

### Research Article

## The Theological Discourse on Divine Attributes

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**Abstract.** This study examines the theological perspectives on Divine Attributes among the Ash‘arī, Māturīdī, and, highlighting their doctrinal differences and methodological approaches. While the Ash‘arīs affirm Divine Attributes as neither identical to nor separate from God’s essence, the Māturīdīs emphasize rational-textual balance, rejecting anthropomorphism without negating attributes. In contrast, the Mu‘tazilites deny eternal attributes, arguing they compromise God’s unity (tawḥīd), and interpret scriptural anthropomorphisms metaphorically. Employing a critical-analytical method, this research reveals how these schools navigate the tension between divine transcendence and scriptural literalism. The findings underscore the Ash‘arī-Māturīdī alignment against Mu‘tazilite rationalism, while noting subtle divergences between them. The study contributes to broader Islamic theological discourse by clarifying these schools’ positions on Divine Attributes.

**Keywords:** Divine Attributes, Ash‘arī, Māturīdī, Mu‘tazilite, Islamic Theology.

**Abstrak.** Penelitian ini menganalisis perspektif teologis tentang Sifat Ketuhanan dalam mazhab Ash'arī, Māturīdī, , menguraikan perbedaan doktrinal dan metodologis mereka. Ash'arī menegaskan Sifat Ilahi tidak identik dengan esensi Tuhan tetapi juga tidak terpisah, sementara Māturīdī menekankan keseimbangan rasional-tekstual dan menolak antropomorfisme tanpa menafikan sifat. Sebaliknya, Mu'tazilah menolak sifat abadi demi menjaga kemurnian tawhīd dan menafsirkan ayat antropomorfis secara metaforis. Dengan pendekatan analitis-kritis, penelitian ini mengungkap ketegangan antara transendensi Ilahi dan literalisme teks. Temuan menunjukkan kesamaan Ash'arī-Māturīdī dalam menentang rasionalisme Mu'tazilah, meski dengan perbedaan subtil. Studi ini memperkaya wacana teologi Islam dengan memetakan posisi ketiga mazhab tersebut.

**Kata Kunci:** Sifat Ketuhanan, Ash'arī, Māturīdī, Mu'tazilah, Teologi Islam.

## INTRODUCTION

The question of Divine Attributes did not receive in-depth theological treatment during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Muslims tend to accept the attributes of God as described in the Qur'an, without engaging in speculative inquiry into their underlying meanings.<sup>2</sup> God possesses absolute perfection, and His attributes are numerous. Nevertheless, God has revealed a portion of His attributes to humankind in the Qur'an."<sup>3</sup>

God is free from any flaws or weaknesses, and nothing can be compared to Him. If such deficiencies were attributed to God, His majesty and transcendence would undoubtedly be diminished. Such a notion stands in direct contradiction to His saying in the Qur'an: <sup>4</sup>. { قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ، وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ } "It is evident here that God's perfect attributes portray Him as wholly transcendent and sanctified above all forms of deficiency." The issue of the Divine Essence and Attributes is one that has frequently sparked debate among theologians, due to the intricate and often contentious relationship between them. This discourse began in the early centuries of the Hijrah with Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 127 AH), and later evolved into an intellectual controversy between the Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite schools within the framework of Islamic theology (*'Ilm al-Kalām*).<sup>5</sup>

When examining the Ash'arite and Māturīdite schools, many scholars of Islamic theology assume that they constitute a single unified creed. This perception

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<sup>1</sup> Fauzan Fauzan, "SEKULARISASI DALAM PANDANGAN HARVEY COX," *KALAM* 6, no. 2 (25 Februari 2017): 251, <https://doi.org/10.24042/klm.v6i2.406>.

<sup>2</sup> Ji Raden Fatah, "HUBUNGAN AGAMA DAN NEGARA DALAM PERSPEKTIF PEMIKIRAN SAYYID QUTUB" 1, no. 1 (2016); Syamsuddin Arif, "Transmigrasi Ilmu': Dari Dunia Islam ke Eropa," *TSAQAFAH* 6, no. 2 (30 November 2010): 199, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v6i2.117>.

<sup>3</sup> Shabbir Akhtar, "The Quran and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam," *Routledge*, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> QS. 112: 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfson, Harry Austryn., "The Philosophy of the Kalām," *Cambridge*, no. Harvard University Press, (1976).

is reinforced by the common assertion that both Ash'arite and Māturīdite scholars are among the leading authorities of Ahl al-Sunnah.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, both Imām al-Ash'arī and Imām al-Māturīdī operated within a shared theological orbit, with the primary aim of defending Sunni orthodoxy and opposing the doctrines of the Mu'tazilites. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that the two schools agreed on all core theological issues, let alone on secondary details. This divergence arises in part from the fact that al-Ash'arī adopted the methodology of Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, which was characterized by a strict adherence to textual literalism and a limited engagement with rational argumentation. Although al-Ash'arī made some modifications to this approach, his underlying commitment to Hanbalite thought constrained his capacity for broader rational exploration. Even when he departed from certain Hanbalite principles, he did so cautiously and without abandoning their foundational assumptions.<sup>7</sup>

As for al-Māturīdī, he was nurtured within the intellectual tradition of the disciples of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah—a tradition marked by rational inquiry and deductive reasoning. This is unsurprising, given that the Ḥanafī school itself is grounded in principles such as analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) and juristic preference (*istiḥsān*).<sup>8</sup> In light of this, it is untenable to claim that the two theologians (al-Ash'arī and al-Māturīdī) were in full agreement on foundational matters, let alone on secondary issues. It would be a mistake to assume complete overlap between their methodologies in every domain. This very question has preoccupied numerous scholars, who have attempted to assess which of the two theological traditions granted greater authority to human reason.

This perspective requires reconsideration and correction, as there are differences—albeit slight—between the two schools. Indeed, the founders of these schools, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī and Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, never met at any point in time, and neither was the other's teacher or student. Each school of thought spread in different regions, and neither was predominant in the areas where the other gained influence. Despite both founders claiming to uphold the doctrines of the early generations (*salaf*) through a rationalist theological method, they nonetheless diverged from certain beliefs of the *salaf* in specific matters.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ramon Harvey, *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Maturidi Theology*, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, pp. 75-76.

<sup>7</sup> Nirhamna Hanif Fadillah, Amir Reza Kusuma, dan Rofiqul Anwar Anwar, "Comparative Study of Ijtihad Methods Between Ahlussunnah and Syiah," *Tasfiyah: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 6, no. 1 (9 Februari 2022): 83, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tasfiyah.v6i1.6837>.

<sup>8</sup> Chaker, Aref, "The Life of Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi and the Socio-Political and Theological Context of Central Asia in the Tenth Century.," *australian Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Abdrasilov T.K., Nurmatov Zh.Y., Abzhalov S.U., Hwang S.I., "Principles of Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi on the Divine Nature /2023. – Vol. 144. – №. 3," / *Bulletin of the L.N. Gumilyov ENU. Historical sciences. Philosophy. Religion Series.*, t.t., [https://doi.org/DOL: https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-7255-2023-144-3-153-166](https://doi.org/DOL:https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-7255-2023-144-3-153-166).

Additionally, both schools deviated from the practices of the Companions of the Prophet and those who followed them in their approach to the transmission and reasoning in religious matters.

Throughout its development, numerous theological schools within Islam have addressed the issue of Divine Attributes. First, the Ash'arites, who believe that God's attributes are inherent in His essence, meaning they are neither identical to His essence nor entirely separate from it. The Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, presented a negative view regarding God's attributes, arguing that God does not possess knowledge, power, life, and so forth. Second, the Māturīdī school, which opposes all forms of anthropomorphism and corporealism, without denying the existence of God's attributes. Third, the Mu'tazilites reject the views of the two preceding schools, maintaining that God's attributes should not be conceived as distinct from His essence. They do not permit the acknowledgment of separate attributes for God, in contrast to the stance taken by the Ash'arites.<sup>10</sup>

Based on this brief overview, several questions arise: What are the views of the Ash'arī, Māturīdī, and Mu'tazilite schools regarding Divine Attributes? Therefore, the researcher aims to address this issue in the present study titled 'The Issue of Divine Attributes between the Ash'arī, Māturīdī, and Mu'tazilite Schools.' The methodology employed in this study is a critical analytical approach. The researcher hopes that this scholarly work will be beneficial and can serve as a reference or complement to other academic research.

### **The Concept of Divine Attributes**

There is a distinction in meaning between the beautiful names of God (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*) and His attributes. The names of God refer to His essence and the perfection of His attributes.<sup>11</sup> For example, the name *al-Samī'* (The All-Hearing) signifies the essence of God and the perfection of the attribute of hearing, while the name *al-Baṣīr* (The All-Seeing) signifies the perfection of the attribute of sight. As for the attributes of God, they denote the perfect qualities of the Divine essence, and do not refer to any specific aspect of God's essence alone. Therefore, the attributes are broader and more inclusive than the names, as each name represents only one specific attribute.<sup>12</sup>

As for the Divine attribute, it is derived from the name of God, *Allāh*. It has already been established that names give rise to attributes. The evidence that names

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<sup>10</sup> Fatah, "HUBUNGAN AGAMA DAN NEGARA DALAM PERSPEKTIF PEMIKIRAN SAYYID QUTUB"; Şubḥī, Aḥmad Maḥmūd., "Fi 'Ilm al-Kalām: Dirāsah Falsafiyah li-Ārā' al-Firaq al-Islāmiyyah fī Uṣūl al-Dīn," *Dār al-Naḥḍah al-'Arabiyyah*, Beirut, 1980.

<sup>11</sup> Parasto Ghaderi, ", "A Comparative Study of the Issue of God's Names and Attributes in New Theology and Transcendental Wisdom." Vol. 6 (2023).

<sup>12</sup> *Fatāwā al-Shabkah al-Islāmiyyah*. Accessed November 18, 2009 (1 Dhū al-Ḥijjah 1430 AH). p. 763.

denote meanings, and that these meanings are attributes, is found in the Qur'anic verse: 'To God belong the best names, so invoke Him by them' (Qur'an, 7:180).<sup>13</sup> The term *al-ḥusnā* here follows the pattern of *fi'lā* and means 'the utmost perfection in beauty.' Perfection can only be achieved if it refers to profound meanings and commendable attributes. If the names were merely proper nouns without any connotation of meaning, they could not be described as beautiful. This serves as evidence for the derivation of attributes from names. The attribute of Divinity (*al-llāhiyyah*) is an attribute of deservingness, meaning that God, exalted be He, is deserving of Divinity and deserving of worship.<sup>14</sup>

The attributes of God, Exalted be He, are divided into several categories based on various considerations,<sup>15</sup> among which are the following: 1) The consideration of affirming and negating God's attributes. 2) The consideration of the attributes' connection to His essence and actions. 3) The consideration of the establishment of the attributes and their evidence. The first category is further divided into two subcategories: 1) Attributes that God, Exalted be He, has affirmed for His essence through the verses of the Qur'an or by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). These are referred to as the *absolute attributes*. 2) Attributes that God, Exalted be He, has negated for His essence, or that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has negated. These are referred to as negated or negative attributes.

This second part is further divided into three categories, which are: <sup>16</sup> 1) Attributes related solely to God, Exalted be He, and are referred to as the intrinsic attributes of God (*ṣifāt al-dhātīyah*). 2) Attributes related to God's will, power, and decree, and are referred to as the active attributes of God (*ṣifāt al-fi'liyah*). 3) Both intrinsic and active attributes, which are further divided into two categories: 1) Attributes mentioned in the Qur'anic verses and the Prophetic Sunnah, known as the transmitted attributes (*ṣifāt khabarīyah*). 2) Attributes understood through both reason and revelation, known as the rational and transmitted attributes (*ṣifāt sam'iyah 'aqliyah*).

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<sup>13</sup> QS. 7: 185.

<sup>14</sup> Erlwein, Hannah C., and هنا إيرلواين. "Fakhr Al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the Question 'Why Worship God?' - فخر الدين الرازي وسؤال." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 21, no. 2 (2019): 39–67. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26747997>; Hannah C. Erlwein, "Moral Obligation to Worship God Alone: Fakhr al-Din al-Razi Analysis in the Tafsir." *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 21: 103-120. DOI:[10.5617/jais.9371](https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.9371)

<sup>15</sup> Anik Masriyah, "BUKTI EKSISTENSI TUHAN Integrasi Ilmu Kalam dengan Filsafat Islam Ibnu Sina," *Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Ushuluddin* 19, no. 2 (21 Desember 2020): 32, <https://doi.org/10.18592/jiiu.v19i2.3399>.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Rājihī, 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Abd Allāh. *Durūs fi al-'Aqīdah*. p. 7.

## The Views of the Theological Sects on Divine Attributes

### a. The Ash'arite Theological Views on Divine Attributes <sup>17</sup>

The Ash'arites took an inconsistent stance regarding belief in the Divine attributes, filled with contradictions.<sup>18</sup> They were unable to fully align with the Salafi school, as they agreed with the Salaf in some aspects but disagreed in others. A similar approach was also taken towards the Mu'tazilite school, as they agreed with them in certain aspects while differing in others.

- 1). God is unlike anything; He is All-Knowing, All-Powerful, and Alive. God does not resemble anything, for if He were to resemble created things, He would be subject to their attributes. He is One, for if there were more than one deity, the management of the world would not be in accordance with its laws and order. As He says in the Qur'an: { لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَا ءَالِهَةٌ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا } God is All-Knowing, for actions that are precise and orderly can only be performed by one who understands them. The harmony in human nature, the life that God has endowed in it, the celestial bodies with their sun, moon, and stars, all of these point to the fact that the Creator of these things is knowledgeable of their nature and essence. Likewise, it is inconceivable that creations could arise from anyone other than the Living and All-Powerful.<sup>19</sup>
- 2). The attributes of God are neither identical to His essence nor separate from it. The attributes of God are inherent in His essence, meaning they are neither His essence nor something other than it. It is inconceivable that God could be living without life, knowledgeable without knowledge, powerful without power, or willing without will, for the concept of knowledge implies the possession of knowledge, the concept of power implies the possession of power, and the concept of will implies the possession of will. As God says in the Qur'an: { أَنْزَلَهُ }<sup>21</sup> { وَمَا تَحْمِلُ مِنْ أُنْتَى وَلَا تَضَعُ إِلَّا يَعْلَمُهُ }.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Ash'arīs (Ash'ariyya) constitute a prominent school of Islamic theology (kalām), traditionally attributed to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324 AH/936 CE), who broke away from Mu'tazilī rationalism. The Ash'arī school employs rational proofs and dialectical arguments (adilla 'aqliyya wa kalāmiyya) to defend Islamic doctrine against theological opponents, including Mu'tazilites and philosophers, while adhering to the methodological framework of Ibn Kullāb (d. 240 AH/854 CE). See, Al-Shahrastānī, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm. *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal (The Book of Religious Communities and Theological Schools)*. Edited by 'Abd al-Amīr al-Muḥannā and 'Alī Ḥasan Fā'ūr. Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, n.d., p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Koca, Özgür. "Causality in the Early Period: Mu'tazilites and the Birth of Ash'arite Occasionalism." Chapter. In *Islam, Causality, and Freedom: From the Medieval to the Modern Era*, 16–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> 'Awwājī, Ghālib ibn 'Alī. *Firaq Mu'āṣirah Tantamīl ilā al-Islām wa Bayān Mawqif al-Islām Minhu*. p. 218.

<sup>20</sup> Ḥusayn, Fawqiyah. "Muqaddimah." In *Al-Ibānah 'an Uṣūl al-Diyānah* by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī. Cairo: Dār al-Anṣār, 1977. p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> QS. 35: 11.

But does the Ash'arite's opposition to the Mu'tazilites in their claim that the attributes of God are identical to His essence mean that he affirms these attributes as distinct from the essence? The Ash'arite cannot adopt this position, as it is the belief held by Christians and leads to the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>22</sup> Rather, he affirms these attributes as inherent in the essence, neither being the essence itself nor something other than it. He disagrees with the Mu'tazilites because he sees their stance as a negation of the attributes, in addition to the conflation of their meanings.<sup>23</sup> For example, the meaning of knowledge is different from the meaning of power, just as life and other attributes are distinct. Indeed, the Mu'tazilites interpreted the difference between knowledge and power by claiming a distinction between the knower and the known.

However, the Ash'arite does not find this a sufficient argument and thus, they would fall into the position of saying: 'O Knowledge of God, forgive me,' because, according to them, if the essence and attributes are not differentiated, there would be no distinction between the meaning of knowledge and any other attribute. The affirmation of the distinct meaning of each attribute from the others, in the Ash'arite's view, can only be achieved by asserting that these attributes are inherent in the essence. On the other hand, the Mu'tazilites claim that knowledge and its essence are the same, and so the concepts of knowledge and power are identical. This would imply that one could know through power or act by knowledge. Since this is not the case, it becomes evident that the two concepts are distinct.<sup>24</sup>

3). The Connection Between God's Eternal Knowledge and Created Knowledge. The Ash'arite almost adopts a stance regarding God's eternal knowledge of created things, asserting that divine knowledge encompasses what has been, what is, and what will be. In other words, it extends from the knowledge of the nonexistent to the existent. The Ash'arites affirmed knowledge of the existing world. However, if the known existence is created and everything else is also created, how can God's knowledge of it be eternal? Does the Ash'arite align with the Mu'tazilite view, as they argue there is no separation between God's knowledge and the created world? The affirmation of the eternity of knowledge is clear: God knows both the existent and the nonexistent with a single, eternal knowledge. His knowledge of an event when it occurs is the same as His knowledge of it before it happens, and His knowledge of what will be is intrinsically the same as His knowledge of the present state of affairs. There is no distinction between what is possible and

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<sup>22</sup> Aicha Lahdhiri, "The Attributes of God in Medieval Islamic Thought: the Conception of the Omnipotence of God between the Qur'anic verses and the Islamic theology." *Perspectivas*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2022, pp. 19-30.

<sup>23</sup> Catarina Belo, "Mu'tazilites, Al-Ash'ari and Mainonidees on Divine Attributes." *Veritas (Porto Alegre)*, Vol. 52, No. 3, Jan. 2007, pp. 117-131.

<sup>24</sup> {Citation}

what is actual, or between what is realized and what is expected. For God's knowledge, all information is on the same plane.<sup>25</sup>

4). Anthropomorphic Attributes (*Ṣifāt Khabariyya*). One of the fundamental positions of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī regarding the anthropomorphic (*khabariyya*) attributes is his insistence that the words of God must be understood according to their apparent and real meaning, and should not be interpreted metaphorically unless there is definitive proof necessitating such interpretation. If the apparent meaning of the Qurʾanic expression indicates generality, it is not permissible to divert it from that general sense without clear evidence. Accordingly, al-Ashʿarī affirms what is stated in the Qurʾan regarding God's 'two hands' and 'face', among other attributes. For instance, God's statement: "*What I have created with My two hands*" is to be understood literally, affirming the reality of the 'two hands', and it is impermissible to deviate from this apparent meaning toward metaphorical interpretations merely based on speculative reasoning or sectarian claims.<sup>26</sup>

But does affirming the divine attributes imply anthropomorphism (*tajsīm*)? Al-Ashʿarī responds to this concern by referring to the Qurʾanic verse: {لما خلقت بيدي} There are only a few possible interpretations of God's statement, "My two hands," according to al-Ashʿarī. If one were to interpret it as referring merely to divine blessing or power, that would be rejected—in line with his principle that Qurʾanic wording must be understood according to its apparent meaning unless there is compelling evidence for metaphorical interpretation or specification. In the absence of such evidence or contextual indicators, language does not permit metaphorical reinterpretation.<sup>27</sup> If, on the other hand, the phrase were taken to mean literal, corporeal hands, this would amount to anthropomorphism (*tajsīm*), which he also explicitly rejects. Thus, the only valid understanding, in his view, is that God has two hands which are neither powers nor blessings, nor are they corporeal limbs. Rather, they are hands unlike any other, affirming the attribute without modality (*bilā kayf*). Although al-Ashʿarī affirms this without likening God to creation, he maintains that the term "two hands" implies duality and even goes as far as to say that both of God's hands are right hands. This reflects his broader theological method: to affirm all attributes as they appear in the revealed texts, without interpretation (*taʿwīl*).<sup>28</sup>

The Ashʿarite school adopts a nuanced position on Divine Attributes, affirming them as neither identical to nor separate from God's essence (*ṣifāt ghayr*

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<sup>25</sup> Al-Ashʿarī, Abū al-Ḥasan. *Al-Lumaʿ fī al-Radd ʿalā Ahl al-Zaygh wa al-Bidaʿ*. Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Munīr, 1955. p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Ashʿarī, Abū al-Ḥasan. *Al-Lumaʿ fī al-Radd ʿalā Ahl al-Zaygh wa al-Bidaʿ*. Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Munīr, 1955. p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Zarkasyi, Amal Fathullah, *Dirāsah fī ʿIlm al-Kalām*. Ponorogo: Jāmiʿat Dār al-Salām Kontūr li al-Ṭibāʿah wa al-Nashr, 2020. p. 282.

<sup>28</sup> Zarkasyi, Amal Fathullah, *Dirāsah fī ʿIlm al-Kalām*. Ponorogo: Jāmiʿat Dār al-Salām Kontūr li al-Ṭibāʿah wa al-Nashr, 2020. p. 283.

*al-dhāt wa ghayr ghayrihā*), thereby avoiding the pitfalls of Mu‘tazilite negation (*ta‘ṭīl*) and anthropomorphic literalism (*tashbīh*). They uphold God’s transcendence (*tanzīh*) while insisting on a literal, non-metaphorical reading of scriptural attributes (e.g., God’s “two hands”), interpreting them *bilā kayf* (without modality) to preserve divine incomparability. This approach reconciles rational theology with textual fidelity, though it risks implicit duality (e.g., dual “right hands”) and contrasts with Māturīdī’s greater rationalist flexibility and Mu‘tazilite allegorical hermeneutics. Their stance reflects a mediating theology between Salafi literalism and Mu‘tazilite rationalism, albeit with unresolved tensions in reconciling eternity with created knowledge

### **b. Al-Maturidi’s Theological Perspectives on Divine Attributes**

Al-Māturīdī’s theological perspectives on divine attributes offer a distinct approach within Islamic scholastic thought, particularly regarding the nature and characteristics of God (Allah). His views represent a middle path between the rigid literalism of some traditionalist schools and the rationalist approaches of others, such as the Mu‘tazilites.<sup>29</sup> The following aspects of Al-Māturīdī’s methodology further clarify the intellectual foundations of his thought and its impact on Islamic theology:

- 1) Characteristics of Al-Maturidi’s Methodology: A Balance Between Reason and Revelation. Al-Maturidi advocated for a balanced approach between rationality (‘aql) and textual revelation (naql). He regarded it as erroneous to rely exclusively on transmitted texts or, conversely, to exaggerate the role of reason. Instead, he argued that the proper stance of the intellect lies in mediating between the two. Al-Maturidi justified this moderate position by referencing the Qur’anic verse:<sup>30</sup> { وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا }

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<sup>29</sup> The Māturīdīs represent a theological tradition following Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī (d. 333 AH/944 CE), who was born in the mid-3rd century AH in Māturīd (or Māturīt), a town near Samarkand in Transoxiana. Al-Māturīdī received his Islamic education in the scholarly centers of Samarkand and Bukhara, studying under teachers who were considered intellectual descendants of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150 AH/767 CE) - one of the foremost figures in Sunnī jurisprudence - through one or two generations of transmission. This established him within the intellectual lineage of Abū Ḥanīfa’s disciples. While al-Māturīdī regarded himself as Abū Ḥanīfa’s intellectual heir and systematic expositor, adopting his positions in both jurisprudence (fiqh) and theology (‘aqīda), he nevertheless developed a distinct theological school with original contributions. Like Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324 AH/936 CE) and in contrast to the traditionalist Ahl al-Ḥadīth, al-Māturīdī affirmed the validity of theoretical reason (al-‘aql al-naẓarī) and endorsed rational inquiry (al-naẓar wa al-istidlāl) in theological matters. However, diverging from Mu‘tazilī thought, he rejected reason as the sole source of religious knowledge, maintaining that the Qur’ān and Sunna constituted primary sources for deriving religious truths. His most significant distinction from al-Ash‘arī lay in his acceptance of practical reason (al-‘aql al-‘amalī) and the doctrine of moral ontology (al-ḥusn wa al-qubḥ al-‘aqlīyān).

<sup>30</sup> QS. 2: 143.

This balanced position is firmly grounded in the religion itself, as moderation represents the true spirit of Islam, which calls for adopting the middle path in all matters. The spirit of moderation has been a dominant feature in Islamic thought across its various domains. For instance, both al-Māturīdī and the Ashʿarites occupy a middle ground between the traditionalists (al-salaf) and the Muʿtazilites. Similarly, Imām al-Shāfiʿī represented a median position between Mālik and Abū Ḥanīfa in jurisprudence. Likewise, Islamic philosophers sought to mediate between religion and philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

2) Intellectual independence. This refers to refraining from partisanship toward a specific school or opinion, and instead pursuing the truth regardless of where it leads. Intellectual independence rejects blind adherence to any thought system when it contradicts the truth. The middle-path approach advocated by al-Māturīdī fosters such independence of thought. 3) A holistic perspective. Al-Māturīdī was characterized by his comprehensive and integrative outlook, linking particulars to universals and referring secondary issues back to their foundational principles. This reflects a philosophical approach that does not stop at isolated details or surface-level disputes but instead seeks to understand the underlying truths that unify them. 4) Integration of thought and action.

For al-Māturīdī, the value of thought lies not in its abundance or abstraction, nor in indulging in theoretical speculation or futile verbal argumentation, but rather in the alignment of thought with action. The purpose of knowledge and reflection is to guide behavior and inform righteous deeds. 5) Focus on meaning and substance. As a consequence of connecting theory with practice, al-Māturīdī emphasized the importance of meaning and content over form. He did not stop at superficial doubt or linguistic form but sought the deeper essence, exploring the substance beneath appearances. His focus was on uncovering the significance, revealing the intended message, and actualizing its implications. 6) Critical orientation. A hallmark of al-Māturīdī's method is his critical stance. His engagement with opposing views was not limited to mere presentation or rejection; rather, he thoroughly analyzed these views, traced them to their foundational principles, and sought the root causes of their errors. As described by Abū al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī, al-Māturīdī's method in disputation resembled that of a relaxed interlocutor who, with calculated calm, lets the opponent speak at length—confident that their own arguments will ultimately expose the weaknesses and inconsistencies in the opposing position.<sup>32</sup> By integrating these characteristics—balance, intellectual independence, holistic thinking, practical application of knowledge, focus on meaning, and critical analysis—Al-Māturīdī established a theological approach that harmonized reason

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<sup>31</sup> Zarkasyi, Amal Fathullah, *Dirāsah fī ʿIlm al-Kalām*. Ponorogo: Jāmiʿat Dār al-Salām Kontūr li al-Ṭibāʿah wa al-Nashr, 2020. pp. 295–298.

<sup>32</sup> Zarkasyi, Amal Fathullah, *Dirāsah fī ʿIlm al-Kalām*. Ponorogo: Jāmiʿat Dār al-Salām Kontūr li al-Ṭibāʿah wa al-Nashr, 2020. pp. 301–302.

and revelation. His work continues to influence Islamic theological discourse, particularly in the understanding and interpretation of divine attributes, offering a framework that respects both tradition and rational inquiry.

### c. Al-Māturīdī's Position on Divine Attributes

Al-Māturīdī opposes the position of the Mu'tazilites, as represented by the view of al-Ka'bī, who claims that a divine attribute is simply the description of the describer. Al-Māturīdī argues that if an attribute were truly only a description of the describer, it would invalidate the Qur'anic assertion of both essence and attributes, and would undermine the discussion of motion, stillness, or any other characteristic inherent in entities when affirming their limits. Al-Māturīdī asserts that al-Ka'bī's view of attributing God's qualities to mere speech is not permissible because intellects are created, and God is not described as created. If this were acceptable, it would lead to the possibility of describing God as both a reformer and corrupter, good and evil, which is clearly false. Therefore, an attribute is not merely a statement, as this would open the door to falsely attributing such descriptions to God. For al-Māturīdī, God is described only by what He has described Himself with from eternity. In his exegesis of the Qur'anic verse: <sup>33</sup> {عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ} He [al-Māturīdī] maintains that this serves as a refutation of the Mu'tazilite claim that the divine attributes are merely descriptions made by human beings. For if the attributes were nothing more than such attributions, there would be no meaningful distinction between the praise of some and the blame of others. Thus, it is established that the attributes possess a reality beyond mere human descriptions.

Al-Māturīdī also opposes the Mu'tazilite view that a divine attribute is merely the negation of its opposite. He argues: 'If the meaning of the statement "He has always been All-Hearing and All-Seeing" were limited to merely denying ignorance, blindness, or deafness, then it would have sufficed to say explicitly that He is not ignorant, blind, or deaf. However, one could say of a thing that it is not ignorant, incapable, or deaf, without necessarily implying that it is knowledgeable, powerful, or hearing. Therefore, if the intent behind such descriptions were nothing more than the negation of opposites, then one might as well say that God is "sound and whole" merely by negating their opposites—which is evidently insufficient.'<sup>34</sup>

Expressions in the Qur'an that may imply anthropomorphism or corporealism—such as references to God's 'face,' 'eyes,' or the notion of 'establishing Himself upon the Throne'—should not be interpreted literally in a

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<sup>33</sup> QS. 6:100.

<sup>34</sup> Zarkasyi, Amal Fathullah, *Dirāsah fī 'Ilm al-Kalām*. Ponorogo: Jāmi'at Dār al-Salām Kontūr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 2020. 300–301.

manner that contradicts the intended meaning of the Qur'an.<sup>35</sup> Rather, such passages must be interpreted in light of verses that emphasize God's transcendence (*tanzīh*), and must be understood in a sound and valid way consistent with the norms of the Arabic language. Alternatively, the precise meaning may be deferred to God's knowledge, without affirming any anthropomorphic implications.<sup>36</sup>

Al-Māturīdī emphasizes the necessity of adhering to the attributes by which God has described Himself, noting that God has affirmed positive attributes for Himself. He argues that if mere negation were sufficient to convey the intended meaning of affirmation, then explicit affirmation would be unnecessary. Al-Māturīdī supports the affirmation of meaning for divine attributes by asserting that if it were impermissible to affirm real meanings for attributes—such as spatiality or other qualities—it would likewise be impermissible to deny them. He questions how an attribute can be characterized if it lacks a real meaning. Through this line of reasoning, al-Māturīdī seeks to establish that divine attributes carry real meanings and are not limited to mere negations, since negation alone does not realize the essence of an attribute.<sup>37</sup>

According to al-Māturīdī, the explanation of God's attributes and His perfection must be done in a manner that excludes any possibility of resemblance, equivalence, or comparison. This underscores the belief in an absolute and unparalleled Divine essence and power as a fundamental theological principle. In al-Māturīdī's view, the Mu'tazilite approach endangers faith in God's existence by negating His attributes and divine perfections. Therefore, when it is stated that God is Wise (*ḥakīm*), it affirms that wisdom is an essential and inherent attribute of God. Any attempt to interpret God's attributes in a purely figurative or rationalistic manner leads not only to conceptual errors but also obscures true knowledge of God, ultimately reducing the Divine to an undefined and unknowable abstraction.<sup>38</sup>

According to al-Māturīdī, the relationship between God's attributes and His essence is a complex issue that must be approached with intellectual rigor and reverence. He maintains that every human being must affirm the oneness of God while refraining from equating His essence with any form of comparison or speculative questioning about the 'how' (*kayfiyya*) of His attributes. This implies that God's attributes are neither identical to His essence nor entirely separate from it, but

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<sup>35</sup> Zulfīqar Ali Shah, *Anthromorphic Depictions of God: The Concept of God in Judaic, Christian and Islamic Tradition: Representing the Unrepresentable*, The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012, London, pp. 494–500.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Māturīdī, Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Samarqandī. *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. 12, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Zarkasyi, Amal Fathullah, *Dirāsah fī 'Ilm al-Kalām*. Ponorogo: Jāmi'at Dār al-Salām Kontūr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 2020. 283, 295–298, 300–301.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn al-Bayāḍī. *Ishārāt al-Marām min 'Ibārāt al-Imām Abi Ḥanīfah*. p. 118.

rather they are affirmed in a manner befitting His transcendence, without delving into their modality.<sup>39</sup>

According to al-Māturīdī, the divine attributes are names for actions that reflect a perfect and coherent order. These attributes are not merely indicators that God is not ignorant or incapable; rather, they are real evidences of knowledge and power. To reduce attributes to mere negations (such as "not ignorant") or to deny their substantive meaning renders the divine names as mere titles. If the attributes fail to convey real meanings, then the names become nothing more than honorary labels—stripped of content. In such a case, the statement that "God has always been thus" becomes meaningless, for mere titles hold no significance in eternity. Therefore, al-Māturīdī affirms that divine attributes possess a real and established meaning; they are not merely descriptors by human observers, nor are they simply negations of opposites.<sup>40</sup> The interpretation of these meanings is intrinsically linked to the broader theological stance on whether to affirm or negate divine attributes.

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### **The Theological Discourse on Divine Attributes: A Comparative Study of Ash'arite, Māturīdite, and Mu'tazilite Perspectives**

The Ash'arī, Māturīdī, and schools of Islamic theology developed distinct approaches to understanding Divine Attributes, reflecting broader debates about God's nature, scripture, and reason. While all three schools uphold God's transcendence (*tanzīh*) and reject anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*), they diverge significantly in their ontological and epistemological frameworks. This section examines their points of convergence and divergence, analyzes their methodological foundations, and explores their implications for Islamic theology and contemporary discourse.

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<sup>39</sup> Al-Māturīdī, Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Samarqandī. *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. 12, p. 32.

<sup>40</sup> Ramon Harvey, "Philosopher of Samarqand: Abu Mansur al-Maturidi's Theory of Properties." pp. 77-90. There are other examples of Kindian echoes in the work of al-Maturīdī. See his statement, "the philosophers term [the human being] the microcosm" (*wa-huwa alladhī sammathu al-ḥukamā' al-'alam al-ṣaghīr*) (al-Maturīdī 2010, 67). This appears to derive from al-Kindī who writes, "those of the ancient philosophers possessing discrimination who did not speak our language termed the human being the microcosm" (*tusamma dhawū al-tamyzi min ḥukamā'i al-qudamā'i min ghayri ahli lisanina al-insāna alaman ṣaghīran*) (al-Kindī 1950, vol. 1, 260). Also, al-Maturīdī's use of the word *mā'iyya* (whatness) finds a precedent in al-Kindī's *On First Philosophy* (*Fī al-falsafa al-ūla*) (Adamson and Pormann 2012, 30). The most likely source for these teachings is directly from al-Kindī's student Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934) or indirectly via al-Maturīdī's Mu'tazilī rival Abū al-Qasim al-Ka'ābī who is known to have met Abū Zayd (Rudolph 2015, 159). But the circulation of written material through less famous channels cannot be ruled out.

<sup>41</sup> Zarkasyi, Amal Fathullah, *Dirāsah fī 'Ilm al-Kalām*. Ponorogo: Jāmi'at Dār al-Salām Kontūr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 2020. 300–301.

The Ash'arīs affirm Divine Attributes as real yet neither identical to nor separate from God's essence (ṣifāt ghayr al-dhāt wa ghayr ghayrihā), adopting a literal reading of scripture while avoiding anthropomorphism (bilā kayf). In contrast, the Māturīdīs harmonize reason and revelation, permitting cautious metaphorical interpretation (ta'wīl) when necessary. The Mu'tazilites, however, reject eternal attributes entirely, arguing that affirming them compromises God's unity (tawhīd). For them, attributes are either negations or reducible to God's essence, with scriptural anthropomorphisms interpreted allegorically.<sup>42</sup>

Ontologically, the Ash'arīs and Māturīdīs agree that attributes are real and eternal, but they differ in their metaphysical structuring. The Ash'arīs view attributes as inherent in God's essence without being separate entities, thus avoiding multiplicity. The Māturīdīs, influenced by Ḥanafī rationalism, treat attributes as manifestations of God's actions, ensuring coherence without composition. The Mu'tazilites, however, deny any real distinction between God's essence and attributes, fearing that affirming independent attributes would lead to a Christian-like trinitarian view.

Epistemologically, the Ash'arīs prioritize textual authority, rejecting speculative interpretation of ambiguous verses. The Māturīdīs, while also scripture-based, integrate rational proofs to reconcile apparent contradictions. The Mu'tazilites, in contrast, subordinate scripture to reason, reinterpreting anthropomorphic descriptions to fit their rationalist framework. This methodological split, underscores a deeper tension in Islamic thought: whether revelation should be understood literally, contextually, or allegorically.

These theological differences have practical consequences for tawhīd and devotional practice. The Ash'arī and Māturīdī positions allow for a relational understanding of God, where attributes like mercy and power shape worship and ethics. The Mu'tazilite approach, while philosophically rigorous, risks rendering God abstract and impersonal, potentially alienating believers who seek a more intimate divine connection. Historically, Ash'arī-Māturīdī dominance in Sunni orthodoxy reflects a preference for balancing transcendence with scriptural fidelity.

In modern Islamic discourse, these schools remain influential. Salafis critique Ash'arīs for residual anthropomorphism

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion and observation, we conclude a position for each school of thought regarding the issues of divine attributes in the following points:

1. The Ash'arites took a conflicted stance regarding belief in the attributes of God, marked by contradictions. They were unable to fully adopt the Salafi school, agreeing with it in some aspects while differing in others. The same approach was

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<sup>42</sup> Wolfson, Harry Austryn., "The Philosophy of the Kalām."

taken with the Mu'tazilite school, where they agreed in certain areas and disagreed in others.

2. Al-Maturidi's position on divine attributes is that they are names for actions within a well-ordered system. The judgments are evidence of knowledge of them and the ability to perform them, not evidence of the absence of ignorance or incapacity. The mere description means the existence of attributes as names only, and once attributes are absent, the names become mere titles. Therefore, the claim that something has always been thus has no meaning when the title is applied to the eternal.
3. Each school provides a unique approach to understanding the nature of divine attributes, with the Ash'arites and Māturīdites maintaining a more balanced view between literal and allegorical interpretations, and the Mu'tazilites advocating for a strict rationalist approach that emphasizes God's absolute transcendence. These differences reflect the broader theological debates within Islamic thought regarding the nature of God's attributes and their relationship to His essence, ultimately shaping the development of Islamic theology and philosophy.

## Closing

This research was completed with the help of Allah, and the researcher believes that the Mu'tazilites made a mistake in their views on divine attributes. This error occurred because they relied more on their reasoning than on textual sources. Had they used the texts as the primary source, they would have avoided justifying their views in a way that leads to the corruption of Islamic belief. This is evident from their claim, like that of the Khawarij and Mu'tazilites, that their interpretation follows a specific methodology, which is to refer ambiguous verses to the definitive ones. For them, the definitive verses are those that align with their belief in the absolute transcendence of God from the attributes of created beings and humans. Therefore, all verses that seem to imply anthropomorphism or resemblance are considered ambiguous.

The Murji'ah, who claim that a person who commits a major sin should not be judged harshly, also contribute to this view. This leads to leniency among Muslims in committing major sins, as no legal punishments or retribution are imposed, which contradicts Allah's warnings regarding those who commit major sins. The position of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* is that a person who commits a major sin is still a believer in their faith, though they are sinful in their actions. This view is supported by the agreement of the Prophet's method, his companions, and the four imams of the Muslim community.

Finally, the researcher claims that this study is far from perfect and that it is merely research that contains many deficiencies, which must be followed by corrections and improvements to reach what is better and more complete. The

researcher hopes that this study will bring many benefits in both knowledge and religion.

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