask, why the latter group rejects the authenticity of certain statements as transmitted prophetic traditions while the other group denies. A simple answer seems to be that since the latter group have certain conception of God—emphasizing that God is unlike creation—, a supposed prophetic tradition may not be acceptable if it does not have a strong chain of transmitters. Even if any given prophetic tradition is considered authentic, because it has a strong chain of transmitters, then the content will be taken in a metaphorical sense. Hence a group's conception of theological language seems to affect strongly, that group's decision about the authenticity of a purported prophetic tradition, and about its interpretation.

To emphasize the importance of the problem of theological language in the formation and development of various theological-philosophical positions, it may be a good idea to look at Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*.³⁸ In his *Tahāfut*, Ghazālī criticized philosophers on twenty issues of discussion. These included discussions regarding the problem of the eternity of the universe, God's knowledge of particulars and the possibility of miracles. Out of these twenty issues of discussion, eight of them focus on issues related to theological language. Discussions 5-13—except for the 10th discussion which covers debates regarding the proof for the existence of the creator: "On their inability to show that the world has a maker and

³⁷ Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Radd 'alā l-jahmiyya, wa-l-zanādiqa*, 132-134; Dārimī, 'Uthmān ibn Sa'īd. *al-Radd 'alā l-Jahmiyya*, 102-129 especially 121-129; 'Abd al-Jabbār. *Sharḥ al-usūl al-khamsa*; 264-270.

³⁸ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Marmura, (Provo: Brigham Young University Press 2000).

a cause”—are closely related to the problem of theological language, i.e., predicating perfection properties of God and the meaning of those properties. In these discussions Ghazālī examines the position of philosophers about God’s attributes such as unity, simplicity, incorporeality and knowledge. Thus Ghazālī’s *Tahāfut* may be a good example indicating how certain debates among medieval Muslim intellectuals are closely related to their conception of theological language.

As another example, one may consider the debate over the creation of the universe. Of course the debate over the creation of the universe have different aspects. But in this context I would like to highlight two issues of debate: 1) whether the universe began to exist and 2) whether creation is a voluntary action. In his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, Ghazālī argues that for philosophers the universe is eternal and creation is not a voluntary action in the proper sense, since their conception of the divine will excludes choice.³⁹ Ghazālī emphasizes that creation is a voluntary action, and he tries to refute arguments that the universe cannot begin to exist, given the fact that God willed the universe. For philosophers, among whom one may safely include Ibn Sīnā, the universe may not begin to exist, given the fact that God willed it and given the fact that God is unchangeable and eternal.⁴⁰ The history of the Islamic philosophy is full of discussions whether Ghazālī’s criticism against philosophers’ conception of creation and conception of the divine will are justified, whether philosophers really defended that the universe is eternal, hence of the same ontological order with God, and whether creation is considered like a natural action, e.g., the sun emitting its light naturally. Here my intention is not to tackle with these discussions.⁴¹ Here, I simply want to highlight how their conception of God’s will lies beneath the discussions concerning creation of the universe. How can we understand the statement, “God creates the universe voluntarily” or “God wills the universe”? Let me remind the positions of the debating parties. Regarding the question whether the universe began to exist, we have two conflicting answers. Ghazālī answer this question positively, while Ibn Sīnā answers this question negatively. Ibn Sīnā does so by emphasizing the necessity and unchangeability of God, and the divine will. Ghazālī tries to defend that the universe began to exist by arguing that the divine unchangeability does not require that the universe cannot begin to exist. Similarly, Ibn Sīnā argues that God creates necessarily, creation of the universe is emanation. The universe emanates from God necessarily, as a result of divine knowledge and will concerning the universe. As opposed to this Ghazālī emphasizes that the concept of will involves choosing between alternatives and

³⁹ Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 12-46.

⁴⁰ Avicenna *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), VI.1, 196-200; VI.2, 203-205; VIII.6 283-287; IX.1, 299, 302-304; IX.4, 326-328.

⁴¹ For these discussions see for example, Herbert Davidson, *Proofs for the Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University, 1987); Louis Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d’Avicenne (Ibn Sīnā)* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1951) and Rahim Acar, “Avicenna’s Position Concerning the Basis of the Divine Creative Action,” *The Muslim World*, 94/1 (2004), 65-79.

being free to choose one option. Thus all the discussions about the beginning of the universe and its necessity are closely connected to the positions of the debating parties on theological language. For Ibn Sīnā the conception of divine will as the cause of the universe's existence after non-existence imply the occurrence of an act of willing to God. Hence it implies an anthropomorphic conception of God, making God similar to creation. For Ghazālī, however, the conception voluntary action requires openness to alternatives, including the option of not willing at all. Hence the harsh debates regarding the creation of the universe between different parties seem to be closely connected to their conceptions of theological language.

CONCLUSION

Intending to highlight the importance of the problem of theological language in the formation of medieval Islamic thought, I tried to do two things: (1) to show how important scholarly groups may be seen as parts of a larger network and (2) to examine how certain issues of debate among rival groups are closely connected to their conception of theological language. To sum up what I have tried to do regarding the first point, let me draw a map of these scholarly groups. It seems that the emergence of major scholarly groups may be explained by a process of dialectical interaction. (1) The earliest trend in this regard was to emphasize divine transcendence, which was referred as *Mu'attila* (also known as *Jahmiyya*). *Mu'attila* means those who make divine attributes useless, or inefficient. It is a name given by opponents, to indicate that such an interpretation of the religious texts strips them out of meaning, because of the emphasis on divine transcendence. As a reaction to this emphasis on divine transcendence, (2) there seems to have emerged scholars who emphasized the literal meaning of the Qur'anic verses and the prophetic traditions. People who took such a position are known as *Mushabbiha*, or *Mujassima*, those who make God similar to creation, or conceive God like bodily creatures. Their position may also be called anthropomorphism. (3) One may consider *Salafiyya*, or *Traditionism*, as the third approach, as a reaction to *Mushabbiha* as well as to *Mu'attila*. The distinctive feature of this group is their claim to follow the path of the earlier generations of Muslims (i.e., companions of the prophet and followers of the companions), or pious forefathers. They claim to take all religious texts at face value, neither removing their meaning by emphasizing divine transcendence, nor making God similar to creation by drawing the implications of religious texts that may imply anthropomorphism, or likening God to creatures. All the major scholarly groups emerged later on, in the medieval Islamic world, such as *Mu'tazilite*, *Ah'arite*, *Māturīdite* groups and philosophers, the so called *falāsifa*, up to Ghazzālī, may be traced back to these three approaches and may be considered some kind of modification of these approaches.

The emergence and development of these theological schools show a dialectical process of mutual interaction. If we assume that *Mu'attila* is the oldest theological school, then *Mushabbiha's* overemphasis on the literal meaning of religious texts may be understood as a reaction to *Mu'attila's* position. Similarly,

one might assume that Salafiyya, or Traditionism, is a reaction not only to Mu‘attila’s position regarding the nature of theological language, but also to Mushabbiha’s position thereof. From the perspective of the Salafī movement, both of these positions are extreme, and unacceptable, positions regarding the interpretation of the relevant religious data. While the former goes extreme with regard to emphasis on divine transcendence, the latter goes extreme with regard to the literal meaning of the scripture. The debates with and criticism against the so-called Mu‘attila may have prepared the emergence of the Mu‘tazilite position regarding the nature of theological language. One may trace the emergence of the Ah‘arite and Māturīdite positions to debates among the Mu‘tazilite scholars and those who are associated with Mushabbiha and Salafiyya. The position of philosophers (*Falāsifa*), specifically that of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, may be similar to the Mu‘tazilite position regarding the nature of theological language, in general.

After discussing the emergence and interaction between different scholarly groups, I tried to show how the positions of debating scholars on certain theological debates are closely connected to their positions on theological language. As I tried to show, the positions of the rival groups in debates whether the Qur’an was created and whether God shall be seen, seem to reflect their conception of theological language. Similarly, in the debates about the creation of the universe between philosophers and theologians, one may trace role played by the conception of theological language assumed by rival groups

One may consider all the discussion presented here to be trivial. It may be considered as trivial, in the following way: in any given theological debate, all claims and arguments are expressed via language and they are recorded as linguistic expressions. Furthermore, in a religious context the linguistic expressions concerning God must have a central role in the formation of religious thought. Hence it is true but trivial that the problem of theological language was a major factor in the formation of medieval Islamic thought. In response to this, I should accept that these remarks are formally valid. However, granting the importance of the problem of theological language in constructing the development of intellectual-scholarly movements may be contrasted to other ways of constructing it. In fact, intellectual historians and historians of religious orders have not classified the major theological groups in terms of their position regarding the problem of theological language. It is not also the case that major issues of debate are examined with respect to the position of debating groups on the nature of theological language. Hence I want to emphasize that paying attention to the problem theological language may help us to have a simpler paradigm to classify different groups and to have a better understanding of what was at stake in particular issues of debate.

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