

**The Sources of Religious and Political Power in Thought
of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi and Saint Thomas Aquinas
– the comparative perspective**

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Özet

**Karşılařtırılmalı Yaklaşım İle Ebu
Mansur el-Maturidi ve Saint Thomas
Aquinas'ta Dini ve Politik Gücün
Kaynakları**

Bu makale ilahi ve dünyevi güç arasındaki ilişki kaynaklarına dair iki önde gelen kelamcı/teolog Ebu Mansur el-Maturidi ve Saint Thomas Aquinas'ın ortaya koydukları düşünceleri karşılařtırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Öncelikle çalışma, bu iki düşünürün yaklaşım tarzlarına dair kısa bir bilgi ile din ile siyaset arasındaki ilişkiye dair temel fikirlerini ortaya koyacaktır. Daha sonra, Maturidi ile Aquinas'ın görüşleri arasında ortak bir zeminin olup olmadığı hususu tespit edilmeye çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İktidar, Dini İktidar, Maturidi, Aquinas

Abstract

This paper aims to compare some reflections on relationship between divine and worldly powers and their sources presented by two prominent theologians Abu Mansur al-Maturidi and. First, the paper we will present a brief characteristic of these two theologians and emphasize some of their fundamental ideas concerning the relationship between religion and politics. Then, we will try to find out if there is a common platform between al-Maturidi's and Aquinas' ideas.

Keywords:

Power, Religious Power, al-Maturidi, Aquinas

Introduction

The discussion around the questions of secularism and relationship between religion and politics has already received a great deal of attention and occupied a central role in different field of studies. Nevertheless, nowadays it is still gaining more importance. Mainly because of the Islamic fundamentalism and the threat it constitutes for the liberal, democratic state and also for the rule of law. Moreover, the question of the place of religion in the public sphere once again is becoming more relevant also in so called Western world

were the aggressive secularism gradually evolves in a kind of ideology with a strong religious characteristic.

In this perspective we would like to compare some reflections on relationship between divine and worldly powers and their sources presented by two prominent theologians representing respectively Islam and Christianity. These two thinkers are Abu Mansur al-Maturidi and Saint Thomas Aquinas. In the first part of paper we will present a brief characteristic of these two theologians and emphasize some of their fundamental ideas concerning the relationship between religion and politics. It seems necessary to obtain a general impression of the issue. Then in the next part we will try to find out if there is a common platform between al-Maturidi's and Aquinas' ideas.

Abu Mansur al-Maturidi

The first theologian to be considered is al-Maturidi. He was born in the outskirts of Samarkand in the Central Asia and died in the 333/944. Maturidi theology can best be understood in contrast to the doctrine of Mu'tazilism and Ash'arisim and their views on the role of reason in the development of religious faith. The same as many of the theologian from the Central Asia regions al-Maturidi was under strong influence of the late Murjia ideas and that is why we could easily describe him as a representative of the Hanafi school of Islamic law. His main work is the *Kitab al-Tawhid*.

From Mu'tazili theologians, al-Maturidi inherited rationalism but he was not eager to give this rationalism priority over epistemology. Analyzing the sources of the human knowledge concerning religion he enumerates two of them: listening to the authorities and reason. But with no doubt the supreme role he ascribes to the Revelation with reason playing only supporting role. al-Maturidi accuses Mu'tazila of relying too strongly on reason and not enough on epistemological intuition (ma'rifa) so common for the members of Sufi orders. Some scholars even suggest that al-Maturidi was to some point influenced by the Sufi thought.

As it could be interpreted from his main work (*Kitab al-Tawhid*) for al-Maturidi the most important aspect of Islam was the idea of monotheism. He strongly criticized all symptoms of dualism. This was the fundament of his disagreements with Mu'tazila: for al-Maturidi humans could not act as independent subjects – in that sense only God is independent and to state otherwise is to agree for dualism or polytheism.

The subject of the sources of divine and political power and relations between them was not the main issue for al-Maturidi. Although as all of the Islamic theologians he also had to take a position concerning the question of religious and political authority in Islam.

In the Qur'an one could not find many verses which can be interpreted as political directives. It is written that in the worldly issues peoples should decide by consultation; that there should be justice in the Muslim society; that peoples should be loyal to the rulers. The hierarchy of the believers should be settled only by their obedience to the God.

In the Sunni Islam every free man could become a political leader (or caliph) and the descent from the Prophet is of no importance. That was also the argument of al-Maturidi – the issue of caliph is a political one, not religious. He argued that because the Prophet had not chosen anyone to be his successor, then it is the role of the community to choose the new ruler.

According to al-Maturidi it was also very important that the God gave the Prophet a divine power and not the political one. This was acquired by the Prophet because of his own attributes and his own struggle. He was simply chosen to be the political leader by the community. That because in Islam all Muslims are equal, anyone could have been chosen. The decision to choose the Prophet Muhammad was taken because of his character and not by divine intervention.

Al-Maturidi concentrated also on the question of the rule of the Quraysh tribe in the first centuries of Islam. For him obviously it was not a religious (*diyanatan*) obligation for the caliph to be the member of the Quraysh tribe but it was a political (*siyasatan*) ne-

cessity. According to al-Maturidi from the religious point of view caliph has to be pious, able to resolve peoples' problems and have suitable knowledge.

On the other hand al-Maturidi was trying to justify special role played by the Quraysh tribe in the Muslim community and in the structure of government of the Muslim state. First of all, he stated that it is natural that caliph should be chosen from among members of the most respected tribe (the Quraysh tribe). Going further he underlined also that the Qur'an was revealed in the Quraysh dialect a fact which have a symbolic value. Also members of such a respected tribe are somehow predestined to make good not wrong things. Al-Maturidi argued also that it would be unjust to ask other tribes to take such an enormous responsibility (to rule).

All these arguments look problematic when taking into account the rule of equality among all Muslims as it was revealed in the Qur'an. Al-Maturidi is de facto producing justification for creation of a dynasty – a very exclusive upper class of the Muslim community. And also - because at that time the Quraysh tribe was still in power these arguments presented by al-Maturidi could be perceived as a symptom of his conformism.

From the political perspective it is also worth to mention the al-Maturidi's idea of abrogation by reasoning (*al-naskh al-ijtihadi*). Being under visible influence of Abu Hanifa, al-Maturidi is separating religion (*Din*) from religious law (*Sharia*).

The main principles of religion are internalized by reasoning and searching. That is why they cannot be abrogated (of change) – they originate from reason. But religious law which contains different rituals and rules brought by different prophets in varying social and historical contexts could be changed.

Each prophet had his own sharia – these law systems responded to different socio-political circumstances. And that is why al-Maturidi allowed changing of the sharia – to adjust this system of religious law to requirements of the time. As an instrument to do this he proposed the Islamic idea of *ijtihah* – in this certain case – *al-naskh al-ijtihadi* – abrogation by reasoning. According to al-

Maturidi there was only one condition to use this instrument – abrogation was allowed only when from the rationalistic point of view there was no other way. This al-Maturidi’s proposal was criticized also by Mu'tazila, so deeply involved in propagating the role of reason in Islam.

Al-naskh al-ijtihadi as a very flexible instrument was crucial for the political developments of the Ottoman Empire and potentially could be fundamental for any political developments of the Muslim states nowadays. That is because it means that there is no such a thing as a Muslim political system. The construction of the government in a Muslim state depends only on the decision of community and different political system could be implemented according to socio-political circumstances. In this context there is no “religious” difference between democracy and absolutism. It also means that Islam as a religion do not determine the character of political power in a Muslim society.

Saint Thomas Aquinas

In this comparison Christianity will be represented by one of the most important theologian of the Christian world – Thomas Aquinas. “Doctor of the Church” is recognized by the Catholic Church as a saint. He lived in the XIII century and was a member of the Dominican order. On the fundament of his theology and philosophy a theological school was established – Thomism.

His main contribution as a theologian was the introduction of many Aristotelian ideas into the Christian theology. His was the pioneer in the understanding of the role of natural law and its meaning for Christians. His interest in the relationship between religion and politics, between divine and worldly power is not so important in the context of his theology by some implication in this subject could be interesting.

Saint Thomas argued that all rulers must respect natural law, reason and God’s will. The character of political system in this context is not so important. Although he underlined a positive func-

tionalism of an elective monarchy because in this kind of system people could break “the contract” with the ruler who has not respected the people’s rights. In the case of dynastic monarchy the ruler is not dependent on the people’s will and easily could become a tyrant – a ruler who is not respecting the natural law.

Saint Thomas perceived humans as social creatures and in this perspective he understood a state as a natural construction built by people. For Saint Thomas the only real purpose for all Christians is salvation. And this salvation cannot be reached outside the Church. That is why the Church as an institution guiding people to salvation has a certain religious power over believer – mainly as a depositor and “distributor” of the sacraments.

But for Saint Thomas it is obvious that the salvation could be reached only through worldly life. It is obvious also that the state should play only supporting role on its citizens’ way to salvation. Almost every character of the government is acceptable for Christians as long as it helps them to reach the salvation. Saint Thomas argues that each “supporting” state should provide its citizens with welfare, justice and peace.

When it comes to the sources of the political power Saint Thomas has no doubts – he refers to the Letter to the Romans in which Saint Paul writes: “Everyone is to obey the governing authorities, because there is no authority except from God and so whatever authorities exist have been appointed by God” (Rom 13:1). And further: “So anyone who disobeys an authority is rebelling against God's ordinance; and rebels must expect to receive the condemnation they deserve”.

Potentially one should not doubt about the relation between religion and politics. But that could be misleading. Saint Thomas is clearly aware of what Jesus had said to Pontius Pilate: “Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. As it is, my kingdom does not belong here” (John 18:36). Starting from this crucial statement Saint Thomas argues that people with the

help of reason given to them by God should shape the world in the way it will bring them worldly and heavenly benefits.

The other sentence which is crucial for Saint Thomas is the one in which Jesus responses to the Pharisees: “pay Caesar what belongs to Caesar -- and God what belongs to God” (Matthew 22:21). This sentence is a fundamental not only for Saint Thomas theology but also for the whole Christianity.

This somehow conflicting statements result in the theory that although religious power is superior to the political one, they are autonomous and the religious side could intervene in critical situations. For example when the political ruler became a tyrant – in that case the religious authorities could call all believers to not obey the tyrant and to deprive him of power.

The Comparison

To compare ideas and grasp the parallels between al-Maturidi’s and Saint Thomas’ views is not an easy task for many reasons. Primarily because of the different and idiosyncratic character of the two religions: Islam and Christianity. However, it is not a place to analyze the discrepancy between them. We also should notice that the attitudes of representing theologians were conditioned by concrete historical context and also determined by other polemic discourse existed at that time. Therefore it is important to remember that al-Maturidi brought to life his ideas almost three centuries before Saint Thomas. The next difference is related to the importance and influence of their thought in the light of their respective religions. According to opinion of some scholars al-Maturidi’s outlooks (although interesting and “original” in some sense) did not play significant role for Islam theology as a whole. Whereas Saint Thomas’ role for the Christianity was fundamental. He is considered to be the most important theologian of Christianity in the middle Ages. However, we have to mention that al-Maturidi seems to be undiscovered thinker and for this reason still slightly unknown.

Nevertheless, trying to concentrate only on their ideas concerning the relationship between religious and political power one could

find some similarities which sometimes are not visible at the first glance.

For example al-Maturidi is stressing that although God gave the Prophet Muhammad the religious authority over all Muslims he did not give him political power – achieved his political position because of his talent and actions taken at the right time. On the other hand for al-Maturidi monotheistic concept of God is so crucial that he accused his close theological allies (Mu'tazila) of heresy.

Therefore, is it possible that the Prophet Muhammad became a political leader in the sense that not all power comes from God? As it was already mentioned before Saint Thomas is sure that all power comes from God what is understandably if one believes in almighty of God. Al-Maturidi would certainly agree with this assumption.

The other similarity is the question of social hierarchy. As it was already said, although in Islam all believers are equal, for al-Maturidi de facto it is not the case. For al-Maturidi the Quraysh tribe is a kind of aristocracy credited with a duty to govern Muslim society. Saint Thomas said openly that social hierarchy is a necessity. If one agrees that humans are creatures living in communities and that in natural act of will they create an organization or a state. That is because every community has to govern itself to endure. Obviously this government is not impersonal – there have to be someone who takes decision, who conducts governing. And this person has to have a power to enforce its decision. Without hierarchical relation between a government and a citizen it is impossible. It is impossible for un-hierarchical society to have a state.

There also two other aspects on which al-Maturidi and Saint Thomas would probably agree. Having in mind the idea of al-naskh al-ijtihadi, al-Maturidi presumably would accept numerous different forms of government as long as they would be accepted by the people and they will not be contradictory to unchangeable rules of his religion. A similar opinion one could extract from the works of Saint Thomas. Although he stated that it is easier to corrupt the power of many than the power of an individual he argued that it is the people to decide about the form of government. Humans have right ar-

ranged the way they live and they will be responsible for that before God.

The last parallel between these two theologians could be found in the relation between will and act. This problem, although not directly, could be perceived as a political question. Understanding of this relation results in the way people are judge for their worldly acts. The border example in this case is obviously related to the distinction between believer and unbeliever. The resolution of this dilemma could have grave political consequences.

For example in case when the ruler is accused of heresy both al-Maturidi and Saint Thomas argue that it is not the privilege of people to judge others' faith. In other words one's faith could be weakly connected with his acts. And both theologians agree that the final say about salvation of a person rests in hands of God. In practice this idea was very friendly for rulers with numerous sins on their account. If acts of this kind of ruler would certify his faith then his subjects could revolt because he would be considered as an unbeliever. With the help of al-Maturidi and Saint Thomas a sinful ruler could always argue: "Do not judge me. Only God can do that".

Conclusions

Coming to conclusion one have to admit that there is a crucial obstacle with comparing al-Maturidi's and Saint Thomas' views on power and relation between religion and politics. At times and places of their lives there was no substantial conflict between religious and political power because they both lived in confessional states. That does not mean that in their time there was no conflicts but they were driven by ambitions of the religious and political leader. That is why both al-Maturidi and Saint Thomas could not provide us with any valuable remarks on the question of secularism. And that because they both did not know was that.

In the political environment of their times political entities like states enjoy a full unity of ethos among their societies. It means that in both cases of Islamic Caliphate of the IX/X century and Christian Europe of the XIII century there was almost universal

agreement about values and virtues (a common ethos) prized and respected by the society. A state only was supposed to support preservation of this ethos contributing in this sense in salvation of its subject/citizens. In this perspective religious and political powers were implementing the same plan of salvation.

The problem with secularization starts when in one political entity one has at least two concurring ethoses – when in one state live two different religious communities. The simplest (and as history shows) solution to this problem is to kill or to expel minor community.

Both theologians al-Maturidi and Saint Thomas did not take any attitude toward this issue. They presents all of their ideas concerning best form of government or relation between religious and political powers with one but crucial reservation – they refer exclusively to the situation in which in society there is only one ethos. This means that on the subject of secularism so important in today's world al-Maturidi and Saint Thomas say very little and out of today's context.

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