

**Tracing Contemporary  
Western Scholarship  
in Sunni kalam: Philosophical, Mystical,  
and Rational Contours**

**Dr Badreldeen Ismail**  
The classical institute Uk

## Tracing Contemporary Western Scholarship in Sunni Kalam: Philosophical, Mystical, and Rational Contours

**Badredeen Ismail**

**The classical institute Uk**

**B.ismail@theclassicalinstitute.co.uk**

This study traces, in turn, the engagement of contemporary western scholarship with the three primary Sunni theological traditions: Ash'arism, Maturidism, and Hanbalism. Modern scholarship has challenged the once prevailing view that Islamic theology is intellectually constrained, and recent studies demonstrate its rationality, originality, and sophistication.

Ash'arite theology has received considerable attention, with scholarly focus shifting from pioneering studies on its formative era to investigations of the philosophical turn in post-classical Ash'arism. Concurrently, studies have focused on another type of interdisciplinarity, namely the integration of Sufi paradigms within the Ash'arite framework.

Maturidite theology has recently emerged as a distinct field of scholarly interest, propelled by Ulrich Rudolph's seminal work and increased access to critical editions of Maturidite texts. Recent research has explored its distinctive theological features and there is a nascent trend revealing philosophical and Sufi interdisciplinary constructs within Maturidism too.

Hanbalite theology, once marginalised for perceived anti-rationalism, is now recognised for its unique rational framework. Scholars have broadened definitions of rationalism beyond Hellenistic norms and, in doing so, have uncovered a form of rationalist traditionalism.

The notable advancements in the study of these three Sunni theological traditions affirm their value for sustained scholarly attention, deeper exploration and ongoing discovery.

**Keywords:** Kalam, Ash'arism, Maturidism, Hanbalism, Rationality, Philosophy, Sufism.

## تتبع الدراسات الغربية المعاصرة في علم الكلام السني: الأبعاد الفلسفية والمصوفية والعقلانية

بدر الدين إسماعيل

المعهد الكلاسيكي، المملكة المتحدة

البريد الإلكتروني: B.ismail@theclassicalinstitute.co.uk

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تتبع ورصد تفاعل الدراسات الغربية المعاصرة مع التقاليد الكلامية الثلاثة الرئيسية في الفكر السني: الأشعرية، والماتريدية، والحنبلية. لقد تحدثت الدراسات الحديثة الرؤية السائدة سابقاً التي اعتبرت علم الكلام الإسلامي قيماً على الفكر، وأظهرت الأبحاث الحديثة ما يتميز به هذا العلم من عقلانية وأصالة وعمق.

ولقد حظيت العقيدة الأشعرية - في الفكر الغربي المعاصر - باهتمام كبير، حيث تحول التركيز العلمي من الدراسات الرائدة حول مرحلتها التأسيسية إلى التحقيقات التي تناولت المنعطف الفلسفي في الأشعرية المتأخرة. وبالتوازي مع ذلك، ركزت دراسات أخرى على نوع آخر من التداخل المعرفي، ألا وهو دمج العناصر الصوفية ضمن الإطار الأشعري.

أما العقيدة الماتريدية فقد ظهرت مؤخراً كمجال مستقل للاهتمام العلمي، وذلك بفضل العمل الرائد لأولريخ رودولف وتزايد الوصول إلى الطبعات النقدية للنصوص الماتريدية. وقد تناولت الأبحاث الحديثة الخصائص اللاهوتية المميزة لهذه المدرسة، وبرز اتجاه ناشئ يسلط الضوء على التداخلات الفلسفية والصوفية ضمن الفكر الماتريدي، كما هو الحال في المدرسة الأشعرية.

فيما يتعلق بالعقيدة الحنبلية، التي همّشت لفترة طويلة بسبب افتراض «مناهضتها للعقل»، فقد أصبحت تُعرف الآن بإطارها العقلاني المميز. لقد وسّع الباحثون تعريفات العقلانية بما يتجاوز المعايير الهلنستية، مما أدى إلى الكشف عن شكل من أشكال المنهج العقلاني ضمن الفكر الحنبلي.

تؤكد التطورات الملحوظة في دراسة هذه التقاليد الكلامية السنية الثلاثة على قيمتها وأهميتها، مما يجعلها جديرة باهتمام أكاديمي مستدام، واستكشاف أعمق، واكتشافات متجددة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الكلام، الأشعرية، الماتريدية، الحنبلية، العقلانية، الفلسفة، التصوف.

## Tracing Contemporary Western Scholarship in Sunni kalam: Philosophical, Mystical, and Rational Contours

The study of kalam (Islamic scholastic theology) in the West has experienced shifting fortunes. Historically, serious rational engagement was seen as the sole domain of falsafa (philosophy), while Islamic theology was perceived to be constrained by scriptural chains.<sup>(1)</sup> In recent decades, however, this assumption has been progressively dismantled. Modern scholarship has moved away from such a limiting framework, recognising the rationality, originality, and depth of Islamic theology.

This article explores, in turn, the engagement of modern western scholarship with the three primary Sunni theological traditions: Ash'arism, Maturidism, and Hanbalism. By tracing recent scholarly contributions to these traditions, it illustrates how each field has evolved in response to new intellectual challenges and insights. Through these developments, Sunni theology has shunned negative perceptions to emerge as a multifaceted, rational tradition worthy of significant scholarly attention.

### **Ash'arite theology – philosophical and mystical intersections**

Of the three Sunni theological traditions surveyed in this article, it is Ash'arite theology that has flourished most prominently in western scholarship, largely due to the pioneering contributions of Richard Frank. Through his meticulous studies on Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite kalam, which were subsequently collated into three volumes, Frank elucidated the theological framework and technical parlance of the Ash'arites with an especial focus on its formative period of

(1) Winter, Tim. Introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 1.

development.<sup>(1)</sup> His research traced defining motifs across the works of the eponym, Abu al-Hassan al-Ash'ari (d. 324/935–6), and his theological heirs, including al-Baqillani and al-Juwayni, contextualising their thought, in particular, against the intellectual grindstone of Mu'tazilism<sup>(2)</sup>.

Following Frank's authoritative contribution to understanding the nuances and complexity of the *mutaqaddimun*, recent scholarly efforts have instead shifted to the ontological and epistemological contributions of the *muta'akhkhirun*, that is, the post-classical Ash'arites. Two key themes, in particular, have piqued scholarly interest. The first challenges the assumption that

(1) To frame Ash'arite theological research, this article utilises Ibn Khaldun's (d. 808/1405) distinction between the *mutaqaddimun* (formative or classical Ash'arites) and the *muta'akhkhirun* (post-classical Ash'arites) – a division based on both historical and intellectual developments. The *mutaqaddimun* period includes foundational figures, such as al-Ash'ari, Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (d. 404/1013), and Abu al-Ma'ili al-Juwayni (d. 478/1085), who shaped Ash'arite thought against the backdrop of debates with the Mu'tazilites and other theological schools. In contrast, the *muta'akhkhirun* period, initiated by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) and fully developed through later scholars such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1209), reflects a shift in focus towards engaging with Avicennan philosophy and integrating philosophical methods into Ash'arite theology. See Frank, Richard. *Classical Islamic Theology: The Ash'arites. Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam. Vol. III*, edited by Dimitri Gutas. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016; Frank, Richard. *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu'tazilites and al-Ash'ari. Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam. Vol. II*, edited by Dimitri Gutas. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016; Frank, Richard. *Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism in Medieval Islam. Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam. Vol. I*, edited by Dimitri Gutas. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

(2) See Frank, Richard. "Elements in the Development of the Teaching of al-Ash'ari." In *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu'tazilites and al-Ash'ari. Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam. Vol. II*, edited by Dimitri Gutas. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. 141–190.



al-Ghazali's scathing attack on the philosophers signalled the demise of theological intellectuality amongst later generations of Ash'arite theologians.<sup>(1)</sup> Countering this outdated view, a recent surge of research focuses on the reorientation of Ash'arite theology away from a Mu'tazilite 'other' towards an Avicennan opponent. It is this complex commingling of theology and philosophy, conceived by al-Ghazali and advanced significantly by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, that has motivated recent scholarly research.

Al-Razi's work is somewhat of a focal point for understanding this philosophical turn in Ash'arism. A number of recent studies underline the profound impact of his intellectual thought on both the post-classical Ash'arite landscape, and later Arabic logic.<sup>(2)</sup> As a particularly stark example of his popularity

(1) For an example of the view that Islamic intellectuality saw a decline post al-Ghazali, see Gardet, Louis and M. M. Anawati. *Introduction à la Theologie Musulmane*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1948. 76–78.

(2) Adamson, Peter and Andreas Lammer. "Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's Platonist Account of the Essence of Time." In *Philosophical Theology in Islam: Later Ash'arism East and West*, edited by Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele. Leiden: Brill, 2020. 95; Benevich, Fedor. "The Necessary Existent (wajib al-wujud) From Avicenna to Fakhr al-Din al-Razi." In *Philosophical Theology*, 123; Ibrahim, Bilal. "Causing an Essence: Notes on the Concept of Ja'l al-Māhiyya, from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī to Mullā Ṣadrā." In *Philosophical Theology*, 156; Sebti, Maryam. "Le commentaire à la sūrate al-A'la' attribué à Avicenne Une épître de Fakhr al-Din al-Razi." In *Philosophical Theology*, 71; Shihadeh, Ayman. "Al-Razi's Earliest Kalām Work: Eastern Ash'arism in the Twelfth Century." In *Philosophical Theology*, 36. On al-Rāzī's influence on Arabic logic, see el-Rouayheb, Khaled. *Relational syllogisms and the History of Arabic Logic, 900–1900*. Leiden: Brill, 2010. 39–69; el-Rouayheb, Khaled. "Theology and Logic." In *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, edited by Sabine Schmidtke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 411–16; Ibrahim, Bilal. "Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Ibn al-Haytham and Aristotelian Science: Essentialism versus Phenomenalism in Post-Classical Islamic Thought." *Oriens* 41, no.=

as a theological subject, no less than five of thirteen chapters in “Philosophical Theology in Islam: Later Ash’arism East and West” are devoted to elucidating aspects of his theological thought. Three of these display al-Razi’s skill in wielding the kalam–falsafa dynamic to address known theoretical challenges related to the essences of God, time, and created things<sup>(1)</sup>.

There is increasing attention, too, on the continuation and reception of al-Razi’s thought. Recent monographs on lesser–studied theologians, such as Sayf al-Din al-Amidi (d. 631/1233) and Ibrahim al-Bajuri (d. 1276/1860), advance our understanding of the evolving tradition of philosophical theology in the Ash’arite tradition.<sup>(2)</sup> Laura Hassan’s study on al-Amidi’s doctrine of creation reveals how he navigates the tension between Ibn Sina’s (d. 428/1037) metaphysical framework of pre–eternal emanation and Ash’arite occasionalism to posit a theory that integrates both perspectives. Furthermore, Yamina Adouhane’s analysis of Abu Hajjaj al-Miklati’s (d. 629/1229) opposition to Avicennan philosophy shows his remarkable use of Averroistic constructs.<sup>(3)</sup> Adouhane’s work also serves to highlight the broader scholarly

---

=3–4 (2013): 379–431; Street, Tony. “Fakhraddin al-Razi’s Critique of Avicennan Logic.” In *Logik und Theologie: das Organon im arabischen und im lateinischen Mittelalter*, edited by Dominik Perler and Ulrich Rudolph. Leiden: Brill, 2005. 99–116.

- (1) Despite the wave of scholarly efforts exploring the post–classical aspects of al-Razi’s theology, the classical features of his work should not be ignored. Ayman Shihadeh’s article grounds one of his earlier works in the methodological approach of classical Ash’arism. See Shihadeh, *Al-Razi’s Earliest Kalaṁ Work*.
- (2) Hassan, Laura. *Ash’arism Encounters Avicennism: Sayf al-Din al-Amidi on Creation*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2020; Spevack, Aaron. *The Archetypal Sunni Scholar: Law, Theology, and Mysticism in the Synthesis of al-Bajuri*. New York: SUNY Press, 2014.
- (3) Adouhane, Yamina. “Al-Miklati, a Twelfth Century Ash’arite Reader of Averroes.” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2012): 155–197.

effort to uncover the adaptation of Ash'arite theology to local intellectual and political milieus in the Islamic West.<sup>(1)</sup>

Relative to the extensive scholarly attention lavished upon post-classical Ash'arism, drawn to perceived greater conceptual sophistication including the prominent kalam-falsafa dynamic therein, the contribution of the mutaqaddimun remains under-explored. Yet there are glimpses of the intellectual richness, which render post-classical Ash'arism so attractive, in formative kalam too. Recent research suggests that the kalam-falsafa dynamic, so evident in muta'akhhirun thought, appears more subtly in al-Juwayni's works.<sup>(2)</sup> Further research is needed to understand the full nature and extent of al-Juwayni's interaction with Avicennan philosophy. Such an investigation could help to challenge the rigid distinction separating the mutaqaddimun from the muta'akhhirun.

The second key theme that has captured western scholarly attention is another form of interdisciplinarity in classical Ash'arite thought beyond the kalam-falsafa dynamic. Numerous studies have uncovered the presence of a mystical theology within Ash'arite works. For example, a theological-led investigation into the creedal portion of Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri's (d. 465/1072) al-Risala al-Qushayriyya reveals a framework within which both Ash'arite and non-Ash'arite theology can co-exist.<sup>(3)</sup> Al-Qushayri assigns

---

(1) See also el-Rouayheb, Khaled. *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Ruano, Delfina S. "Later Ash'arism in the Islamic West." In *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, edited by Sabine Schmidtke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 638.

(2) For a discussion on Avicennan influences on al-Juwayni's works, see Shiha-deh and Thiele, *Philosophical Theology*, 2.

(3) See my forthcoming book which addresses the complexities of al-Qushayri's theological thought in al-Luma' fi al-i'tiqad, al-Fusul fi al-usul and al-Risa'la. Amongst these is the presence of a mystical theology, particularly in the creedal portion of al-Risa'la.



each of these theologies to two different spiritual paradigms on the path to gnosis – namely the stage of the Sufi salik (spiritual traveller) and that of the Sufi adept. The Ash’arite schema corresponds with the flawed and imperfect human condition, whereby those who are still on the journey to ma’rifa (gnosis of God, or internal knowledge of God) are characterised by the limitations of free will and rational efforts. Those who God selects for gnosis, however, observe the impenetrable and unassailable divine decree, and are bestowed direct spiritual knowledge from God. Through these distinctions, al-Qushayri lays the foundations of a mystical theology that governs the Sufi elect, whilst simultaneously demoting the relevance of Ash’arite doctrine to the masses. The intersection of theology and Sufism in the muta’akhkhirun era is of scholarly interest too. Harith Ramli explores the manner in which Ibrahim al-Kurani (d. 1101/1690) reshapes Ash’arite theology to accommodate aspects of the Akbarian Sufi tradition.<sup>(1)</sup> Given the prominence of Sufism amongst the Ash’arites, these findings pave the way for further research on the confluence of Sufism and Ash’arite theology.

Despite the recent focus on philosophical and, to a lesser extent, mystical currents in Ash’arite theology, the question of Ash’arism’s placement on the traditionalism–rationalism continuum remains a contentious topic of debate. Scholars have long disagreed on whether al-Ash’ari was a traditionalist or a semi-rationalist, with some arguing that he embodies both approaches.<sup>(2)</sup>

(1) Ramli, Harith. Ash’arism through an Akbari Lens: The Two “Taḥqīqs” in the Curriculum Vitae of Ibrāhīm al-Kurani (d. 1019/1690). In *Philosophical Theology*, 371–396.

(2) On al-Ash’ari’s two faces, see Wensinck, A.J. *The Muslim Creed*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1932. 91. Supporting al-Ash’ari’s traditionalism is Makdisi, George. “Ash’ari and the Ash’arites in Islamic Religious History II.” *Studia Islamica*, no. 18 (1963): 21–22. Supporting al-Ash’ari’s rationalism is Thomson, William. “Al-Ash’ari and his al-Ibanah.” *The Muslim World* 32, no. 3 (1942): 244.

More recently, Wilferd Madelung has extended the traditionalist description to the broader Ash'arite school, arguing that its theology is "predominantly anti-rationalist".<sup>(1)</sup> On the contrary, multiple scholars have contested this view. Shihadeh, for example, examines the complexity of Ash'arite arguments in the fields of psychology and ethical epistemology, and reaches the conclusion that, compared to the Mu'tazilites, the Ash'arites "in fact were theoretically and dialectically the more sophisticated, innovative and resourceful side."<sup>(2)</sup>

An examination of the recent scholarly trends within Ash'arite theology reveals a search for interdisciplinarity, be that its confluence with philosophy or with Sufism. Turning next to the western study of Maturidite thought, a remarkably similar picture emerges.

### **Maturidite theology – seeking distinction**

Despite occupying a prominent position alongside Ash'arism as one of the two main theological schools of Sunni kalam, Maturidism has historically attracted relatively little scholarly attention in the West. Up until around the turn of the century, both the Maturidite school and its key texts have remained largely inaccessible to a western audience. However, two key developments have thrust the School into the scholarly frame.

The first is Ulrich Rudolph's seminal monograph on Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333/944), penned in 1997, and subsequently translated into multiple languages, including English in 2015.<sup>(3)</sup> Rudolph's study comprehensively

(1) Madelung, Wilfred. "Al-Ghazali's Changing Attitude to Philosophy." *Islam and Rationality* 1 (2015): 28–29.

(2) Shihadeh, Ayman. *Psychology and Ethical Epistemology: An Ash'ari Debate with Mu'tazili Ethical Realism, 11th–12th C.* *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 21 (2021): 82.

(3) Rudolph, Ulrich. *Al-Maturidi und die sunnitische Theologie in Samarkand.* Leiden: Brill, 1996; Rudolph, Ulrich. *Al-Maturidi and the Development of Sunni Theology in Samarqand.* Translated by Rodrigo Adem, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

surveys al-Maturidi's milieu, contextualising his teachings against the backdrop of complex interfactional dynamics in Transoxiana. Besides providing a platform for future scholarly studies, his findings rendered Maturidism a more attractive area for research than previously thought. Rudolph challenged earlier assumptions that Maturidism, given its apparent alignment with Ash'arism on certain theological issues, lacked any distinguishing features of its own. By demonstrating, for instance, that al-Maturidi was significantly influenced by Mu'tazilite thinkers such as Abu al-Qasim al-Balkhi (d. 319/931), Rudolph highlights a sharp distinction between the two schools<sup>(1)</sup>.

One particular distinguishing feature of Maturidite theology that has attracted scholarly attention is the concept of divine hikma (wisdom). In his recent monograph on al-Maturidi, Ramon Harvey explicates the importance of divine wisdom in the Maturidite schema.<sup>(2)</sup> Unlike the Ash'arites, who typically framed God's will as inscrutable, the Maturidites posited that divine actions are inherently wise and purposeful, and that human reason can discern this wisdom, albeit within certain limitations. Harvey sets out the consequences of this distinction, noting how it shaped Maturidite sensibilities on topics including divine justice and the nature of moral obligation.

Whilst Rudolph's work may have ignited scholarly interest in Maturidism, it is the second key development – namely the quickening pace of publication of key Maturidite texts – which has fuelled the growing research into the field. Deserving especial recognition is the vast effort of Turkish scholars, whose

---

(1) For a specific example of al-Maturidi's theological debates with al-Balkhi, see el Omari, Racha. "Divine Justice: Abu al-Qasim al-Balkhi/al-Ka'bi (d. 319/931)." In *Maturidi Theology: A Bilingual Reader*, edited by Lejla Demiri, Philip Dorroll and Dale J. Correa. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022.

(2) Harvey, Ramon. *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Maturidi Theology*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 159–174.

endeavours have made many important works, including al-Muntaqa min ‘ismat al-anbiya’ and al-Kifaya fi al-hidaya from amongst Ahmad al-Sabuni’s (d. 580/1184) oeuvres, more accessible to western scholars.<sup>(1)</sup> Aside from the production of critical editions suitable for scholarly analysis, another important development is the publication of the first bilingual reader of Maturidite theology in English. This features key Maturidite texts, ranging from those authored by the eponym himself to others penned by theologians as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Arguably, its most important contribution is providing a glimpse into the wealth, distinctiveness, and complexity of the Maturidite tradition awaiting discovery<sup>(2)</sup>.

Despite these developments, the relative immaturity of western investigation into Maturidism is brought sharply back into focus by the fact that recent studies, in many respects, reflect the strides taken in much earlier Ash’arite research. Take, for example, the works of Phillip Bruckmayer and Philip Dorroll, which trace the diachronic relationship between al-Maturidi’s formative intellectual ideas and the more intricate and developed arguments espoused by later Maturidites.<sup>(3)</sup> Both echo Frank’s efforts, two decades prior, to trace the defining elements of al-Ash’ari’s teachings in the works of his successors.

(1) al-sabuni, Ahmad. Al-Kifaya fi al-hidaya, ed. M. Arutashi. Beirut/Istanbul: Ibn Hazm/Markaz al-Buhuth al-Islamiyya, 2013; al-Sabuni, Ahmad. Al-Muntaqa min ‘ismat al-anbiya’ ed. M. Bulut. Beirut/Istanbul: Dar Ibn Hazm/Markaz al-Buhuth al-Islamiyya, 2013. For a comprehensive overview mapping the wealthy contributions of Turkish scholarship to Maturidite studies, see Dorroll, Philip. “Maturidi Studies in Turkish: Historical Outline and Main Contributions.” In Maturidi Theology, 15–24.

(2) Demiri, Dorroll and Correa, Maturidi Theology.

(3) Bruckmayr, Philipp. “The Spread and Persistence of Maturidi Kalam and Underlying Dynamics.” *Iran and the Caucasus* 13 (2009): 59–92; Dorroll, Phillip. “The Universe in Flux. Reconsidering Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī’s Meta-physics and Epistemology.” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 119–135.

That said, the lessons learned from the evolution of western research into Ash'arism appear to be informing swift recent developments in Maturidite studies. As with Ash'arism, in recent years, scholars have started to explore the confluence of philosophy and theology in Maturidism too. Robert Wisnovsky's work identifies an Avicennan stream in Maturidite kalam paralleling the Ash'arite engagement with Avicennan thought post al-Ghazali. He observes Avicennan flashes in Abu al-Yusr al-Bazdawi's (d. 493/1099) writings, specifically a discussion colocating the necessity of God's existence (wajib-al-wujud) with His eternality.<sup>(1)</sup> Harvey's aforementioned monograph champions the kalam-falsafa framework of Maturidism, showcasing its enduring relevance, to a large extent, to contemporary discourses.

Besides developments in philosophical theology, and again mirroring advances in Ash'arite studies, recent scholarship on Maturidism has opened additional avenues for further research. Western scholars are beginning to analyse more obscure works from the Maturidite tradition, which has yielded fascinating findings. Take, for example, Lejla Demiri's investigation into the theology of the lesser-known Maturidite, 'Ubayd Allah al-Samarqandi (d. 701/1301).<sup>(2)</sup> Her analysis of his theological thought unearths a "theology of humility", highlighting one's incapability to know God, and one's reliance on God for ma'rifa of Him, the blessing of iman and the blessing of rewards. These themes recall the Ash'arite flavour of mystical theology woven into al-Qushayri's al-Risala. From a wider perspective, western scholars are increasingly investigating the foundational importance of Maturidite theology to other Islamic disciplines. For example, recent works have demonstrated the

---

(1) Wisnovsky, Robert. "One Aspect of the Avicennan Turn in Sunnī Theology." *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004): 94–95.

(2) Demiri, Lejla. "God and Creation: 'Ubayd Allaḥ al-Samarqandī (d. 701/1301)." *In Maturidi Theology*, 89–102.



epistemological significance of theological constructs to logic and legal theory in the Hanafite tradition<sup>(1)</sup>.

These nascent strands of research reveal the richness and complexity of Maturidite theology, emphasising that its intellectual heritage offers significant untapped potential for future scholarship. And given the philosophical and mystical strands of theology common to both traditions, the Ash'arites and the Maturidites, the scope for comparative studies is highly attractive too.

### **Hanbalite theology – reframing rationality**

Whilst Ash'arite and Maturidite theologies have both gained attention for their intellectual contributions, Hanbalite theology has historically attracted a different narrative. Relative to Ash'arism and Maturidism, Hanbalite theology has previously been marginalised in western scholarship for a couple of key reasons.

Firstly, Hanbalite theology has been considered extraneous to the mainstream kalam tradition. According to bygone perceptions, 'intellectual' theology – the exclusive reserve of kalam theologians, including Mu'tazilites, Ash'arites and Maturidites – was more deserving of scholarly efforts. Moreover, not only were Hanbalites typically excluded from the kalam categorisation, they suffered from widespread depiction as intellectually austere, literalist individuals.<sup>(2)</sup> They were regarded as suppressors of, rather than contributors

---

(1) Nadi, Najah. *Theorising the Relationship between Kalam and Usul al-Fiqh: The Theological-Legal Epistemology of Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani (d. 792/1390)*. PhD thesis, Oxford University, 2018; Zysow, Aron. *The Economy of Certainty: An Introduction to the Typology of Islamic Legal Theory*. Atlanta GA: Lockwood Press, 2013.

(2) The Hanbalites are considered to be 'traditionalists', utilised here in the way it was employed by George Makdisi. The defining feature of traditionalists, according to Christopher Melchert, was their "certain intellectual austerity". Furthermore, Binyamin Abrahamov characterises traditionalists as ones who =

to, the intellectual theological tradition. Secondly, and perhaps as a result of the relative disinterest in Hanbalite theology for the above reasons, there has been slow progress to bring forth the Hanbalite textual tradition to the attention of western researchers.

That said, much has changed in the recent two decades. Despite being deeply ingrained in historical scholarly literature, recent scholarship is re-evaluating these assumptions, and in their stead is presenting Hanbalism as a complex theological tradition with its own sophisticated approach to rationality. The earlier perspective on rationality, scholars argue, is couched in the Platonic–Aristotelian paradigm. It is only through that narrow lens that reason entails divine incorporeality and a rejection of anthropomorphism. And it is by such arbitrary standards that Hanbalite theology – known for its anthropomorphic tendencies – was dismissed as ‘anti-rational’.<sup>(1)</sup> Western scholars have questioned whether this approach tends to nurture a certain prejudice against Hanbalite theology, one which occludes enquiring into the possibility that Hanbalites adhere to a different kind of rationality. Following this line of argumentation, Sherman Jackson argues that rationality in Islamic theology is far from monolithic, instead encompassing different traditions of reason.<sup>(2)</sup>

---

=“regarded religious knowledge as deriving from the Revelation (Qur’an), the Tradition (sunna) and the consensus (ijma’), and preferred these sources to reason in treating religious matters”. See Abrahamov, Binyamin. *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998; Makdisi, George. “Ash’ari and the Ash’arites in Islamic Religious History I.” *Studia Islamica*, no. 17 (1962): 37–80; Melchert, Christopher. “The Piety of the Hadith Folk.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 425–439.

(1) For a detailed view of the prevailing model of the relationship between traditionalism and rationalism see Abrahamov, *Traditionalism and Rationalism*.

(2) Jackson, Sherman. *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s Faysal al-Tafriqa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 16–29.

He suggests that Hanbalism represents an alternative rationalism, rooted in its own theological framework rather than Hellenistic paradigms. Jon Hoover echoes this perspective, confining the approach of al-Razi in al-Muhassal afkar al-mutaqaddimin wa-l muta'akhhirin, wherein he equates corporeality to irrationality, to the limitations of a Hellenistic framework<sup>(1)</sup>. The adoption of a more flexible approach to rationality has resulted in a seismic shift in attitudes towards Hanbalite theology. Hoover, for example, describes leading Hanbalite figures of the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries as “more rationalist than earlier thought”.<sup>(2)</sup> Wesley Williams too, argues that it was intellectuality, rather than a simplistic literalism, that underpinned strong corporeal impulses in Hanbalite theology.<sup>(3)</sup>

Such views have demanded a closer examination of Hanbalite theological positions on their own terms. Consequently, through an increased focus on the works of prominent Hanbalite thinkers including Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), scholars have started to unveil rationalist dimensions within Hanbalite theology. These figures, traditionally portrayed as strict literalists, are now recognised as theologians who incorporated rational arguments into their defence of traditionalist beliefs. Miriam Ovadia's research on Ibn al-Qayyim's understudied work on anthropomorphism, al-Sawa'iq al-mursala, for example, explores his method of systematically countering rationalist convictions presented through kalam

---

(1) Hoover, Jon. *Ibn Taymiyya (Makers of the Muslim World)*. London: Oneworld Academic, 2019. 116.

(2) Hoover, Jon. “Ḥanbalī Theology.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, edited by Sabine Schmidtke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 777.

(3) Williams, Wesley. “Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 454.

argumentation, thus reframing Hanbalism as a “rationalised traditionalism.”<sup>(1)</sup> Similar studies on Ibn Taymiyya, such as Jon Hoover’s examination of his rationalist strategies in *Dar’ ta’arud al-’aql wa-l-naql*, show how Hanbalite theology engaged in rigorous intellectual discourse.<sup>(2)</sup> Such studies reveal a tradition that, albeit distinct from Ash’arite and Maturidite kalam, engaged in a sophisticated theological discourse with its own modes of reasoning and epistemological principles.

Another intriguing recent development is the interface of Hanbalite theology with Sufism. Despite prevailing views that the Hanbalite school adopts a scripturalist, anti-speculative approach, it has since been demonstrated that certain Hanbalite figures engaged deeply with mystical themes. In her exploration of layered hermeneutics in al-Maybudi’s Sufi exegetical work, “*Kashf al-asrar wa-’uddat al-abrar*” (Unveiling of Mysteries and Provision of the Righteous), Annabel Keeler seeks a unifying factor between al-Maybudi’s seemingly incompatible approaches of extreme literalism and esoteric lens. She identifies in al-Maybudi’s teachings an unwavering belief in the absolute omnipotence God, one that manifests in two mystical theological themes. The first is a belief in predestination, such that all mystical states are governed by divine decree. The second relates to the shortcoming of reason, such that

---

(1) Ovadia, Miriam. *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and the Divine Attributes*. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

(2) Hoover, Jon and M. A. G. Mahajneh. “Theology as Translation: Ibn Taymiyya’s Fatwa permitting Theology and its Reception into his Averting the Conflict between Reason and Revealed Tradition (*Dar’ ta’arud al-’aql wa l-naql*): Ibn Taymiyya’s Fatwa permitting Theology.” *Muslim World* 108, no. 1 (2018): 40–86. For another example of Hoover’s portrayal of a rationalist Ibn Taymiyya, see Hoover, Jon. “God Spatially Above and Spatially Extended: The Rationality of Ibn Taymiyya’s Refutation of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi’s Ash’ari Incorporealism”. *Arabica* 69, no. 6 (2022): 626–674.

God’s grace is the sole route to gaining knowledge of the Divine.<sup>(1)</sup>

Paralleling this renewed interest in Hanbalite theology is a concerted effort to address issues of textual misattribution within Hanbalite thought. Scholars have scrutinised the authenticity of several traditionalist creeds attributed to Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 240/855). In his detailed investigation into the textual history of al-Radd ‘ala al-zanadiqa wa-l-Jahmiyya, McLaren concludes that it is the result of “corporate ownership”.<sup>(2)</sup> Furthermore, through his study of the six creeds attributed to Ibn Hanbal in Abu al-Husayn Ibn Abi Ya’la’s (d. 526/1131) *Tabaqat al-Hanabila*, Saud al-Sarhan reattributes three creeds to other individuals, and questions the authenticity of the remaining three creeds based either on criticism of their transmitters or on contradictory statements attributed to Ibn Hanbal elsewhere.<sup>(3)</sup> Such research is crucial to distinguishing authentic Hanbalite theological positions from later interpolations, adaptations or misattributions, thus providing a clearer understanding of the theological legacy of early Hanbalite figures.

## Conclusions

In closing, the recent study of Sunni theological thought has experienced a revitalisation, with western scholarly efforts focused on understanding its nuances on its own terms, beyond earlier restrictive frameworks. This renewed approach has brought considerable momentum, in particular, to the field of

- (1) Keeler, Annabel. “Mystical Theology and the Traditional Hermeneutics of Maybudi’s *Kashf al-Asrar*.” In *Sufism and Theology*, edited by Ayman Shihadeh. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. 15–30.
- (2) McLaren, Andrew. “Ibn Hanbal’s Refutation of the Jahmiyya: A Textual History”. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 140, no. 4 (2020): 923.
- (3) al-Sarhan, Saud. “The Creeds of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal.” In *Books and Bibliophiles: Studies in honour of Paul Auchterlonie on the Bio-Bibliography of the Muslim World*, edited by Robert Gleave. Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2014. 29–44.



Ash'arite theology, where scholars have begun to explore its intricate connections with both philosophy and Sufism, shedding new light on its intellectual and spiritual dimensions. Similarly, research into the thought of Maturidite theologians has seen a swift resurgence, fuelled by quickening efforts to publish key manuscripts which have exposed the tradition to a broader audience. With the search for philosophical and mystical strands within Maturidism now also underway, the trajectory of such research mirrors, in part and in a nascent manner, more mature scholarly efforts in Ash'arite theology. Research into Hanbalite theology has faced unique challenges. Previously overlooked for seemingly limited intellectual depth, the appreciation of Hanbalite theology has required scholars to broaden definitions of rationalism beyond Hellenistic norms. By doing so, research has uncovered formerly unappreciated aspects of Hanbalite thought, revealing a form of rationalist traditionalism. These notable strides confirm that each of the three Sunni theological traditions deserve considerable ongoing scholarly attention, and present fertile ground for further discovery.



## Selected Bibliography

Abrahamov, Binyamin. *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

Adamson, Peter, and Andreas Lammer. "Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's Platonist Account of the Essence of Time." In *Philosophical Theology in Islam: Later Ash'arism East and West*, edited by Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

al-Sarhan, Saud. "The Creeds of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal." In *Books and Bibliophiles: Studies in honour of Paul Auchterlonie on the Bio-Bibliography of the Muslim World*, edited by Robert Gleave. Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2014.

Bruckmayr, Philipp. "The Spread and Persistence of Maturidi Kalam and Underlying Dynamics." *Iran and the Caucasus* 13 (2009): 59–92.

Demiri, Lejla. "God and Creation: 'Ubayd Allah al-Samarqandi (d. 701/1301)." In *Maturidi Theology: A Bilingual Reader*, edited by Lejla Demiri, Philip Dorroll and Dale J. Correa. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022.

Dorroll, Phillip. "The Universe in Flux. Reconsidering Abu Mansur al-Maturidi's Meta-physics and Epistemology." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 119–135.

el-Rouayheb, Khaled. "Theology and Logic." In *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, edited by Sabine Schmidtke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Frank, Richard. *Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam*. Vol. I, Vol. II & Vol. III, edited by Dimitri Gutas. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

Harvey, Ramon. *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Maturidi Theology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

Hassan, Laura. *Ash'arism Encounters Avicennism: Sayf al-Din al-Amidi on Creation*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2020.

Hoover, Jon. *Ibn Taymiyya (Makers of the Muslim World)*. London: One-world Academic, 2019.

Ibrahim, Bilal. "Causing an Essence: Notes on the Concept of Ja'l al-Ma-hiyya, from Fakhr al-Din al-Razi to Mulla Sadra." In *Philosophical Theology in Islam: Later Ash'arism East and West*, edited by Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

Jackson, Sherman. *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Faysal al-Tafriqa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Keeler, Annabel. "Mystical Theology and the Traditional Hermeneutics of Maybudi's *Kashf al-Asrar*." In *Sufism and Theology*, edited by Ayman Shihadeh. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Madelung, Wilferd. "Al-Ghazali's Changing Attitude to Philosophy." *Islam and Rationality* 1 (2015): 23-34.

McLaren, Andrew. "Ibn Hanbal's Refutation of the Jahmiyya: A Textual History." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 140, no. 4 (2020): 901-926.

Ovadia, Miriam. *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and the Divine Attributes*. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

Ramli, Harith. "Ash'arism through an Akbari Lens: The Two 'Tahqiqs' in the Curriculum Vitae of Ibrahim al-Kurani (d. 1019/1690)." In *Philosophical*

Theology in Islam: Later Ash'arism East and West, edited by Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

Rudolph, Ulrich. Al-Maturidi und die sunnitische Theologie in Samarkand. Leiden: Brill, 1996.

Shihadeh, Ayman. "Al-Rāzī's Earliest Kalām Work: Eastern Ash'arism in the Twelfth Century." In Philosophical Theology in Islam: Later Ash'arism East and West, edited by Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

Spevack, Aaron. The Archetypal Sunni Scholar: Law, Theology, and Mysticism in the Synthesis of al-Bajuri. New York: SUNY Press, 2014.

Street, Tony. "Fakhraddin al-Razi's Critique of Avicennan Logic." In Logik und Theologie: das Organon im arabischen und im lateinischen Mittelalter, edited by Dominik Perler and Ulrich Rudolph. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Williams, Wesley. "Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse." International Journal of Middle East Studies 34, no. 3 (2002): 441-463.

Winter, Tim. The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Wisnovsky, Robert. "One Aspect of the Avicennan Turn in Sunnī Theology." Arabic Sciences and Philosophy 14 (2004): 65-100.

