Ta'wīl of the Sifat of Allah Used by Ash'arīs and Māturīdīs

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Course: Sifat Allah, AQD 501

International Open University

Assignment question:

Ta'wīl of the Sifat (attributes) of Allah is a method used by the Ash'arī and Māturīdī of today to avoid affirming the apparent meanings of the Sifat of Allah. Explain the doubt that led them to adopt this method and whether their approach is the correct approach in dealing with the verses and hadiths of Allah's Sifat. Substantiate your answer.

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Abstract

This research paper elaborates on the Ta'wīl of the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah which they use to avoid affirming the apparent meanings of the ṣifāt (Attributes) of Allāh. This approach of theirs has been the major difference between these two schools of 'aqīdah and the Atharī school of 'aqīdah, also known as the Ḥanbalī kalām.

Tawhīd, belief in the Oneness is the basis of Islām, the most important part of it. Belief in Allāh – and the correct belief in Allāh – is the first pillar of īmān, and the affirmation of faith in Allāh and His Messenger ﷺ (shahādatān) is the first pillar of Islām. From this, one can understand that it is of utmost importance to have the correct belief in Allāh, His Names and His Attributes.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon each Muslim to find out what is the truth about Allāh's Names and Attributes.

This research paper is divided into 3 sections.

Firstly, definitions and explanations of certain terminologies will provide a good basis for understanding this subject.

Secondly, the doubt that led the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah to indulge in Ta'wīl and some other methods to avoid affirming Allāh's apparent Attributes will be briefly discussed.

Finally, it will be discussed whether or not this approach is correct.

Keywords: Aqidah, Asha'irah, Māturīdī, Atharī, Hanbali Kalam, Ta'wīl, Ta'tīl

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Introduction

All praise belongs to Allāh, the Lord of the worlds, and blessings and peace be upon our Prophet Muhammad, his companions, his family and those who follow his path until the Last Day.

To proceed:

The Ash'arī creed is attributed to Imām Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī who lived in the 3rd and 4th century hijri although Imām al-Ashʿarī retracted from the beliefs that formed the basis for the Ash'arī creed.

The Māturīdī creed is attributed to Imām Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Ḥanafī al-Māturīdī al-Samarḵandī who was a contemporary of Imām al-Ashʿarī.

Both creeds have some matters in common. One of them is the use of ta'wīl to avoid affirming the apparent Attributes of Allāh. As a consequence of this creed, they claimed that those who follow the Atharī creed do not have the correct 'aqīdah and do not belong to Aḥl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah as they take the Attributes of Allah too literally. An example of this will be given in this research paper, in shā Allāh. At the same time, those who follow the Atharī creed have claimed that the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah do not have the correct 'aqīdah and do not belong to Aḥl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah as they do not take the Attributes of Allah literal enough.

This research paper will look at the two perspectives and the faults of ta'wīl. For that, this research is divided into 3 sections.

Section 1: Definitions and explanations of certain terminologies that will give a good basis for understanding this subject.

Second 2: The doubt that led the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah to indulge in Ta'wīl and some other methods to avoid affirming Allah's apparent Attributes will be briefly discussed.

Section 3: It will be discussed whether or not this approach is correct.

Definitions and Explanations of Some Terminologies

Ta'wīl

Linguistically, ta'wīl means "interpretation, explanation". (Wehr, 2001)

Technically, it means "interpreting or explaining something in a way that the apparent meaning does not apply anymore, and another meaning must be adopted".

Ta'tīl

Linguistically, ta'tīl means "stripping away, emptying".

Technically, it means "denying the Names and Attributed of Allāh, or denying some of them". (Al-'Uthaymīn, 2019)

This can be of two types:

1. Absolute Ta'tīl: This is the ta'tīl that is attributed to the Jaḥmīyah who deny the Attributes of Allāh. Some of the Jaḥmīyah even deny the Names of Allāh.

2. Partial Ta'tīl: This the ta'tīl that is attributed to the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah who deny some of the Attributes of Allāh and confirm others.

Tashbīh

Linguistically, tashbīh means "comparison".

Technically, tashbīh means "ascription of human characteristics to God" (Wehr, 2001) or "to acknowledge that something is similar to something else". (Al-'Uthaymīn, 2019)

Tafwīḍ

Linguistically, tafwīḍ means "entrustment" or "delegation". (Wehr, 2001)

Technically, tafwīḍ means "leaving the interpretation and explanation of Allāh's Names and Attributes up to Allāh, not indulging in Ta'wīl, but at the same time rejecting the apparent meaning". (al-Fawzaan, 2010)

The Doubt that Led the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah to Indulge in Ta'wīl

The main reason why the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah indulge in ta'wīl is because Allāh mentions in the Qur'ān that there is nothing equal to Him:

"Do you know of any similarity to Him?" (Sūrah Maryam, 19:65)

Allāh also says:

"And equal to Him has never been any one." (Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ, 112:4)

Based on these verses, the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah claim that one has to reject the literal meanings of most of Allāh's apparent Attributes, such as hearing, sight, hands, face, mercy, anger, coming, encompassing, being above the Throne, etc.

Instead, they explain these Attributes in a way that they no longer have the apparent meaning. (Al-'Uthaymīn, 2019)

First example:

Allāh says in the Qur'ān:

"The hand of Allāh is over their hands." (Sūrah al-Fatḥ, 48:10)

Allāh's Hands in this verse is traditionally interpreted as Allāh's Power or Generosity (al-Fawzaan, 2010). Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah claim that, if one affirms the literal meaning, it will be tashbīh, i.e. ascribing human attributes to Allah.

However, it is interesting to note here, that modern-day Deoband scholars, who attribute themselves to the Māturīdī creed deny this interpretation. Mufti Muḥammad Shafī' 'Uthmānī mentioned in his Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān regarding this verse: "'Allah's hand' is in any

case something falling in the category of mutashābihāt the correct nature of which cannot be known to us, nor should we attempt to investigate its reality." (Uthmani, 1995)

Second example:

Allāh says in the Qur'ān:

"Indeed, your Lord is Allāh, who created the heavens and the earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne." (Sūrah Yūnus, 10:3)

The Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah claim that this cannot be understood in the literal sense and that it is not possible for Allāh to have risen above the Throne because it would ascribe a place to Allāh. In fact, this is the reason why the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah claim that those who follow the Atharī creed do not belong to Aḥl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah.

They interpreted the statements of ibn Taymīyah in a heretical way. For example, based on Ibn Taymīyah's claim in his Majmū' al-Fatāwā, "It has been narrated through the acceptable scholars and Muslim saints that Muḥammad, the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ will be seated by His Lord on His Throne with Him" (ibn Taymiyyah, 2004), they claim that ibn Taymīyah said that Allāh sits on His Throne with His Body.

However, this claim is not correct as ibn Taymīyah mentioned elsewhere in his Minhaj al-Sunnah: "As for the word jism (body), it is an innovation (bid'ah) in both negation or affirmation, there is not in the Book or the Sunnah and nor the saying of any of the Salaf of the Ummah and it's leading Imāms who applied the word "jism" with respect to Allāh's attributes, neither in negation nor in affirmation." (ibn Taymiyyah, 2002)

Is Ta'wīl the Correct Approach?

The opinions of some scholars including ibn Taymīyah and Mufti Muḥammad Shafī' 'Uthmānī have already been mentioned. They can both be summarised by saying that we should not indulge in the investigation of these matters. However, ibn Taymīyah was stricter

in the sense that he rejected the negation of any of Allāh's Attributes in the real (ḥaqīqī) sense.

Some other scholars who mentioned their view regarding the interpretation of the Attributes of Allāh include Al-Husain Al-Baghawī who mentioned, after discussing several āyāt and aḥadīth regarding Allāh's Attributes: "Upon this were the Righteous Predecessors of this ummah of Islam and the Sunnī scholars. They all accepted it faithfully and avoided comparing Him with His creation or making Ta'wīl, and referring its knowledge to Allah." (al-Baghawi, 1983)

Ibn Qudāmah Al-Maqdisī mentioned in his Luma`at Al-I`tiqād: "This is the way of the scholars of the past and the present have followed, may Allāh be pleased with them. They all unanimously agreed on acknowledging, accepting, and affirming what has been mentioned in the Book of Allāh and the Sunnah of His Messenger concerning the attributes without turning towards ta'wīl. […] This and what is similar to it is from what the Salaf, may Allāh have mercy on them, have unanimously agreed on reporting and accepting. And we do not incline towards rejecting it, nor toward distorting its meaning [Ta'wīl], nor towards making a comparison to it, nor towards liking it." (ibn Qudama, n.d.)

The main problem regarding Ta'wīl is what Hafiẓ ibn Ḥajr pointed out in his Fatḥ al-Bārī: "Whoever chooses the path of the Khalaf (latter-day scholars of 'aqīdah) cannot ensure that that which he makes ta'wīl of is the intended meaning and it is impossible to ensure the correctness of the ta'wīl." (ibn Ḥajr, 1989)

Even though modern-day Māturīdī scholars mention that the scholars never made their statements upon certainty, it is not the correct path, because it is still not "the only simple and straight creed. Mufti Muḥammad Shafī' 'Uthmānī, a Māturīdī scholar, wrote: "As for the later day ` Ulama who have suggested some meanings to these things, they have done it only in a degree of probability, even in their own sight. They simply suggest - perhaps, it

may mean this. They never say that the meanings they have given are certain. As obvious, probabilities disclose no reality. Therefore, the only simple and straight creed (maslak) is that of the Sahabah (Companions), the Tabi`īn (Successors to Companions) and the Salaf (the righteous and worthy forebears and elders of the Faith). They were satisfied to live with the approach of entrusting the reality of such matters with Divine Knowledge." (Uthmani, 1995)

Therefore, even the modern-day scholars of the Māturīdī creed concluded that ta'wīl is, in fact, not the correct approach.

Imām al-Ṭaḥḥāwī may be quoted at this point from the last chapter in his 'Aqīdah al-Ṭaḥḥāwī: "We regard the jamā'ah as truth and correctness, and sectarianism as deviation and punishment. Allāh's religion on earth and in the heavens is [only] one, and it is the religion of Islam. Allah Almighty said, 'Verily, the religion with Allah is Islam,' And the Almighty said, 'I am pleased with Islam as the religion for you.' And it is between radicalism and leniency, between tashbīh and ta'tīl, between jabrīyah (having no free will at all) and qadrīyah (having unrestricted free will), and between guarantee and hopelessness." (at-Tahawi, 1995)

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the approach of the Ashā'irah and Māturīdīyah is not correct and that it has led to a lot of evil, such as excluding great scholars from Aḥl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah. The correct approach is to not delve into trying to interpret any of the Names and Attributes of Allāh, but to leave them as they are and accept them according to the meaning Allāh intended for them, which is the apparent meaning.

And Allāh knows best.

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