The Qur’ānic Doctrine of the Divine Names and the Muslim Understanding of the Divine

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ABSTRACT

What is the Muslim conception of the Divine? To answer this question, we first must look to the Qur’an, since Muslims consider it God’s self-revelation to human beings. However, when we look to the Qur’an for guidance, we are presented with a God who describes Himself using Names that indicate both His incomparability to creation (tanzīḥ) and His similarity (tashbīḥ) to the created order. For example, God refers to Himself as the Hearing (as-Samī), the Seeing (al-Baṣīr), and the Living (al-Ḥayy), but also says He is the Unique (al-Ahad). For many Muslim scholars, these contrasts lead to paradoxes when understanding the Divine. This thesis examines the positions of three intellectual schools on this issue, namely Kalām (Islamic dialectical theology), Falsafah (philosophy), and Taṣawwuf (Sufism) and traces the development of their distinct conceptions of God using the Qur’anic doctrine of the Divine Names. Through a close study of all three approaches, we can realize how Muslims have approached these questions from three distinct perspectives, namely through the lenses of revelation, reason, and experience. Through a contemplation on numerous Names, and a study of the plethora of approaches to this tradition, we are inevitably led back to the One.
INTRODUCTION

Belief in the oneness of God is the first article of belief in Islam, since God is “the foundation and beginning of everything Islamic.” The centrality of this doctrine to Islamic thought is clear when viewing the first pillar of faith, the *Shahadah* or the testimony of faith, “there is no god but God” which is indicative of the uncompromising monotheism that is central to the Islamic faith. *Tawḥīd* or attesting to the absolute oneness of God is a core doctrine in Islam, as each of the prophets came bearing this message which both explains the nature of God and clarifies that the only one worthy of worship is God. However, who or what is the God of Muslims like? In order to truly worship God, it is necessary to know, some extent at least, the object of worship. If we seek to gain knowledge of what God is like in Islam, we must look to the Qur’an for guidance, which, as the “Speech of God” (*kalām Allāh*), contains His Self-revelation to His creation. Yet, even though the Qur’an is the point of reference for information about God, it “does not dogmatically explain what people should or should not think about God.” Nonetheless, as God’s Speech and His Self-revelation to human beings, the Qur’an provides Muslims with “the full revelation of Allāh…the Supreme Reality Whose Oneness is at the center of the Islamic message.”

The Qur’an reveals that “God is One, at once impersonal and personal, transcendent and immanent, majestic and beautiful, beyond all that we can conceive, and yet nearer to us than our *jugular vein.*” Based on the teachings of the Qur’an we can also say that God is one, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal.

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immanent, utterly transcendent, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, human beings, and the only god worthy of worship. A distinguishing feature of God’s Self-disclosure in the Qur’an is the way in which God refers to Himself using a number of epithets, which have been called the “ninety-nine most beautiful Names.” Although these Names are central to way in which God is described in the Qur’an, the picture the Names paint of God seems to be contradictory at first, since God refers to Himself using Names that indicate both His incomparability (tanzīh) and His similarity (tashbīh) to the created order. The Qur’an describes a God who is utterly transcendent, but at the same time, responsive and near. The Divine Names are thus classified under the categories of either tanzīh (declaring incomparability) or tashbīh (affirming similarity), which when taken together reflect tawḥīd or Divine Unity. Some Names describe God in a way that seem to indicate God’s physical similarity to the created order such as the Hearing (as-Samī), the Seeing (al-Baṣīr), and the Living (al-Hayy), whereas others such as: the All-Pitying (ar-Raʿūf), the Responder (al-Mujīb), the Loving (al-Wadūd), the Friend (al-Walī), and the Kind (al-Laṭīf) indicate God’s closeness and concern for His creation. Names that indicate God’s utter transcendence from all things include: the King (al-Malik), the One (al-Wahīd), the

7 Cf. Qur’an And We are nearer to him than his jugular vein (50:16); Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God (2:115); 57:4.  
8 Cf. Qur’an 42:11: Naught is like unto him.  
Unique (al-Ahād), the Holy (al-Quddūs), and the Eternal (al-Samād). Even though the Names can be thought of in terms of incomparability and similarity, both tānẓīh and tāshbīḥ or Attributes of God that we are able to comprehend, are absolved in tawḥīd, because God’s Qualities of Distance and Nearness only reflect the One God, Allāh. Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh al-Iskandārī (1259–1309), an Egyptian jurist and great Sufi saint of the Shādhilī order, writes that God is “mighty despite His nearness, and near despite His transcendence” illustrating the essential fusion of tānẓīh and tashbīḥ, or the junction of two opposing Attributes together into a single picture of tawḥīd.

God describes Himself most frequently using the Names Allāh (the Arabic word corresponding to “God”), the Compassionate (al-Raḥmān), and the Merciful (al-Raḥīm). God is referred to as the Compassionate (al-Raḥmān), and the Merciful (al-Raḥīm) perhaps more often than any of the other Divine Names, especially since these two Names appear at the beginning of all but one of the 114 surahs (chapters) of the Qurʾān in a formulation referred to as the basmalah, which states: In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. The basmalah is a combination of three significant Names of God - Allāh, the Compassionate, and the Merciful – containing God’s personal Name and two Divine Names which relate to God’s Mercy (raḥma). In his commentary on the Divine Names, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), writes that the name Allāh is the greatest of all of the Divine Names, because it “unites all of the Attributes of divinity.” Furthermore, the Name Allāh is also the most specific Name, since it can be attributed

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27 These two Divine Names appear at the beginning of every surah of the Qurʾān, except one (Surah al-Tawbah).
28 Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh al-Iskandārī, The Pure Intention: on Knowledge of the Unique Name, 18-19. For Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh al-Iskandārī, it is profound that the first Names that readers of the Qurʾān encounter are Divine Names that indicate God’s mercy, because this proves that God’s Mercy is of utmost importance.
to nothing but God. Whereas the other Divine Names refer to Attributes that are conceivable by human beings and are found in various aspects of creation, the name Allāh cannot be shared by creation in any way, as every other Divine Name can only be conceived of as a name of the one supreme Name, Allāh. 

The Divine Names often appear in pairs; God calls Himself the Compassionate (al-Rahmān) and the Merciful (al-Raḥīm), the Living (al-Hayy) and Self-Subsisting (al-Qayyum), and the Beginner (al-Mubdi‘) and the Restorer (al-Mu‘īd). Other verses list the Divine Names in succession, describing God through a multitude of different Names, the most extensive example of which is verses 59:22-24, in which God is referred to using eighteen different Names.

The tradition of enumerating the Divine Names is central to Islamic practice and doctrine, since it can be traced back to one of the sayings (ḥadīth) of the Prophet Muḥammad. The ḥadīth, attributed to Abū Hurayrah, a notable companion (ṣaḥābah) of the Prophet and ḥadīth transmitter, notes that the Prophet remarked, “Surely God has ninety-nine names, one hundred less one. Whoever enumerates them will enter the Garden.” This call to enumerate the Divine Names has origins in the Qur’an, which asserts, Unto God belong the Most Beautiful Names; so call Him by them (7:180). The verb that translates to ‘call upon’ in this verse also means to invoke or supplicate, which is why commentators on this verse took this to mean the practice of remembering God (dhikr) and invoking Him through His Most Beautiful Names (al-asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā). Muslim

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33 Nasr et al., The Study Quran, 1356.
34 Aḥmad ibn Maṣ˓ūr Samʻānī. The Repose of the Spirits: a Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names. Translated by William C. Chittick. Albany: State University of New York, 2019, Iii. This is a very famous ḥadīth cited by many canonical sources including Bukhārī and Muslim. See also: Al-Ghazālī, The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God, 49. In his treatment of the divine names, al-Ghazālī also includes the traditional list of ninety-nine mentioned by Abū Hurayrah.
35 Nasr et. al., The Study Quran, 472.
devotional practices involve a constant remembrance of God through His Names, in which God’s Names are incorporated into various aspects of everyday life. The basmalah (the formula – “in the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful) consecrates all actions, whether it be beginning a recitation of a new chapter of the Quran, or simple actions such as eating, drinking, entering and leaving one’s home, since Muslims believe that every action should be performed in the Name of God and for His sake. Other examples of the practical function of the Divine Names include remembering God through His names in a methodical remembrance and the use of God’s Names in naming others. Remembering God is a key theme in the Qur’an, as God often calls upon believers to *invoke the Name of thy Lord morning and evening* (76:25), stating that it is only in the *remembrance of God* that hearts are at peace (13:28). The Qur’an states that the *remembrance of God is surely greater* (29:45), which mirrors the Prophetic saying, “for everything there is a polish, and the polish of the heart is the remembrance of God.” Believers are urged to *remember the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with complete devotion* (73:78), since only whole-hearted devotion and remembrance of the Divine allows for one’s heart to become purified, by removing the rust that covers hearts, and allowing believers to become faithful servants of God.

It is with this hope that parents often name their children in reference to the various Divine Names. In the same way that the Prophet Muhammad was called ‘*Abd-Allah* (servant of God), Muslim parents often name their children using the formula “servant of” and a particular Divine Name. In the hopes that their children will benefit from the blessing associated with the Divine Name, parents often name their children, ‘*Abd al-Ḥayy* (servant of the Alive), ‘*Abd al-Alīm* (servant of the Knower), ‘*Abd al-Qādir* (servant of the Powerful), ‘*Abd al-Rahman* (servant of the

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36 Nasr et al., the Study Quran, 5.  
37 Nasr et. al., 623.  
Compassionate), ‘Abd al-Khaliq (servant of the Creator), and so on.\textsuperscript{39} Even Islamic architecture reflects something of the Divine Names, as mosque decoration frequently includes intricate calligraphic representations of the Divine Names, a notable example of which is the Grand Mosque of Kuwait which displays the ninety-nine Names in a spherical pattern on its interior dome. Islamic oral traditions also reflect the tradition of enumerating the Divine Names, where the ninety-nine Names are chanted in a lyrical rendition. In these ‘musical’ recitations, the reciter begins with the longest enumeration of the Divine Names in the Qur’an: “He is God, other than whom there is no god...the Compassionate, the Merciful...the Sovereign, the Holy, the Peace, the Faithful, the Protector, the Mighty, the Compeller, the Proud…”\textsuperscript{40} and recites each of the names as narrated in the Ḥadīth traditions.

**Commentaries on the Divine Names**

The Divine Names are also central to Islamic thought, since they are the subject of a distinctive genre in Islamic intellectual history, that of commentaries on the Divine Names which are lengthy contemplations on each of the Names. On the importance of the Divine Names to Islamic thought, William Chittick writes,

> for Muslim theologians and thinkers, the most beautiful Names of God designate the Attributes that govern the cosmos and determine the nature of everything that exists. Without knowing the Names and their significance, people will know nothing of lasting import about the world and themselves, for the names delineate the very warp and weft of existence.\textsuperscript{41}

For Chittick, the Names are considered the “roots of all that exist, since the Attributes the Names designate, such as “life, knowledge, desire, power, making [and] form-giving” are the very Divine

\textsuperscript{39} Chittick and Murata, *The Vision of Islam*, 125.
\textsuperscript{40} This enumeration is found in verses 22-24 of Surah 59, *Surah al-Hashr* (The Gathering). See Nasr et. al., *The Study Quran*, 1356-1357.
\textsuperscript{41} Samʻānī, *The Repose of the Spirits*, I.
structures which permeate the entirety of existence.\textsuperscript{42} Listing the Names allows for reflection on the Ultimate Reality, and as Chittick explains, knowledge of the world and human beings themselves. Since the Divine Names and Attributes are the very structures which shape existence, explaining the meanings of these Names became the subject of an important genre of theological writings, where scholars list and explain each Name.\textsuperscript{43} These commentaries on the Divine Names systematically try to unpack the meaning behind each one of the Names, and can be thought of as an enumeration of the Names themselves. In this genre, scholars list each Name and try to situate it in terms of Islamic thought. For example, a typical entry for a Divine Name in al-Ghazālī’s commentary on the Divine Names gives a brief explanation of the Name, followed by a section which explains the degree to which human beings can actualize this Name in their own lives. For example, in his entry on the Name, al-Fattāḥ (“the Opener”), al-Ghazālī explains that the Opener is “the one by whose providence whatever is closed is opened, and by whose guidance whatever is unclear is disclosed.”\textsuperscript{44} He goes on to explain that the Opener is He who lifts veils from hearts and opens them to the Divine mystery, and who opens kingdoms for the Prophets and delivers them from their enemies.\textsuperscript{45} In terms of al-Ghazālī’s counsel for a person who wants to acquire the blessing of such a Name, he writes that “man should yearn to reach a point where the locks to the divine mysteries are opened by his speech” because such a person’s knowledge opens these doors for him.\textsuperscript{46}

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s \textit{The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God (al-Maqṣad al-asnā: fi sharḥ asmā’ Allāh al-husnā)}, is one of the most famous commentaries on the Divine Names.

\textsuperscript{42} Sam‘ānī, l.
\textsuperscript{43} Chittick, “Worship” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology}, 222.
\textsuperscript{44} Al-Ghazālī, \textit{The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God}, 79.
\textsuperscript{45} Al-Ghazālī, 79.
\textsuperscript{46} Al- Ghazālī, 79-80.
tradition in Islam. Others include Aḥmad ibn Maṇṣūr Samʻānī’s (1094–1140) *The Repose of the Spirits: Explaining the Names of the All-Opening King*, and Abu’l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī’s (986–1072) *Explanation of God’s Most Beautiful Names*. Each of these works approaches the question of the Divine Names in different ways, building off the same prophetic tradition, however, each one varies in the interpretation taken by the scholar on the list of names transmitted by Abū Hurayrah.

Despite the Prophet’s mention of ninety-nine, scholars did not take this to be a numerical limit which indicated that God must have only a certain number of names. Al-Ghazālī’s commentary includes exactly ninety-nine Names, whereas Aḥmad Samʻānī’s includes one-hundred and two names, and al-Qushayrī’s contains ninety-six. As Chittick notes, even if we were to go through the Qur’an and count the Names that appear, we would not end up with ninety-nine Names. Since God is beyond all comprehension, His Names can also be said to be infinite, based on how we define the term ‘Name.’ In order to make sure that they covered all ninety-nine Names, scholars often included more than ninety-nine Names in their lists, and in his commentary on the Divine Names, ‘Afīf al-Dīn Tilimsānī (d. 1291) derives a list of 146 Names from the Qur’an. In his historical survey of the Divine Names, *Les noms divins en Islam*, Daniel Gimaret compiles a list of 275 Names based on a survey of 38 different early commentaries on the Divine Names, which indicates the diversity of Names that scholars identified. Later treatises on the Divine Names that Gimaret does not cover include even more Names, revealing the lengths to which scholars would go make sure they enumerated all of the Names of God. A notable later

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47 Samʻānī, lii.  
48 Samʻānī, liii.  
49 Samʻānī, lii.  
50 Ibid., liii.  
51 Ibid., liii.
commentary, the *Sharḥ al-ʿasmāʾ* by the nineteenth century Persian philosopher Mullā Hādī Sabziwārī (1797–1873), includes a list of 1,001 Divine Names, derived from a Shi‘ite supplication entitled *al-Jawshan al-kabīr* (“The Great Chainmail”). In chapter 558 of his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* (“The Meccan Revelations”) Muḥyiddin Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240), addresses the topic of the Divine Names in the lengthiest treatment of the Divine Names in Islamic literature, in a discussion that spans approximately one thousand pages. Furthermore, as Chittick says almost every page of the *Futūḥāt* deals with the topic of the Divine Names in some way, indicating that Ibn ʿArabī’s survey is undoubtedly the lengthiest contemplation on the Divine Names in Islamic intellectual history.

**Divine Names Traditions in Other Religions**

As Chittick notes, “all God talk employs names and attributes.” Thus, discussions of the Divine Names are not limited to Islam, rather all forms of “God talk” seek to name the Divine in a multitude of ways. A tradition of naming the Divine can be found across religious traditions, but the traditions of Judaism and Christianity most closely resemble the Divine Names tradition in Islam, most likely because all three traditions share the same sacred history. As David Burrell notes, each of the Abrahamic faiths puts a particular emphasis on the self-revelation of God through His Divine Names in scripture (like the names Elohim, Adonai, El-Shaddai, and YHWH in the Torah, or the Divine Names in the Qur’an), or through the incarnation of the Divine Word (through Jesus Christ). In his commentary on the Name Allāh, Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh al-Iskandarī writes,

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52 Ibid., liii.
53 Ibid., liii.
54 Ibid., liii.
55 Ibid., liii.
“know that the Most Beautiful Names number one thousand, of which there are three hundred in the Torah, three hundred in the Gospel, three hundred in the Psalms, one in the scriptures of Abraham, and ninety-nine in the Qur’an.”

Although he believes that the meaning of these Names are encompassed in the Names included in the Qur’an, his stance reflects the idea of a larger Divine Names tradition across all three Abrahamic faiths. In the Torah, Moses asks God, “What is the name of the God of our fathers?” and God replied: “Say this to the people of Israel: I am has sent me to you (Ex. 3:14 –15). In Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, the Divine Names are invoked in devotional practices to acquire some of the power or blessing associated with the different names. Although there is some continuity between the Names traditions in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, constant reiteration and enumeration of Divine Names is common across many faiths. For example, in Hinduism, Om is considered the most sacred formula that reflects the essence of the universe in a single syllable, and in Hindu devotional practices, lists of 1008 or 108 names (the Sahasranāma), of certain deities such as Vishnu, Brahma, Shakti, and Shiva are recited in order to reflect upon and praise the great gods.

In his Summa Theologica, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) concludes that God is unknowable, because even if we “may assert that God is wise or just, and mean it” we cannot claim to “understand how God is just” because in whatever we say of God, we do not know how any of these statements are true. Al-Ghazālī echoes Aquinas’ ideas when he says that knowledge about God has to do with His Names, even if this knowledge only leads us to the conclusion that God is unknowable. Thus, the exercise of invoking the Divine Names is not without merit since

58 Burrell, “Naming the Names of God,” 22.
60 Burrell, 28. This conclusion is similar to one of the conclusions that some Islamic theologians came to when stating that we attribute features to God without knowing how (bilā kayf) these attributes are true of God.
61 Burrell, 25.
contemplating God’s Names allows us to attest to the oneness of God through the signs He reveals in the Qur’an, and throughout all of creation. The Divine Names are meaningful in that they have the ability to lead us back to tawḥīd, the crux of Islamic belief, and the absolute point of reference. Tawḥīd is expressed using the shahādah, the statement which reveals that there is no god but God. However, this statement can be taken one step further to say that there is no knowledge but God’s Knowledge, there is no mercy but God’s Mercy, and so on, such that each Divine Name could be viewed of using this formula. Another formula that Muslims frequently recite in their daily prayers, Allāhu Akbar (God is greater), also reflects a similar principle, reminding us that God transcends everything else, including our limited conceptions of Him. God is greater than anything we can perceive of, so it is obvious that no one can know God but Himself.

Even if no one but God is able to know God, the Qur’an indicates that there is some previous knowledge of the names that is essential to the progeny of Adam. The Qur’an states, And He taught Adam the names, all of them, which has been interpreted by some thinkers to mean that Adam was given knowledge of all things by virtue of being taught all of the names. His descendants, however, have forgotten this knowledge, and need to return to the knowledge they once contained, to “remember the true names of things,” and turn away from themselves in order to turn (tawba) in repentance towards God. In light of this, our lifetime can be conceived of as a single Return to God, in which we finally remember our innate nature or fitrah (in which we affirm God’s oneness or tawḥīd), or the knowledge of the Names, which we have forgotten due to the clouding of our hearts during our time in the world (dunya). In the Qur’an, God frequently calls...
upon human beings to remember Him so that He remembers them.\footnote{Cf. Qur’an 2:152} Remembering God through His many Names allows Muslims to call upon the Divine presence daily and acquire Divine blessings daily, and actualize tawhīd through revelation, reason, and experience.

The Qur’anic doctrine of the Divine Names is therefore central to Muslim belief and practice, and the means of coming to know the object of worship. These Names, each of which denote a distinct Attribute of God, serve as an excellent point from which to understand how Muslims conceive of the God they worship. However, the numerous Names and the contrasting views of God they posit also call into question the unity of God. When listing these Names, we are to ask: how can God be both immanent and utterly transcendent at the same time? How could God be both the Hearing and the Seeing, and the Unique, when human beings and other creation can also be said to be hearing and seeing? How can we affirm the unity of God when faced with such paradoxical descriptions? One could simply disregard these names as mere metaphor, but the Qur’an repeatedly insists for Muslim to call upon God using them, which in itself indicates that these Names should not be considered a mere stylistic addition to the Qur’an, but a central feature which must be carefully examined. The Qur’an is the word of God (kalām Allāh) for Muslims, and therefore, every verse contains exhaustive levels of meaning, such that students of Islam have hardly exhausted interpretations of the various verses in the course of over a thousand years.

As Muslim theologians, mystics, and philosophers wrestled with the Divine Names and their implications, they sought to reconcile the many Names into their vision of the One God, who is both transcendent and immanent, and whose Names are infinite. Therefore, by contemplating the many Names, we are inevitably led back to the One. This thesis examines the approaches taken
by the three most important intellectual schools in Islam to the question of the Divine Names and Attributes, namely the schools of Islamic theology, philosophy, and Sufism.

Chapter 1 will trace the development of Islamic theology (Kalām), the early discussions of anthropomorphism, and the question of the reality of the Divine Names and Attributes as approached by the theologians. This chapter builds upon the way in which groups of Muslim theologians came to assert varied conceptions of God using the divinely revealed text as their source. The second chapter will explain the how Islamic philosophy (falsafa) dealt with the Divine Names and Attributes and approaching knowledge regarding the Divine. Finally, chapter three will discuss the use of the Divine Names in the Islamic mystical tradition (Tasawwuf), in terms of using these names in devotional practices, and the development of the theosophical tradition within Sufism which advocates for the role of experience in gaining an understanding of the Divine, and calls for human beings to qualify themselves through the Attributes of God.

It is important to understand that these divisions are not as rigid as they may appear, since Kalām, Falsafa, and Tasawwuf build off each other, and are inextricably linked, and in fact deal with the same set of ultimate questions in different ways. In fact, I argue that we can come to a better understanding of the impact of the Divine Names through an analysis of all three methods, since all of these means of approaching the question of the Divine Names and Attributes are simply multiple ways of approaching the One God who is both the Beginning and the End. Although some schools tended to emphasize Tanzīh or Tashbīh Attributes, the greatest of thinkers were those who were able to envision how both views, incomparability and similarity, fit together. Ultimately, it is only through a synthesis of opposites that we can understand the full Self-Disclosure of the Divine.
CHAPTER I
THE WAY OF REVELATION

Understanding the Divine Names and the Attributes they designate became central to the theological discourse amongst Muslim scholars, who discussed shaping the right conception of belief in God. Faced with anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur’an, such as the constant use of Divine Names such as the Hearing and the Seeing, and verses which speak of God’s Face or His sitting on the Throne, theologians wrestled with the contrasting views of God as an absolute transcendence (tanzīh) and a God that seems similar to the created order, in some aspects at least. When the Qur’an says *All things perish, save His face* (28:88) does this mean that God has a face like human faces? The Qur’an also states that *The Compassionate mounted the Throne* (20:5), which seems to indicate that God sits on the Throne, but does this description allude to limbs? For most theologians, this is a point of contention since the Qur’an explicitly states *none is like unto Him* (112:4). Yet, what does this mention of God’s Face mean? Rationalist theologians argued that these descriptions of God as similarity (tashbīh) are metaphor, because they cannot be reconciled with the tanzīh descriptions of God. For most Traditionalist theologians, the mere inclusion of these descriptions in the Qur’an means that they must be taken to be true, so God does sit on the Throne and He does have a Face, although explaining how this is possible is beyond the scope of human beings. Theologians mainly speak about God in terms of His Essence, which is unknowable, and the Attributes which Name the Essence. Theological discussions about the relationship between the Divine Essence and the Divine Attributes (or the Names) also deal with the question of the eternality of the Attributes, and whether or not the Attributes or Divine Names are identical with the Divine Essence. As we will see in this section, different schools of theology took different views on these theological issues and emphasized various Divine Attributes in their
conception of God. Furthermore, theologians had to reconcile the many Names and contrasting depictions of God and the Islamic principle of God’s Oneness.

This chapter traces the development of the theological tradition regarding the Divine Names, mainly in terms of the views of rationalist and Traditionalist theologians who argued for different conceptions of the Divine through them. Let us begin by outlining the origins of Islamic theology to illustrate the context which inspired specific debates regarding the Divine Names and Attributes.

I. Articulating the Core Tenets of Faith: The Development of Kalām

The first few centuries after the Prophet Muḥammad’s death in 632 CE led to the flowering of a distinctive Islamic theological tradition, in which Muslim theologians compiled the teachings of the Qur’an and hadīth in a systematic manner to expound unified systems of belief. It was the need to engage in discourse about the principles of faith, in a complex political and social environment, which led to the beginnings of the science of Kalām, or Islamic dialectical theology. Kalām literally means “speech” or “word,” which for Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406 CE) refers to the way in which dialecticians or mutakallīmūn engaged in disputation over creedal beliefs using rational proofs.67 As Ibn Khaldūn writes, the religion which formed out of the teachings of the Qur’an consisted of two principal duties, which he terms the “duties of the body,” and the “duties of the heart.”68 The ‘duties of the body,’ for Ibn Khaldūn, consisted of following “the divine laws that govern the actions of all duty-bound Muslims” from which the discipline of fiqh (jurisprudence) emerged.69 He ascribes the origin of the duties of the heart (which he links to faith),

68 Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Kalam, 3.
69 Wolfson, 3. Wolfson cites Ibn Khaldūn’s description of these events from his Muqaddimah.
however, to *Kalām*, which, he believes arose out of a necessity to affirm “by the heart…what is spoken by the tongue,” through sustained discussion of the six articles of faith (*imān*) in Islam (that is, the belief in God, His angels, His scriptures, His apostles, the Day of Judgement, and *Qadar* (“the measuring out”) or predestination). 70

Other seminal figures in Islamic history have alluded to the way in which the science of the *Kalām* is able to establish a true understanding of the faith. Abū Ḥanīfa (699–767 CE) famously called the *Kalām*, al-fiqh al-akbar (“the greater understanding”), in contradistinction to *fiqh*, the “lesser understanding.” 71 The *Kalām* has also been called *usul al-dīn* or “the roots of religion,” because the “roots of Islam lie in faith” which leads to an “understanding [of] the nature of things.” 72 The tradition of the *Kalām*, however, did not begin with the Prophet, and its true shape took place in a particular context riddled with numerous tensions. Although the early Islamic tradition involves some discussions on matters of faith, the rational theology which we refer to as *Kalām* was the first to extensively outline these articles of faith in a systematic manner in response to certain theological questions that appeared in specific contexts.

Hamza Yusuf writes that “the Qur’an is not a book of theology, and the Prophet was not a theologian.” 73 Thus, instead of thinking about theology as something innate to religious traditions, Yusuf urges us to conceive of theology as a reaction, a “creative response to tension in the mind of a believer who is confronted with propositions that challenge not his experiential faith, but his intellectual understanding of that faith.” 74 *Kalām*, of course, deals with the intellectual understanding of faith, which cannot necessarily replace the way in which believers experience

70 Wolfson, 3-4. Ibn Khaldūn’s adds to the sixth article of faith, that belief in *Qadar* whether it “be it good or bad.” The first five articles of belief come directly from the Qur’an, cf. Qur’an 2:285. The sixth is mentioned in the Hadith of Gabriel, see: Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York, Paragon House, 1994), xxv.
72 Murata and Chittick, 242.
73 Yusuf, 16.
74 Yusuf, 13.
their faith, since Kalām is a “mental activity by nature,” rather than a form of experiential knowledge gained through ritual piety – what Yusuf calls the “spiritual witnessing of reality.”  

Expressing one’s faith through language and outlining what one believes and why, however, is incredibly important in certain situations where a clearly articulated belief system is needed in response to external or internal challenges.

Scholars trace the historical development of the Islamic theological tradition to two factors, the first of which is the shaping of Kalām by external influences on the growing Muslim community, and the second is the internal fragmentation of the Muslim community following the death of the Prophet Muḥammad. In terms of external influence, Islamic theology emerged in a multi-religious environment, where Muslims often debated the principles of faith with theologians from other traditions, many of whom were Jewish and Christian theologians equipped with centuries of theological debates, and were well-versed in the intricacies of Hellenistic logic and rational debate. The expansion of the Islamic empire in the centuries following the advent of Islam into lands that were primarily composed of Christian, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Manichean, or pagan communities, fostered these kinds of religious debates which required an clear articulation of belief on the part of Muslims. As Muslims came into contact with such communities, they engaged in the kinds of inter-religious debates their new neighbors had partaken in for centuries. Yet, in order for Muslims to have sound discussions with sophisticated Jewish, Christian, and

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75 Yusuf, 13. See also: Murata and Chittick, 244. As Murata and Chittick note, Iman Ghazālī is reported to have said that Kalām can be dangerous in some instances, because it has the ability to weaken the faith (imān) of some Muslims who may become too involved in the rationalizing approach of the mutakallimūn.


Hellenistic theologians, Muslims who were used to arguing the faith through revelation alone, had to incorporate reason and logic into their arguments in order to effectively respond to their opponents. Thus, the addition of reason (‘aql) to revelation (naql) in articulating faith, was central to the emergence of the Islamic theological tradition, since the extent to which reason could be used to affirm revelation eventually became a point of contention in the development of Islamic theology.

Although the external influences certainly influenced the emergence of Islamic theology, internal tensions regarding principles of faith took place as well. Muslims often struggled to explain their beliefs to each other using revelation alone (naql), which itself contained differing views on important issues, and thus easily opened up the floor for debate. As Wolfson and Blankinship explain, the earliest traditions of Kalām included disputes over creedal differences that arose when principles of faith were detailed. The questions these early theologians asked can be summed up into two broad categories, which we will dissect throughout the course of this chapter. These questions these early theologians asked are undoubtedly important, as they played a key role in shaping the later debates between mutakallimūn. The first concern of the early mutakallimūn was related to the first article of faith in Islam, that of belief in God. As Wolfson explains, their debate was over shaping “a right conception of belief in God,” which he identifies as a question of how to approach the topic of anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur’an. The second concern was related to the belief in predestination and free will, or the sixth article of faith, where the mutakallimūn wrestled with “the belief in the power of God over human acts.”

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79 Wolfson, 5.
80 As we will see later when Mu‘tazilite theologians were accused of overemphasizing the role of reason in interpreting revelation.
81 Wolfson, 8; Blankinship, 35.
82 Wolfson, 8.
83 Ibid., 8.
The first article is, of course, more pertinent to our discussion here of how Muslims articulated their belief in God using the doctrine of the Divine Names. However, the debate over free will and predestination became the most pressing question Muslims had to wrestle with following the reshaping of the Muslim community after the Prophet’s death, and is therefore responsible for shaping the budding theological tradition in countless ways. Although we cannot go into detail here on the second concern early theologians faced, Blankinship explains that these two concerns were initially separate, with the first concern predating the second, but the two eventually became “symbiotically related.” Thus, the theological tradition blossomed alongside the monumental changes taking place in the Muslim community, and led to the emergence of distinct groups of mutakallimūn, each expounding clearly argued creedal arguments about the doctrine of the Divine Names.

II. The Pre-Muʿtazilite Kalām: Early Discussions of Tashbīh verses of the Qur’an

In his study of the origins of Kalām, Wolfson identifies three distinct periods through which we can track the development of the Kalām tradition until the introduction of the rationalistic method of the Muʿtazilites, the school of Islamic theology which brought the question of the Divine Names and Attributes to the center of debate. According to Ibn Khaldūn, the pre-Muʿtazilite period of Kalām arose out of a desire to reconcile the contrasting descriptions of God in the Qur’an. In Khaldūn’s narration of the history of the Kalām, the addition of a “few” tashbīh verses in the Qur’an, which indicated God’s similarity to the likeness of human beings,

84 Blankinship, 35.
85 Wolfson, 8. Wolfson divides the period up to the arrival of the Muʿtazilites as 1) pre- Muʿtazilite Kalam, 2) a non-philosophical period of Muʿtazilism and 3) the philosophical period of Muʿtazilism.
86 Wolfson, 8.
87 Wolfson, 8. As Wolfson writes, Ibn Khaldūn’s claim that there are only a “few” tashbīh verses of the Qur’an is questionable, as verses indicating tanzīh are, in Wolfson’s view, “not more numerous than those which imply anthropomorphism.”
gave rise to three views on the anthropomorphic descriptions of God. The first view, which he attributes to the early Muslims, was a preference for the *tanzīh* verses of the Qur'an, which affirmed God's transcendence in every way. Even Muslims who emphasized *tanzīh*, however, could not deny that even the anthropomorphic verses were part of the Qur'an. Their stance, instead, was that these descriptions were the revealed word of God, but they decided it was unnecessary “try to investigate and interpret their meaning.”

The other two groups, however, tried to wrestle with the question of anthropomorphism, and came to two conclusions. The first group’s method of dealing with *tashbīh* depictions of God led them to profess “outright anthropomorphism,” whereas the second group attempted to harmonize both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* descriptions of God through an interpretation of the verses that mention anthropomorphic Attributes. This group reasoned that the verses that “ascribe to God parts of the human body” merely mean that “God is a body unlike bodies,” where names that indicate *tashbīh* Attributes of God only affirm the *tanzīh* nature of the Divine. This paradoxical formula was vehemently rejected by Ibn Khaldūn, who argued that such a statement “is tantamount to saying that God is both like and not like other things,” which for him, is a blatantly contradictory statement. This method of comparing “likeness,” Wolfson argues, is derived from the *fiqh* tradition of *qiyās* (reasoning by analogy) which is then applied to the context of *Kalām*.

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88 Ibid., 8-9.
89 Ibid., 8.
90 Ibid., 10. Wolfson cites this narrative from Ibn Khaldūn’s history of these events in his magnum opus, *Mugaddimah* III, II, 2-4. This position was that of the leading traditionalist perspective of the Ḥanbalites in which verses indicating *tashbīh* are accepted, but asking ‘how’ is prohibited.
91 Ibid., 10.
92 Ibid., 10.
93 As we will see later, this was also rejected by Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā, the founder of the Muʿtazilites, who similarly claimed such paradoxical formulas were illogical. However, the use of a certain paradoxical formula in describing the Attributes of God rose to prominence by the end of the 10th century, and flourished after the 11th century.
94 Ibid., 10. This statement was later adopted as the orthodox Sunni view.
95 Ibid., 12.
Based on this tradition, the pre-Muʿtazilite mutakallimūn decided that tashbīh verses of the Qurʾan did not indicate a likeness in every respect.⁹⁶

In order to illustrate the framework in which questions regarding the right conception of belief in God emerged, we have to begin first by explaining the political situation in the early Muslim community, as this backdrop is essential to understanding where, when, and why certain theological schools developed. The political implications of differences in belief regarding predestination and free will began to manifest after the Prophet had passed away. With the loss of the Prophet, Muslims struggled to name a new leader, and differed in their articulations of the qualities of the new leader, and what the new Muslim community should look like. Most Meccans supported a continuation of the Quraysh’s power, and thus supported Abū Bakr as the next leader of the ummah, whereas many Medinans supported ʿAlī, and argued for a more “inclusive policy” to govern succession, rather than forming a dynastical succession of tribesmen from the Quraysh.⁹⁷ Despite the opposition, the early Muslim community at large supported Abū Bakr, and it seemed as though this issue was put to rest during the first two caliphates of Abū Bakr (r. 632–4), and ʿUmar (r. 634–644) who consolidated their power as leaders, and effectively ruled over a Muslim populace not used to such a strong central authority.⁹⁸ When the third caliph, ʿUthmān (r. 644–56), was assassinated in 656 CE in a revolt that brought ʿAlī (r. 656–61) to power, the entire system established after the death of the Prophet came crashing down, leading to a civil war (fitna).⁹⁹

As Watt narrates, the first theological factor that came into contact with politics originated in the disputes amongst the followers of ʿAlī.¹⁰⁰ These followers were divided into two camps, the

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⁹⁶ Ibid., 14.
⁹⁷ Blankinship, 35.
⁹⁸ Ibid, 36.
⁹⁹ Ibid, 36.
¹⁰⁰ Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, 2-3.
first of which was “deeply attached” to the leadership of ʿAlī such that they believed that a leader of such charisma as ʿAlī was infallible. The second subgroup within the followers of ʿAlī believed that ʿAlī was capable of erring, and in fact, thought he had erred because he failed to express support for the murderers of ʿUthmān. This group believed that ʿUthmān had sinned when he failed to punish a crime, and by sinning as such he had lost his authority as a leader, such that it was not a sin, but an obligation for pious Muslims to kill him. The views of this group are radical, and as such do not represent the entirety of the followers of ʿAlī, but the views of the few members of this camp had a tremendous influence on the early theological debates, especially in terms of the status of sinners. This radical subgroup became known as the Khārijites, or the “Seceders,” because they seceded (kharajū) from ʿAlī when he agreed to an arbitration with Muʿāwiya (602–680 CE) at the Battle of Siffin (657 CE). In reference to the arbitration, Khārijites proclaimed they would agree to “no decision save that of God!” (Lā hukm illā liʾLlah). They subsequently rebelled against ʿAlī’s authority, claiming that in arbitrating he had committed a grave sin which expelled him from their righteous community. The Khārijite claim of accepting no judgement other than God’s has been criticized for relegating the task of deciding what God’s will is to mere human beings.

101 Watt, 3.
102 Ibid., 3.
103 Ibid., 3.
104 Yusuf, 17.
105 Blankinship, 37. Blankinship explains that this slogan was derived from a literal reading of Qur’anic verses (such as 6:57,12:40, and 18:26). In adopting such a slogan, the Khārijites take the text of the Qur’an to be “a manifestation of God’s will,” thereby de-emphasizing human political authority.
106 Watt, 4-6. As Watt notes, the Khārijites were members of nomadic tribes, and their conception of leadership and the status of sinners was based on the goal of attaining paradise. Since the Khārijites, unlike the Shiʿites, were unconvinced of the infallibility of the leader, they thought that the leader was capable of taking an action that would ruin the entire community’s chances of entering paradise. The differences in Khārijite and Shiʿite conceptions of leadership are central to differentiating between these two groups of people who followed ʿAlī. The Shiʿites believed that the decisions could not be left to an “uninspired” community of people, since the “charismatic leader” is the only one capable of leading the group to salvation.
107 In response to the Khārijite slogan, ʿAlī is reported to have said, “A true word, yet they intend falsehood by it. True, [there is] no rulership save that of God, yet they claim there is no command (imara) save that of God while
The early *mutakallimūn* also debated the sixth article of faith, the belief in predestination (*qadar*), or God’s power over human acts. The differences in belief on this article of faith, are also derived from the contrasting picture the Qur’an paints when it states that some human actions are predetermined by God, and also alludes to the freedom humans have to choose whether to believe or disbelieve.\(^{108}\) The debate over free will and predestination became the most pressing question Muslims had to wrestle with following the reshaping of the Muslim community after the Prophet’s death. The issue of succession carried serious political implications, and led to heated disputes between the Muslim community, some of which can still be seen to this day.\(^{109}\) Although these questions were mostly political in origin, they had resounding theological implications.\(^{110}\) Even the more theological questions concerning belief in God manifested in the political sphere with state-sponsored enforcement of doctrine. Therefore, in the discussion that follows, it may be difficult to separate what is political and what is theological, because the two have foiled one another for centuries, and the political enforcement of theological doctrine continually reemerges.

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\(^{108}\) Cf. Qur’an 57:2-3, 6:2, 10:100, 7:29-30, and 63:11 which indicate predestination; for verses that indicate free will, cf. Qur’an 18:28, 20:84. At one extreme of this debate, the Qadarites (“Libertarians”) believed in “a power (qudrah) in human agents that makes them responsible for acts performed,” arguing that free will was necessary in order to justify God’s power to punish human beings and separate God from evil (See: Parviz Morewedge. “Theology,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Edited by John Esposito. Oxford University Press, 2009). As Morewedge explains, the Qadarite view was consequently criticized of stripping God’s power over human actions, and placing the power of human beings above God’s. On the other hand, the Determinist school, the Jabarites, denied human beings any power to choose their actions, reflecting the fatalistic view of the pre-Islamic pagan Arabs (See Treiger, 34). The Jabarite view tended to emphasize the might of God, claiming that human beings have “neither volition nor choice” (Yusuf, 124.)

\(^{109}\) Yusuf, 17.

\(^{110}\) Yusuf, 17.
In light of this entanglement of theology with politics, Watt concludes that “all theological and philosophical ideas have a political or social reference.”

**IV. The Rise of the Muʿtazilites**

The questions the Khārijites raised about the status of sinners, what a true Muslim community should look like, and the addition of reason to revelation did not disappear, and in fact these tensions continued to shape the Muslim conception of the Islamic community. The Khārijite rigid belief that sin negates faith led to the fragility of their political system, with the possibility of any leader being accused of sin, and subsequently disqualified on the grounds of illegitimacy. Later Khārijite trends tried to moderate the early radical views by disallowing immediate revolution against corrupt rulers, and refusing to call sinners apostates in an effort to co-exist peacefully amongst other Muslims who did not share their views. In the city of Baṣra, many of these moderate Khārijite communities existed alongside “pietists,” or groups of Muslims concerned with living their lives in conformation with the Divine will, by carrying out actions that God would find acceptable, and continuing to make efforts to improve their conduct. The most eminent figure within these pietist circles was al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (642–728 CE), a companion of ʿAlī, who criticized the Umayyads, and opposed the violent rebellion of the Khārijites. His political dissent and distaste for the two extremes was based on his view of sin in terms of free will, arguing that sinners were guilty of using predestination as a means to exculpate themselves in the face of corruption, or claims of illegitimacy. Thus, he believed that sin could not be solely

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112 Blankinship, 38.
113 Ibid., 39.
114 Ibid., 39.
115 Ibid., 39.
attributed to God, since human beings are responsible for their actions, and God creates only good, whereas evil, in his view, comes from humans or devils.\footnote{Ibid., 39.}

It was from the traditionalist circle of al-Baṣrī that the group known as the Muʿtazilites emerged during the first part of the 8th century, and the point from which the budding Islamic theological tradition became heavily influenced by the introduction of Hellenistic logic and debate. As Blankinship writes, Muʿtazilism was the “first fully elaborated, quasi-rationalistic defense of the faith,” the implications of which changed the Kalām tradition thereafter\footnote{Ibid., 47.} Early sources narrate that the Muʿtazilites originated during one discussion in the mosque between followers of al-Baṣrī. During the discussion, one of the followers questioned al-Baṣrī on whether a grave sinner could be considered a Muslim, but before he could reply, one of the members of the circle, Wāsil ibn ʿAṭā (699–748 CE) exclaimed that the grave sinner was in an “intermediate position” between belief and disbelief \textit{(al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn)}.\footnote{Yusuf, 19.} When he subsequently left the circle, al-Baṣrī remarked that “he has withdrawn (iʿtazala) from us,” a phrase which coined their namesake as the “withdrawers,” or the Muʿtazilah.\footnote{Watt, 60.} Wāsil’s new group propounded a theology unlike any of the smaller strains in Islamic theology that existed prior. The Muʿtazilites offered five creedal articles which dealt with topics such as the status of sinners, the ‘right conception’ of God, evil, and the possibility of the beatific vision, all of which early Muslim theologians had flirted with, but never delineated in such a rational fashion. Their doctrine had key political motives in being “moderate” as well, in that by appealing to both Sunni and Shiʿite groups through their ‘intermediate position’ on sin, the Abbasid Caliph al-Maʿmūn (786–833 CE) hoped to acquire the
broad support of both sections of the Muslim community.\textsuperscript{120} If the leading Sunnī view was that a grave sinner was still a believer, and the Khārijite view was that they were an apostate, then the Muʿtazilites stance, for al-Maʾmūn, was decidedly the best view to support.\textsuperscript{121}

The first of the five points of Muʿtazilite doctrine, and the one most central to their views on the Divine Names and Attributes, is based on their assertion of Divine Unity (\textit{tawḥīd}) in a unique way. Although most Muslims conceived of \textit{tawḥīd} as attesting to the Oneness of God, the Muʿtazilites took this to mean that nothing could share in the Divine Essence. As we have already explained, the tradition of the ninety-nine “beautiful Names” of God (\textit{asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā}) in Islam is central to Muslim practice and in shaping what Muslims believed about God. However, early Muslim theologians focused on Names that indicate Divine Knowledge, Power, Will, Life, Hearing, Seeing, and Speech, claiming that these Names corresponded to certain Divine Attributes (\textit{sifāt}).\textsuperscript{122} For the Muʿtazilites, saying that these Names indicated Attributes co-eternal with the Divine Essence introduced multiplicity into the Divine Essence (\textit{dhāt}), which must be one.

Thus, the Muʿtazilite denial of the Attributes is related to their conception of Divine Unity (\textit{tawḥīd}), in which they rationally interpreted anthropomorphic verses to maintain the single eternity of God by explaining away the Divine Names which indicate \textit{tashbīh} as mere metaphor. The Muʿtazilites viewed references in the Qurʾan to God’s “hand” to mean “power and bounty,” “face” to mean “existence,” “descent” to mean the “descent of some of God’s signs,” and being seated on the Throne\textsuperscript{123} to mean “dominion.”\textsuperscript{124} However, as Wolfson explains, this form of

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{120} Watt., 62.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Blankinship, 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Watt, 63.
  \item \textsuperscript{123} The question of God sitting on the Throne was prominent in early Islamic theology, since the Qurʾan states: \textit{The All-Merciful sat on the Throne} (20:5). Muslim theologians wrestled with this anthropomorphic description of God, with some arguing it is mere metaphor, and others, mainly traditionalists, claiming that this must be true but human beings are unable to know how God sits on the Throne.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Wolfson, 23.
\end{itemize}
analogy is derived from the Aristotelian sense of analogy in that it reduces terms to mere equations, indicating the extent of influence of Greek rationalism on Muʿtazilite thought. In order to advance their total conception of Divine Unity, the Muʿtazilites broadened the meaning of *tanzīḥ*, in a manner that absorbed any trace of *tashbīḥ*, which for the Sunni orthodoxy, made the Muʿtazilites guilty of “divesting” (*taʿṭil*) God of His attributes. Regardless of opposition, the Muʿtazilites maintained that the eternity of God meant the various Divine Names in the Qurʾan are simply Names of the Divine Essence and not Attributes that exist distinct from the Divine Essence. If the Divine Attributes (*as-ṣifāt*) were separate from the Divine Essence (*adh-dhāt*), then this would be problematic in light of their view of *tawḥīd*.

The Muʿtazilite argument against the existence of independent or hypostatic Attributes in addition to the Divine Essence is based on two principles. The first is that they believed that anything eternal must be a God, and the second is that the unity of God must exclude any plurality within Him, even if those parts are tied to Him from eternity and are inseparable. Wāṣil ibn ʿAtāʾ’s famous statement, “he who posits a thing (*maʾnā*) and attribute (*ṣifāt*) as eternal posits two gods,” illustrates the reasons for the Muʿtazilite denial of Attributes. For the Muʿtazilites, if the Divine Attributes were said to be eternal, then this would lead to multiplicity in the Divine Essence, which fundamentally violates the Islamic principle of Divine unity. They posited that if “the Attributes share with God in eternity” then “they would have a share in divinity (*al-illahiyyah*).” To avoid this, and preserve the Divine Unity that is central to both Islam and their doctrine, the Muʿtazilites denied the reality of the Divine Attributes, and thought of them as mere Names of the

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125 Ibid., 23.
126 Ibid., 26; Blankinship, 48.
127 Wolfson, 133.
128 Wolfson, 19.
129 Ibid., 133.
Divine Essence, because the Essence, in their view, excluded any composition of parts.\textsuperscript{130} To give a practical example, the Muʿtazilite view on an Attribute such as Knowledge, is that God knows by Himself or His Essence, but not because of the existence of any hypostatic Attribute of Knowledge.\textsuperscript{131} In other words, although they believed that God was the Omniscient, He was the Omniscient without any hypostatic Attribute of Knowledge, claiming that God’s Knowledge is identical with Him.\textsuperscript{132} As Wolfson notes, “it is because of this rigid conception of the unity of God that they were called the “partisans of unity” (ashab al-tawḥīd).”\textsuperscript{133}

It was because of their strict belief in an absolute Divine unity, and denial of the eternity of the Divine Attributes, that the Muʿtazilites asserted the createdness of the Qurʾan, a point of debate which had not existed prior to their arrival on the theological stage.\textsuperscript{134} This tension arose due to a specific Attribute of God, that of His Speech, and whether or not this Attribute could be co-eternal with God. Since the Qurʾan was God’s Speech, if his Attributes were said to be eternal, then the Qurʾan would also be eternal, which would then have a share in divinity. Thus, the Muʿtazilites decided that the Qurʾan must be created to avoid any plurality in the Divine Essence. Watt decides that it is unclear as to why the Muʿtazilites would bring up such a topic, and why they insisted on the createdness of the Qurʾan. He offers the idea that what the issue really marked was a desire to reduce the status of the Qurʾan, even as the Word of God (kalām Allāh), for political reasons.\textsuperscript{135} Thus, the political framework surrounding even as technical a debate as this cannot be

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 133.  
\textsuperscript{131} Watt, 64; see also Blankinship, 48.  
\textsuperscript{132} Yusuf, 110; Blankinship, 48.  
\textsuperscript{133} Wolfson, 133.  
\textsuperscript{134} Watt, 64. For Watt, the debate over the Attributes seems to have originated in the discussions about the Qurʾan.  
\textsuperscript{135} Watt, 64. Wolfson offers a different interpretation as to why the Muʿtazilites would want to argue over something like the createdness of the Qurʾan, and links this development to a new way of thinking. For Wolfson, the reason the Muʿtazilites did not believe in an uncreated Qurʾan was because they believed that any eternal Attribute (such as God’s Speech) would rival God in eternity and thus in divinity. Wolfson argues that the belief that ‘eternity equals divinity’ comes from the earlier Judeo-Christian principle in Philo (c. 20 BC – c. 50 CE), who wrote that God “alone is eternal,” such that anything which can said to be eternal must, by definition, be a god. In Wolfson’s view, the
overlooked, since the adoption of Muʿtazilism as state doctrine in 827 CE by the caliph al-Maʾmūn, and the subsequent inquisition (mihna) in 833 CE which forced scholars to conform to the Muʿtazilite teaching of the createdness of the Qurʾan, illustrate the inherent political tensions permeating such discourse.136

When this inquisition was enforced, the foremost Sunni traditionalist, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (780–855) was arrested, and subjected to torture at the hands of the new caliph, al-Muʿtaṣim (796–842), for refusing to revoke his position of the eternity of the Qurʾan.137 These events reflect the intertwined nature of both Muʿtazilite theological positions on key issues, and the political implications of these stances.138 For Blankinship, this is indicative of the loss of the “original theological merits of either position on the Qurʾanic text,” since these debates quickly became overshadowed by the partisan struggles taking place alongside the critical theological reflection.139 Thus, even though Muʿtazilism remained the state doctrine until 851 CE, the brutal enforcement of the doctrine did not convert Sunni scholars to the Muʿtazilite cause, and instead strengthened the emerging opposition movement.140

The second of the five points of the Muʿtazilite doctrine dealt with Divine justice (ʿadl), which is why the Muʿtazilah often referred to themselves as “the people of God’s unity and justice” (ahl al-tawḥīd waʾl-ʿadl).141 Whereas the first principle was an ideological struggled backed by

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Muʿtazilites viewed their tradition through the lens Philo and the Church fathers used, and posited that Allah is an absolute unity, in which any composition of parts, or Attributes, in addition to the Essence would only complicate their vision of tawḥīd. See Wolfson, 133. However, Wolfson’s thesis that the Attribute and Essence debate in Islam has origins in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity has been criticized by Mustafa Cerić (the former Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina) for being a reductionist approach, which overemphasizes parallels across theological traditions in an attempt to attribute a Christian origin to these doctrines. See Mustafa Cerić, Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam: A Study of the Theology of Abu Mansūr Al-Māturīdī. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995. 6-7.

136 Blankinship, 49.
137 Blankinship, 49.
138 Ibid., 49.
139 Ibid., 49.
140 Ibid., 49.
141 Blankinship, 48.
the state, the second principle of the Muʿtazilite teaching is considered to be even more central to their system, due to its resounding implications for Muslims in this world (dunyā) and the next (ākhirah). The Muʿtazilite insistence of Divine justice leads some scholars like Watt to call the Muʿtazilites the “heirs of the Khārijites.” Like the Khārijites, the Muʿtazilites believed that human beings were responsible for their own actions, but their doctrine radically emphasized the free will of human beings at the expense of God’s. By insisting on human responsibility and human freedom, the Muʿtazilah argued that God was constrained to be just, and thus had to reward believers by granting them Paradise, and punish disbelievers with Hell. In the Muʿtazilite conception, since God is just, He is also obligated to endow human beings with free will. If human beings were compelled to carry out divinely ordained actions, this would make God unjust in their view, and unable to carry out ‘the promise and the threat’ of Paradise and Hell. The second principle of Muʿtazilite doctrine thus relates to the third principle, “the promise and the threat” (al-waʿd waʾl-waʿīd) of Paradise and Hell, a concern that follows from earlier Khārijite discussions of the status of sinners, and good and evil. The Muʿtazilites argued that since God declared Himself to be just, He had to “follow His own declaration,” such that instead of being able to merciful to whomsoever He wills, God must punish the sinners, and must reward the righteous. This view promotes the idea that God is somehow bound by His own justice, and must award punishments and rewards in the manner the Muʿtazilites dictate. However, questions were soon raised at the validity of such a belief. The issue of children who passed away before committing any sins rose

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142 Ibid., 48.  
143 Watt, 66.  
144 Watt, 67.  
145 Watt, 67.  
146 Blankinship, 48.  
147 Yusuf, 123.
to the forefront of debate, and was used as an example to criticize Muʿtazilite doctrine.\footnote{148} Would these children be granted Paradise if they had not sinned? If they were granted Paradise could this be considered unjust, since they did not technically “merit Paradise [through] obedience”?\footnote{149} If such children were awarded ‘the promise,’ was this not unfair to others who had to earn Paradise through good deeds?

Due to their overemphasis of the human person in shaping their own destiny, the Muʿtazilite view was branded as “Qadarite” by those who opposed it, since it emphasized human free will by minimizing God’s powers over human acts.\footnote{150} The Muʿtazilite view of God was considered problematic because it reinvented the relationship between human beings and God as one where God is a “kind of cosmic justice machine, rather than a free and conscious being.”\footnote{151} In this picture, the personal deity of Muslims was stripped of His mercy and beholden to the Muʿtazilite view of His justice.\footnote{152} This view of human freedom was also taken to mean that human beings were the creators of their own actions, which for some meant that the Muʿtazilites were attributing acts of creation to a being other than God. The criticism goes that if the Muʿtazilites considered the addition of the Attributes to the Essence an example of tarnishing Divine unity, their vision of Divine Justice fell prey to doing the same, seemingly “imply[ing] partners in His lordship,” and duly compromising the Divine Unity they so stringently wished to uphold.\footnote{153}

\footnote{148} The Muʿtazilite principle of Divine justice is often referred to as the “weak link” in their doctrine. The Muʿtazilites believed that a person’s ultimate destiny results entirely from their actions, but their opponents (such as al-Ashʿarī) quickly countered by asking about children who die. If the child went to Paradise or Hell, both results would be considered unjust in the Muʿtazilite view, since they had not earned such a result through their actions. See Yusuf, 20;110.
\footnote{149} Ibid., 67.
\footnote{150} Ibid., 67. The term “Qadarite” was often used as a pejorative term to mean someone who emphasized human free will and responsibility, see: Watt, 31.
\footnote{151} Blankinship, 50.
\footnote{152} Blankinship 50.
\footnote{153} Gomaa, 11. The final two points of Muʿtazilite doctrine did not become such points of contention as the principles of Divine unity (tawḥīd) and justice (al-ʿadl). The fourth point is one we have already mentioned, of the “Intermediate Position” (al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn), which had primarily political implications, and sought to take a middle position on the issue of the status of sinners. The fifth point of Muʿtazilite doctrine is the command to enjoin right and
V. The Consolidation of Sunnism and the Rise of Ashʿarism

The adoption of Muʿtazilism as state doctrine, and the subsequent inquisition (miḥna) in 833 CE prompted many influential Sunnī traditionalist scholars to actively refute Muʿtazilite thought. During the inquisition, respected scholars of Islam, including “elderly and politically loyal scholars” were publicly humiliated and forced to agree that the Qur’an was indeed created or face persecution. The brave few who refused to comply with the state’s position on the matter were promptly thrown in jail, where some spent the rest of their days. Years after the death of Al-Maʾmūn in 833 CE, one of his successors, caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–861 CE) brought about the end of the fifteen year period of coercion and resistance in 848 CE, an action which left the once powerful Muʿtazilites weak and unable to exercise much influence on the future of Islamic thought, and in turn empowered the opposition movement which the inquisition aimed to brutally oppress. As Josef Van Ess notes, it was ultimately the miḥna, which he describes as producing an “immeasurable” shock, that “cost the Muʿtazilites the sympathy of all its victims, members both of the lower classes and of the middle class.” Ultimately, by allying themselves with the Abbasid court, the Muʿtazilites cut themselves off from the masses, allowing for a visible opposition movement to take their place as the forerunners of Islamic theology.

When reviewing the end of such a traumatic inquisition, we are led to ask: why did caliph al-Mutawakkil decide to end an inquisition which continued for many years after the death of the

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caliph who initiated it? Assessing the political situation of the time may offer some insight as to why al-Mutawakkil decided to end the mihna a year after assuming his role as caliph, especially if we keep in mind the reason why al-Maʾmūn chose to adopt the Muʿtazilite position a few decades earlier. Towards the end of the mihna, the Muʿtazilite position which al-Maʾmūn originally adopted in an attempt to support the intermediate position on key theological issues had ceased to be relevant in a situation where the separation between the Sunnis and Shiʿites views had hardened to the point where no visible compromise could bind these two strains together. In the face of this realization, the government abandoned its desire to adopt the intermediate position by the middle of the ninth century, and sided with the dominant Sunni position, an action which perhaps was as much of a practical decision as al-Maʾmūn’s choice to support the Muʿtazilite position was. With the government backing the orthodox Sunni position, Sunnism flourished and consolidated over the following half century. In response to decreased support for Muʿtazilite doctrine, caliphs such as al-Mutawakkil and his successors adopted a policy of “semi-rationalism” which was conveniently situated in the middle of the spectrum, with strict Muʿtazilī rationalism at one end, and the traditionalism of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal at the other.

Due to these changes in the political climate of the time, the Muʿtazilites had become “a group of academic theologians who had retired to an ivory tower remote from the pressures and tensions of the time.” With the adoption of a Sunni consensus on dogma by a large swathe of the population, it became clear that a position such as that of the Muʿtazilites, which differed

159 Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, 82.
160 Watt, 83.
161 Harith Bin Ramli, “The Predecessors of Ashʿarism: Ibn Kullāb, al-Muḥāṣibī, and al-Qalānisī” in The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology, edited by Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 217. As Harith Bin Ramli explains, the scholars supported by the caliphs usually inclined towards Shāfiʿī fiqh and supported the use of kalām methods in articulating and defending faith.
162 Ibid., 83.
significantly from the orthodox consensus, was unlikely to gain widespread popularity and become influential once again. Even though the Muʿtazilites had lost much of their power by the end of the ninth century, their role in shaping classical and contemporary Islamic theology can hardly be overstated. The Muʿtazilites transformed the nature of Kalām arguments by introducing systematic theology to the Muslim community, since the greatest “doctrinal challenge” to the early Muslim community came from this group of rationalist Muslim theologians whose unorthodox beliefs and methods forced Sunni theologians to resort to similar methods in order to “produce refutations that invariably clarified their own positions within a Sunni framework of theology.”163 Thus, it was ultimately the mīḥna which was essential in drawing out this reaction from the Sunni orthodoxy, by sparking a movement within its ranks that aimed to effectively refute the Muʿtazilites.

Ibn Khaldūn referred to the orthodox reaction to the mīḥna, as a cause for “the people of the Sunnah to rise in defense of the articles of faith by use of intellectual (ʿaqliyyah) proofs in order to repulse the innovations,” which produced seminal figures in early Sunni Kalām such as Ibn Kullāb (d. c. 854 CE), al-Qalānisī,164 and al-Muḥāsibī (c. 781–857 CE).165 The Persian historian of religions, ash-Shahrastānī (1086–1158 CE), called these three mutakallimūn some of the “most powerful in Kalām,” due to their influence in shaping what would become a powerful Sunni opposition.166 Ibn Kullāb, al-Qalānisī, and al-Muḥāsibī became known as the early pioneers of Sunni Kalām who emerged out of the mīḥna, in addition to the other branches of Sunni theology

163 Yusuf, 123.
164 It is unclear as to exactly when al-Qalānisī lived and died, although he is generally assumed to have been born sometime during the second half of the ninth century. Wolfson explains that in Shahrastānī, it seems as though al-Qalānisī lived between 854 CE and 857 CE, since Shahrastānī always lists him in between Ibn Kullāb and al-Muḥāsibī. However, in other sources he is referred to as either a contemporary or follower of al-Ashʿarī (d. 935), which, if true, would suggest that he not be grouped together with the other pioneers of early Sunni Kalām as the predecessors of al-Ashʿarī. Other scholars, such as Horten give varying dates, sometimes offering 870 CE, and other times listing 910 CE. See Wolfson, 34-35.
165 Wolfson, 32.
166 Wolfson, 32.
that rose to prominence during the years of the inquisition. By the middle of the ninth century, as Wolfson explains, Muslim orthodoxy was divided into three groups, each of which responded in various ways to Muʿtazilite doctrine, primarily in terms of their denial of the reality of the Divine Attributes. The first of these groups was the Ḥanbalites, who denied anthropomorphism, but accepted the literal reading of the text, while refusing to discuss the *tashbīh* verses of the Qurʾan.\(^{167}\) The second group Wolfson cites is an “orthodox branch of the Ḥashwiyyah”\(^ {168}\) who refused to discuss verses which indicate *tanzīh* because they took verses that indicate *tashbīh* literally, and promoted anthropomorphic readings of Qurʾanic verses.\(^ {169}\) Wolfson’s third group is what he terms the “Kullābites,” who interpreted the anthropomorphic verses of the Qurʾan using the formula “a body unlike bodies,” which Wolfson believes they inherited from the *fiqh* method of analogy (*qiyyās*).\(^ {170}\) It was the first and the third of these groups that played a significant role in the future of Islamic theology, and still exist to this day; therefore, it is pertinent for us to examine both orthodox responses in detail.

\(^{167}\) Ibid., 35

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 35. The Ḥashwiyyah were condemned by most Muslim theologians for being what Halkin describes as “an ignorant, reactionary lot who grossly exaggerated anthropomorphism and were receptive enough to accept any fantastic belief or superstition.” See: A.S. Halkin. “The Ḥashwiyya.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 54, no. 1 (1934): 2. Nonetheless, the Ḥashwiyyah were part of the collective Sunni orthodoxy of the time which opposed both the methods and conclusions of the Muʿtazilah, but most Sunni scholars avoided any association with the Ḥashwiyyah, because of their crude ways. As Halkin explains, the name Ḥashwiyyah, or the ‘vulgarists,’ is derived from the word *ḥashw*, which roughly translates to “common people,” indicating the way in which this group was likened to the uneducated masses who lacked the refinement necessary to engage in dialectical debates. In her essay, Schöck refers to the Ḥashwiyyah as a “notoriously subliterate and aggressive mob,” who promote a “non-reflective reading of the Qurʾan.” See Cornelia Schöck, ‘Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/745-6) and the ‘Jahmiyya’ and Dirār b. ‘Amr (d. 200/815) in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, edited by Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 56. On the subject of the Ḥashwiyyah and the Muʿtazilites, the seminal Sunni theologian al-Ghazālī said that the former inclined towards “deficiency” and the latter towards “excess,” but considered both equally guilty of being “far from judiciousness and caution.” See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. *Al-Iqtisad ft al-Iʿtiqad (Moderation in Belief)*. Trans. Aladdin M. Yaqub. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013, 3. Thus, for Wolfson to include the Ḥashwiyyah in his spectrum of Sunni orthodoxy is illustrative of the range of views held by the groups numerous groups we categorize within the larger Sunni orthodoxy.

\(^{169}\) Wolfson, 35.

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 35.
Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, the founder of the Ḥanbalite school of Islamic theology, and the leading Sunni traditionalist of his time, was a staunch opponent of the *Kalām* tradition, because he opposed any speculation regarding the tradition. He studied jurisprudence in Baghdad, and was wholly devoted to preserving the way the “pious ancestors” or the *salaf* understood the traditions of the Qur’an and *ḥadīth*.171 Thus, he refused to consider any later developments in thinking about theological issues, and considered them “innovations” to the authentic creed of the early Muslim community. As mentioned above, Ibn Ḥanbal served as the champion of orthodoxy during the years of the *miḥna*, and famously refused to accept the Muʿtazilite doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’an, which led to his imprisonment from 833 to 835 CE, where he was subjected to torture in order to force him to agree with the caliph’s position.172 Nonetheless, he held steadfast to his position, and was eventually released due to widespread opposition. Ibn Ḥanbal insisted that the Qur’an was uncreated, and went one step further to argue that even the oral recitation of the Qur’an was uncreated. This position, however, was not accepted by even some traditionalists, such as al-Bukhārī (810–870 CE) the author of one of the most authoritative *ḥadīth* collections, who deemed that calling the oral recitation of the Qur’an uncreated was excessive.173

Ibn Ḥanbal’s position on theological issues was to engage in a literalist reading of the traditions, since he believed that revelation was the only legitimate authority on matters of belief, and he therefore prohibited the use of reason to dispute revelation, even if rational discourse was used to verify traditionalist positions. Ibn Ḥanbal famously condemned one of the early *mutakallimūn* mentioned above, al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, for using the methods of the *Kalām*, but had no other points of dispute with him on matters of creed.174 Despite their doctrinal similarities,

172 Watt, *Islamic Theology and Philosophy*, 76.
173 Blankinship, 51.
174 Blankinship, 52.
Ibn Ḥanbal led a boycott of al-Muḥāṣibī for his “innovatory” methods, which led to his exile from Baghdad, and the “attendance of only four people at his funeral.” Ibn Ḥanbal’s conservative position on the Essence and Attribute debate was that since the Attributes are mentioned in the Qur’an, the most one can do is affirm their existence, but go no further in explaining their meaning, since only God can know their true meaning. In their defense of literal readings of the text, the Ḥanbalites were often criticized for promoting anthropomorphism through their literal reading of the traditions, but their desire to refute the Muʿtazilite denial of anthropomorphic verses of the Qur’an through metaphorical interpretation (ta‘wil) led them to continually insist on the literal meaning of the text. However, Traditionalists like Ibn Ḥanbal used the formula bi-lā kayf (“without asking how”) to deflect these accusations, and explained that all descriptions of God must be understood ‘amodally,’ or without questioning. For the Ḥanbalites, the beatific vision is a reality, such that “the People of Paradise will see God with the eyes,” rather than a metaphorical “seeing” as others argued. They affirmed that God was the creator of all human acts (unlike the Muʿtazilites who claimed that human beings create their own actions), and created in human beings “the ability to perform each at the time of the act.” They held that faith lies in belief and actions, which can increase and decrease based on the righteousness of one’s works. They also countered the Muʿtazilite exaggeration of Divine justice, and the promotion of a “mechanistic” image of God, by emphasizing the power of the immediately available, personal God that most Muslims envisioned.

175 Bin Ramli, 219.
176 Blankinship, 125. Since the knowledge of the Attributes is only available to God, in the Ḥanbalite perspective, speculation on these matters is pointless.
177 Blankinship, 52.
178 Watt, Islamic Creeds, 31.
179 Blankinship, 53.
180 Ibid., 53. This stance was in direct opposition to other positions on the status of sinners, and whether certain actions can negate faith.
181 Ibid., 52.
The third orthodox response to the *miḥna* shares many of the Traditionalist views, but they used different methods, and were in fact criticized by Sunni Traditionalists like Ibn Ḥanbal for tainting the pure creed by introducing rationalist methods.\(^{182}\) Since the Traditionalist school of Ibn Ḥanbal opposed the *Kalām* tradition, it is the third group of Muslim theologians which Wolfson mentions that is of particular interest to us, since Ashʿarite *Kalām*, which quickly became one of the leading schools of Islamic theology about half a century later, was based on some of the ideas first raised by this group of theologians.\(^{183}\) Ibn Kullāb, the founder of the Kullābite tradition, was a Baṣrān theologian who had acquired a reputation for “overwhelming his intellectual opponents,” which is why he was nicknamed *kullāb* (or “grappling hook”).\(^{184}\) Ibn Kullāb served as a key opponent of the Muʿtazilites, but his theological approach adopted their rationalist methods, such that he applied the classical Baṣrān *Kalām* methodology to “the defense and articulation of doctrinal positions…in line with traditionalist creed.”\(^{185}\) By doing so, Ibn Kullāb was perhaps more able to respond to his Muʿtazilite adversaries than other Sunnī traditionalists.\(^{186}\)

The most influential aspect of Ibn Kullāb’s theology was his position on the relationship between the Divine Attributes and the Divine Essence, which Bin Ramli calls the “Kullābite formula.”\(^{187}\) Ibn Kullāb’s formula stated that the relationship between Attributes and Essence was that the Attributes were “neither identical to Him nor other than Him.”\(^{188}\) This position emerged

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\(^{182}\) Whereas early traditionalists like Ibn Ḥanbal refused to discuss matters of creed, later members of the Ḥanbalite school realized the necessity of defining details of creed dialectically when challenged and were forced to abandon Ibn Ḥanbal’s strict conservatism in favor of *Kalām* methods. See Blankinship, 52.

\(^{183}\) By the end of the tenth century, the Kullābite tradition was already being absorbed into the Ashʿarite tradition.


\(^{185}\) Bin Ramli, The Predecessors of Ashʿarism,” 216.

\(^{186}\) Bin Ramli, 216. Nevertheless, Ibn Kullāb was criticized by his Muʿtazilite opponents for his traditionalist positions on theological issues. One of his opponents, the Muʿtazilite, ʿAbbād b. Sulaymān (d. 864) argued that Ibn Kullāb’s position on the Divine Attributes, particularly God’s speech (which Ibn Kullāb viewed as uncreated) was “suspiciously similar to the Christian idea of the Trinity.”

\(^{187}\) Bin Ramli, 217.

\(^{188}\) Bin Ramli, 217.
out of a desire to adequately explain the Attributes, without simply affirming the reality of the Attributes ‘without asking how’ (bi-lā kayf), as was the position of the Sunni Traditionalists who followed the school of Ibn Ḥanbal.189 Like other Traditionalists, Ibn Kullāb refused to explain away the Qur’anic descriptions of God as mere metaphor or through negative theology as the Muʿtazilites did. Where Ibn Kullāb differed, however, was in his belief that the Sunni position could be affirmed through reasoning in the Başran methods of Kalām.

This shift towards explaining the Sunni Traditionalist perspective using the Başran theological method did not become so influential in the time of Ibn Kullāb, but it eventually gained traction, and paved the way for the emergence of a Sunni theological school to rival that of the Muʿtazilah. As Harith Bin Ramli explains, Ibn Kullāb’s fame most likely was posthumous, since during his lifetime, he did not seem to attract the attention of the miḥna; thus, it is likely that Ibn Kullāb’s method of forging “a synthesis between traditionalist doctrine and Kalām methods probably attracted few followers in his lifetime, only gathering pace in the following generation.”190 This later generation of theologians succeeding Ibn Kullāb was spearheaded by al-Ashʿarī, who propounded the Kullābite formula once again, in a theological era that was much more open to adopting such theological views.

Abū-ʾl Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (874–935 CE) is credited with inheriting the Kullābite tradition of utilizing a rational defense to explain the traditionalist perspective in order to rebut the Muʿtazilites.191 Unlike Ibn Kullāb’s theology, which largely remained unnoticed during his time, the theology of al-Ashʿarī marked a turning point in Islamic theology, since Ashʿarism became the most prominent theological school following the decline of the Muʿtazilites, the influence of

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189 Ibid., 217.
190 Ibid., 217.
191 Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, 82.
which can still be seen to this day.\textsuperscript{192} Al-Ashʿarī was born in Baṣra, the birthplace of Muʿtazilite theology, and studied under the leading Muʿtazilite teacher of the time, Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāṭī (d. 915 CE).\textsuperscript{193} In 912 CE,\textsuperscript{194} al-Ashʿarī broke from his master, and renounced Muʿtazilite teachings in favor of those of the Sunni Traditionalists.\textsuperscript{195} As we saw earlier, Al-Ashʿarī’s schism from the Muʿtazilah reflects a growing dissatisfaction in Baṣra at the time with strict Muʿtazili rationalism and a turn towards Sunni Traditionalist teachings.\textsuperscript{196} Although al-Ashʿarī abandoned the rationalist teachings of the Muʿtazilah for Sunni traditionalism, he disagreed with the other Sunni orthodox groups on the extent to which rationalism should be limited. Whereas some Traditionalists, like Ibn Ḥanbal, “rejected rational speculation” outright, al-Ashʿarī supported “dialectical reasoning on theological questions.”\textsuperscript{197} Yet, even though al-Ashʿarī supported rational reflection, he maintained that revelation was the prime source of theological truths. Therefore, interestingly enough, al-Ashʿarī was opposed by both the Muʿtazilah, who disagreed with his conclusions, and by conservative Sunni Traditionalists who disagreed with his method of rational argumentation.\textsuperscript{198}

Watt calls al-Ashʿarī’s theological position “the support of revelation by reason,” which to some extent indicates his Muʿtazilite background and his own personal Sunni theological leanings.\textsuperscript{199} Yet, as many readers of al-Ashʿarī have noted, it is difficult to see the way in which he introduced a rational method, since his works consist mainly of arguments from Qur’anic verses

\textsuperscript{192} Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Theology, 303.
\textsuperscript{193} Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, 82.
\textsuperscript{194} This date is reported in most sources, but some scholars urge that the year 912 CE in particular as the date of al-Ashʿarī’s conversion be taken with a note of caution, since it is possible that this date was chosen to support the claim that al-Ashʿarī was the mujaddid or the “renewer of religion” of the 4th century. See Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Theology, 306.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 82. In his works, al-Ashʿarī claimed to be a follower of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, the leading Sunni traditionalist of his time.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{198} Thiele, “Emergence and Consolidation of Ashʿarism,” 227.
\textsuperscript{199} Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, 85.
and the Islamic tradition.\textsuperscript{200} Despite their outward appearance, al-Ashʿarī’s works did introduce rational arguments into the Sunni theological tradition.\textsuperscript{201} We can see the traces of this when we break down al-Ashʿarī’s theological positions, and note how he utilizes similar rational methods as the Muʿtazilites, in order to explain the position of the Ḥanbalites.

Unlike the Muʿtazilah, al-Ashʿarī believed that the Qurʾan was uncreated and eternal as the Speech of God. He based his argument on the Qurʾanic verse 16:40, which states, \textit{For to anything which We have willed, We but say “Be!” and it is.} If God has to say “Be!” for something in order for it to come into existence, then a created Qurʾan would have had to been generated by this command. In other words, al-Ashʿarī argued that what the Muʿtazilites were saying was that God would have to say “Be!” to His Speech, which is absurd, and sets off an infinite regress since it implies that “God’s words are themselves generated by His word “Be!”\textsuperscript{202} Since both possibilities defy reason, the Qurʾan, and God’s Speech, must be uncreated and eternal.

For al-Ashʿarī, God’s Speech, like His other Attributes was eternal and distinct from His Essence.\textsuperscript{203} Like Ibn Kullāb, al-Ashʿarī argued that if revelation refers to God’s Power, Knowledge, Life, Will, Hearing, Sight, and Speech this must be taken to mean that these Names indicate real “co-eternal entities that subsist in God.”\textsuperscript{204} As one can imagine, for the Muʿtazilites, such a position was considered tantamount to affirming the existence of eternal beings other than God, which violates the Islamic principle of Divine Oneness (\textit{tawḥīd}). However, al-Ashʿarī, and

\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 85. Indeed, many earlier scholars of Islamic theology understood al-Ashʿarī’s theological stance as simply Ḥanbalite, and thought that his successors, and not al-Ashʿarī himself, should be credited with establishing a Sunni orthodoxy that created a balance between pure traditionalism (the stance of the Ḥanbalites) and pure reason (the stance of the Muʿtazilites). See George Makdisi. “Ashʿarī and the Ashʿarites in Islamic Religious History I.” \textit{Studia Islamica}, no. 17 (1962): 42.

\textsuperscript{201} Watt, 85.


\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 85.

\textsuperscript{204} Thiele, “Emergence and Consolidation of Ashʿarism,” 227.
his predecessor Ibn Kullāb, did not believe that this statement in anyway contradicts tawḥīd, since their position was, as al-Ash‘arī stated in his creed, that the “Names of God are God.” This is also the position of the Traditionalists, but Ibn Kullāb and al-Ash‘arī rejected the Ḥanbalite view of the Attributes, and desired to rationalize the doctrinal claims of the Sunni orthodoxy on this particular point of contention.

Ultimately, the conclusion al-Ash‘arī came to on the question of the Attributes was to explain the Divine Names without simply resorting to metaphorical interpretation (ta‘wil) and being guilty of divesting God’s Attributes (ta‘til), or simply accepting them ‘amodally’ (that is, bi-lā kayf) like the Traditionalists did. Al-Ash‘arī’s response to the Mu‘tazilite rejection of the eternity of the Attributes was to offer the same formula Ibn Kullāb had years earlier, that “God’s eternal attributes were neither identical to, nor other than Him.” The Ash‘arites were questioned about this paradoxical position, since to some extent they were arguing that God’s Attributes are other than God, because they posited that they were not identical with the Divine Essence. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), one of the most prominent Sunni theologians, and an individual who played a central role in the success Ash‘arism has enjoyed to this day, argues that it is a “mistake” to say that the Attributes are other than God, since Muslims frequently refer to both the Divine Attributes and the Divine Essence when invoking God, through invocations such as “God, the Exalted” or the basmalah (“In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful”). Ghazālī sums up the Ash‘arite position when he states,

the name of God does not designate an essence that is assumed to be devoid of the divine attributes, just as it is not said that jurisprudence is other than the jurist…and that the

206 Thiele, 228.
207 Watt. *Islamic Creeds*, 41.
208 Thiele, 227.
carpenter’s hand is other than the carpenter. For any part of what is designated by a name is not other than what is designated by the name.\textsuperscript{210}

In the Ash\textsuperscript{a}r\textsuperscript{i}te view, to say that the carpenter’s hand \textit{is} the carpenter is foolish, as is saying that his hand is other than him, because a part of the carpenter is at once a part of him and also not representative of his essence. Al-Ghaz\textsuperscript{\textregistered}l\textsuperscript{i} further explains this position by stating that, “every part is not other the whole, nor is it the same as the whole…thus it is possible that an attribute is other than the essence in which the attribute subsists.”\textsuperscript{211} This directly refutes the Mu\textsuperscript{t}azil\textsuperscript{l}ite rationalist approach that could not accept the reality of the Divine Attributes, because they believed the Attributes had to be either the same as the Essence or other than it. Although al-Ash\textsuperscript{\textregistered}r\textsuperscript{i}’s paradoxical construction did not coincide with the Mu\textsuperscript{t}azil\textsuperscript{l}ite logic, he countered by saying that God Himself cannot be constrained by the bounds of logic, since He transcends everything, even our conception of Him.\textsuperscript{212}

If the Mu\textsuperscript{t}azil\textsuperscript{l}ites were the defenders of Divine Unity and Justice, al-Ash\textsuperscript{\textregistered}r\textsuperscript{i}’s chief concern was preserving God’s Omnipotence.\textsuperscript{213} Whereas the Mu\textsuperscript{t}azil\textsuperscript{l}ites assigned the power over human acts to human beings themselves, al-Ash\textsuperscript{\textregistered}r\textsuperscript{i} argued that saying so attributes acts of creation to a being other than God, which compromises Divine unity. The compromise al-Ash\textsuperscript{\textregistered}r\textsuperscript{i} came to instead was the doctrine of “acquisition” (\textit{kasb}), which was first offered by another one of his Ba\textsuperscript{s}ran predecessors, \textsuperscript{214}D\textsuperscript{\textregistered}r\textsuperscript{\textregistered}r ibn c\textsuperscript{\textregistered}Amr (c. 730–c.800), who, in an effort to resolve the tensions between determinism and free will, utilized the Qur’anic doctrine of the verb \textit{kasaba} (“to

\textsuperscript{210} al-Ghaz\textsuperscript{\textregistered}l\textsuperscript{i}, \textit{Al-Iqtisad ft al-I\textsuperscript{t}iqad}, 136.
\textsuperscript{211} al-Ghaz\textsuperscript{\textregistered}l\textsuperscript{i}, 136.
\textsuperscript{212} Murata and Chittick, \textit{The Vision of Islam}, 245.
\textsuperscript{213} Watt, \textit{Islamic Philosophy and Theology}, 88.
acquire”\(^{214}\) to argue that human beings “acquire” their actions.\(^{215}\) Ǩirāʿ’s position was that God was ultimately the creator of all human actions, but human beings “acquire” their actions, such that they are endowed with a certain responsibility for them.\(^{216}\)

The doctrine of *kasb* thus allowed a certain degree of free will by relating human beings to their actions, while making sure to attribute to God power over acts of creation, providing a balance between the two extremes of advocating for predestination in order to absolve oneself of responsibility on the one hand, and claiming that human beings are to some degree partners in creation on the other. Like the Traditionalists, al-‘Ash‘arī believed that God’s Omnipotence could not be restricted by claiming that the events of this world are not dependent on Him. Furthermore, al-‘Ash‘arī argued that evil, too, comes from God, and not from human beings or devils like some Baṣrī pietists (like al-Baṣrī) argued. Since God is the Omnipotent (*al-Jabbar*), He must be the creator of all that is evil, but this does not mean that evil is attributed to Him in a way that would make Him an “evildoer.”\(^{217}\)

Al-‘Ash‘arī’s positions are in many ways a compromise between the extreme rationalism of some Mu‘tazilites and the extreme conservative traditionalism of some Ḥanbalites. In an era marked by the introduction of Hellenism, some Muslims embraced Greek thought and “committed themselves entirely to the guidance of reason…and gave no more than lip service to [the traditions],” and others refused the introduction of any new way of thinking into the authentic creeds of the early Muslims.\(^{218}\) The way in which the first of these groups fundamentally changed

\(^{214}\) This verb appears in the Qur’anic verse 2:286: *God task no soul beyond its capacity. It shall have what it has earned and be subjected to what it has perpetrated.* The verb *kasaba* can mean to acquire or to earn, which is taken in context to mean that a soul shall earn what it has merited and will be held responsible for the sins it has committed. See: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom. *The Study Quran.* 1st ed. HarperOne. 2015, 125.

\(^{215}\) Blankinship, 45.

\(^{216}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{217}\) Watt, 88.

\(^{218}\) Watt, 89.
Muslim intellectual life facilitated the rise of theologians committed to explaining Islamic dogma through the Greek intellectual tradition. Figures like Al-Ashʻarī who were able to assimilate both traditions without compromising on Sunni creed, allowed for a distinctive Islamic theology to emerge. With the increasing popularity of the Ashʻarite compromise, the decline of Muʻtazilism, and the adoption of Sunnism by caliphal authorities, Ashʻarism was set to become the leading school of Islamic theology.

Ashʻarism enjoyed incredible success in later centuries, particularly under the patronage of vizier Niżām al-Mulk (1018–1092). However, with the rise of the Seljūq empire and their subsequent takeover of Baghdad in 1055 CE, Ashʻarites faced persecution at the hands of the Sultan’s vizier, al-Kundurī, a Ḥanafite who despised the “heretical” views of both the Ashʻarites, primarily because of their adherence to the Shāfiʻī school of jurisprudence, and the Shiʻites. Under al-Kundurī, the Ashʻarites faced a period of public cursing during Friday communal prayers, and were prohibited from teaching and preaching. With the accession of the Seljūq Sultan, Alp-Arslān, however, a fortunate turn of events occurred for the Ashʻarites, where the new vizier, Niżām al-Mulk, a follower of the Ashʻarite school of theology and the Shāfiʻī school of jurisprudence, conceived of an expansive policy to export Ashʻarite creed across the empire through the establishment of Ashʻarite centers of learning. Niżām al-Mulk reportedly took these steps to curb the influence of the Fāṭimids and Ismaili Shiʻism in the Muslim world, by embedding the Sunni position into the intellectual heritage through the formation of new institutions that would propagate Ashʻarite creed and Shāfiʻite jurisprudence. Thus, towards the end of 1065 CE, a

219 Thiele, 234.
220 Watt, 110.
221 Watt, 110.
222 Ibid., 111.
new college in Baghdad, the Niẓāmiyya, begun construction. A series of similar centers of Ashʿarite theology were founded in other areas of the caliphate, such as Nishapur, a city in the northeast of modern-day Iran. Niẓām al-Mulk skillfully chose some of the most distinguished scholars of each locality for the head professorships at these universities, and it was through Niẓām al-Mulk’s Ashʿarite program that Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī secured his position at the Niẓāmiyya in Baghdad. These developments, along with the influence of al-Ghazālī’s seminal works in Kalām, are to a large part responsible for the establishment of Ashʿarism as the Sunni orthodoxy by the second half of the twelfth century, a status the school has upheld to this day.

VI. Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī and the Muslim East

Ashʿarism is not the only school which consolidated its role in Sunni orthodoxy through a balanced approach to reason and revelation, and some Muslim scholars argue that a different school altogether was truly able to adopt the ‘moderate position’ in both doctrine and practice. The school of Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE) rose to prominence in the Muslim East, especially in Turkestan, and al-Māturīdī is often referred to as the Eastern counterpart to al-Ashʿarī. Historically, much about al-Māturīdī’s life has remained uncertain, since his name has been surprisingly absent from many of the histories of the Kalām offered by historians such as Ibn Khaldūn and Shahristānī, who have informed much of the work on other early mutakallimūn. Nonetheless, this overlooked figure rose eventually became a towering intellectual, whose teachings are taught across the Islamic world to this day. Where he was once ignored in favor of

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223 Ibid., 111.
al-Ashʿarī, by the fourteenth century his works became central to the study of Kalām, and he was frequently called a parallel to al-Ashʿarī, and he now serves as the founder of one of the largest theological schools in Islam.227

The lack of knowledge about al-Māturīdī’s early life is because he was born in Māturīd, a locality in Samarqand which was not a central region of the Islamic world at the time.228 Thus, although he became widely popular in Samarqand and Transoxiana, for a long time his influence was restricted to this corner of the Islamic world.229 Nonetheless, this region was not lacking in terms of intellectual activity, since Samarqand was known for hosting a “great intellectual diversity between the different theological and philosophical groups” that inhabited it.230 Other differences between al-Ashʿarī and al-Māturīdī relate to their adherence to different legal schools. Whereas Ashʿarism is associated with the Shāfīʿī school of jurisprudence, Māturīdīsm is associated with the Ḥanafī legal tradition, founded by Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767 CE). Within the Ḥanafī tradition, al-Māturīdī was known as the “the most knowledgeable person on the views of Abū Ḥanīfah” (aʿraf al-nās bi-madhāhib Abī Ḥanīfah),231 but this does not mean that al-Māturīdī simply followed the teachings of Abū Ḥanīfah and the Ḥanafī theological tradition. Instead, he is known for elaborating and “completely reforming Ḥanafī theology by defending it against the claims of various other theological movements.”232 For Mustafa Cerić, it was al-Māturīdī’s ability to find middle ground in the reason and dogma debate that led to his status as “one of the most original orthodox thinkers of the early period” and “the most genuine founder of Islamic synthetic theology.”233

227 Watt, 313.
228 Rudolph, Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand, 2.
229 Rudolph, 2.
231 Rudolph, 5.
One of the most important events that gave rise to the transformation of the Ḥanafī theological tradition by al-Māturīdī was the arrival of his main opponent, the famous Muʿtazilī thinker Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī al-Kaʿbī (d. 931) in northeastern Iran.\(^{234}\) Al-Kaʿbī was one of the leading Muʿtazilite theologians of his time, and even al-Māturīdī acknowledged, somewhat begrudgingly, that the Muʿtazilites considered al-Kaʿbī “the Imam of world’s inhabitants” (imām ahl al-arḍ).\(^{235}\) It was the confrontation with al-Kaʿbī that led al-Māturīdī to devote his efforts to disputing the Baghdad school of Muʿtazilite doctrine, rather than the Baṣran school al-Ashʿarī was engaged with.\(^{236}\) For Rudolph, al-Māturīdī’s debates with al-Kaʿbī allowed him to “possess the knowledge base and discursive capacity of an Iraqi mutakallim,” which, coupled with his interest in keeping up with the latest developments in Kalām rather than replicating previous Kalām debates, allowed him to adopt a revered status as a true theologian of the times.\(^{237}\)

Al-Māturīdī’s theological position can be rightly called a balance between both Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism, a quality which becomes evident in his views on key theological issues shared by Muslim intellectuals engaged in Kalām. If the Muʿtazilah argued that intellect was enough to know God, and the al-Ashʿarites argued that although there were clear signs for the existence of God, human beings were always in need of the initial “stimulus of revelation to even become conscious of the pressing question of the existence of a Creator,” al-Māturīdī argued that both revelation and “rational observation of the creation” brought about knowledge of God.\(^{238}\) In arguing for a rational approach in interpreting revelation, al-Māturīdī’s position does not reflect a simple concession to aspects of Muʿtazilī doctrine. Al-Māturīdī’s epistemological position is

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\(^{235}\) Rudolph, 158. See also Rudolph, “Ḥanafī Theological Tradition and Māturīdīsm,” 287.


\(^{237}\) Ibid., 160.

\(^{238}\) Ibid., 265.
actually one grounded in the Ḥanafī tradition, which has generally upheld a rationalist position on the issue of knowing God, since Abu Ḥanīfah argued that belief in God was required even without “recourse to revelation.” The Ḥanafites held that no person could justify their disbelief by citing a lack of knowledge about revelation, since other proofs (ḥujaj) for God’s existence are visible to us, and the blessing of intellect allows us to recognize these proofs. Furthermore, al-Māturīdī argues that just as we are able to know God through rational means, human beings are able distinguish between what is good and what is bad solely by means of intellect, even without access to revelation. Al-Māturīdī shares this conviction with his Ḥanafī forefather, Abū Ḥanīfah, but this belief was entirely foreign to someone like al-Ashʿarī or other Sunni Traditionalists, who upheld the primacy of revelation in epistemological matters.

To the question of the Divine Attributes, al-Māturīdī devotes an entire section in his major work on the Kalām, the Kitāb al-Tawḥīd. Based on this work, we can see that for al-Māturīdī, the seven most important characteristics of God are His oneness, His complete otherness, His freedom (ikhtiyār), power, will, knowledge, and creation or “existentiation” (takwīn). The approach al-Māturīdī took to the final of these Attributes, that of “existentiation” (tawkīn) is a distinctive feature of Māturīdite and Ḥanafite theology that is not shared by any other school of Islamic theology. These schools understood the Divine Attribute of creation to be an eternal active Attribute, since they believed God was known as the Creator before he needed to create, and was in fact qualified by all of His Attributes eternally. Whereas the Ashʿarites distinguished from

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239 Ibid., 265.  
240 Ibid., 266.  
242 Rudolph, “Ḥanafī Theological Tradition and Māturīdīsm,” 288. It is necessary to mention that the Ḥanafī school differed from other Sunni schools of theology and jurisprudence in that they continually stressed the importance of rational speculation.  
243 Rudolph, 289.  
244 Ibid., 289.  
245 Ibid., 288.
the essential and active Attributes, only the former of which they held to be eternal, the Ḥanafites believed that all of God’s Attributes, that is all of the ways in which God refers to Himself in the Qur’an, and His actions, are eternal and uncreated. Official Ḥanafite creeds such as that of al-Hakīm al-Samarqandī (d. c. 953 CE) explain that the Ḥanafite view on God’s Attribute of Creation is that,

God was always a Creator (lam yazal khāliqan) before He created the creation. His state (ḥāl) does not change. Whoever claims that He was not a creator before the creator, but instead became (ṣāra) a creator afterward (ba’d), speaks like someone who claims that God (Allāh) was not a god (ilāh) and then became God.²⁴⁷

Al-Māturīdī’s contribution to the debate over the Divine Attributes was a clearly articulated three point dogma, which stated that: 1) God has Attributes which are distinct entities not identical to the Divine Essence, 2) the Divine Attributes are distinctive from human attributes of the same name, but they cannot be stripped of meaning through metaphorical interpretations, and 3) the Attributes are “beginningless and eternal, whether they describe God’s essence or His actions.”²⁴⁸

For al-Māturīdī, the Muʿtazilite position that an Attribute, such as that of God’s Speech is created violates the principle that nothing eternal exists but God, since saying so brings God down “into the sphere of temporality and change.”²⁴⁹ In reference to the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur’an, al-Māturīdī resorts to a central Sunni position, that of bi-lā kayf or ‘without asking how.’ In regard to the beatific vision, al-Māturīdī argued that since theophany was the most beautiful reward that God has promised to the people of true faith, the vision of God must be a reality, but we must accept this amodally.²⁵⁰ On the subject of God sitting on the Throne, al-Māturīdī decides that even though we are certain that God is not in any location or bound by spatial

²⁴⁶ Rudolph, Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samargand, 281.
²⁴⁷ Ibid., 281-282.
²⁴⁸ Ibid., 282.
²⁴⁹ Ibid., 284.
²⁵⁰ Ibid., 292.
limit or scope, “one ought to still believe the Qur’an, in that He sits on the throne in some incomprehensible way.”

In the view of al-Māturīdī, this can be rationally understood to some extent since our intellect tells us that God cannot be confined to any location, since He created everything, but existed before them, and thus will always remain independent of any place. However, since the Qur’an says the Creator sits on the Throne, we must accept this “unshakable fact, of which we can know nothing more precisely, because everything divine is beyond human comprehension.”

Where the Muʿtazilites emphasized Divine unity and justice, and the Ashʿarites stressed Divine Omnipotence and Freedom, the central concept in al-Māturīdī’s theology was Divine Wisdom. Al-Māturīdī agreed with the Ashʿarites that God always acts in complete freedom, but he further argued that God always acts in wisdom as well, since He is the “all-knowing and wise in the absolute sense.” For al-Māturīdī, God’s Wisdom (ḥikmah) manifests by way of grace (fadl) and justice (ʿadl), which allows him to explain the way in which created things ultimately “receive their due” because all of God’s actions are wise. On the subject of human actions, and the debate between predestination and free will, al-Māturīdī argued once again for a balance between the extreme views of the Qadarites and the Jabarites, where human beings could be granted free will, but not at the expense of God’s power over acts of creation. Al-Māturīdī decides that God creates (khalq) actions and human beings do them (fīʿl), a stance which endows human

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251 Ibid., 295.
252 Ibid., 296.
253 Ibid., 296.
254 Ibid., 298.
255 Ibid., 298.
256 Ibid., 298.
beings with responsibility over their actions because of the intellect, which allows human beings to distinguish between right and wrong actions.\textsuperscript{257}

It was ultimately al-Māturīdī’s ability to form a unique synthesis between the different strains of Islamic thought that led him to become one of the leading representatives of the Sunni \textit{Kalām} to this day, and the popularity of his works allowed him to formally enter the region of Transoxiana in the history of the \textit{Kalām}. His work utilized methods unlike any other theologian of his times, since he avidly sought to prove what he was taught by using various methods of inquiry to come to his positions.\textsuperscript{258} Even if he taught the same doctrines as his Ḥanafite predecessors on a number of issues, his new method allowed him to explore the various pathways of seeking knowledge about theological issues, and address issues that no other Ḥanafite scholar before him had thought of. He was thus able to verify the positions of other schools on new theological matters, to see if they could be compatible with the teachings of his own school.\textsuperscript{259} Al-Māturīdī’s ability to find a balance between different theological concepts is clear in his concept of Divine wisdom, which his biographers understand as the very “key to a theology of synthesis.”\textsuperscript{260} In his view of God, al-Māturīdī was able to achieve a balance between the Traditionalist depiction of God as “sovereign and unrestricted,” and the rationalist understanding of a just God held by the Muʿtazilites. Al-Māturīdī upheld Divine omnipotence and freedom, but also allowed God to act in “a comprehensible manner” because of the underlying wisdom behind every one of His actions.\textsuperscript{261}

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 305.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 314.
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 314.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., 317.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 316-317.
VII. Relating Attribute and Essence: Conclusions on the Theological Views of the Divine Names

Rather than simply using the methods of *Kalām* to attack and refute the conclusions of the other side, al-Māturīdī used the methods of *Kalām* to find a doctrinal balance, what Rudolph terms “a meeting point between the religious ideas of the Traditionalists and a type of thinking characterized by rationality.”262 Thus, even though al-Ashʿarī and al-Māturīdī fall under the same rubric of Sunni *Kalām*, the way in which they interpreted *Kalām* is different in each case. As a former Muʿtazilite, al-Ashʿarī was trained in their rational form of argumentation, but he made use of these methods to essentially explain Sunni Traditionalism.263 Like his contemporaries, al-Māturīdī was undoubtedly engaged in the methods of *Kalām* to refute the ideas of his intellectual opponents, but he was able to go beyond the rivalries between both groups and adopt a middle position in *doctrine* using *Kalām* methods.

Throughout the course of this chapter, we have seen how the theological middle position always manages to rise to prominence. At first, even Muʿtazilism, which some scholars have tried to portray as rationalist to the point of dissociation with the Islamic tradition itself, considered itself a balance between the Khārijite and Traditionalist Sunni position on sin and offered its “intermediate position” on the issue, where the grave sinner was neither a believer or an apostate. The rise of Ashʿarism allowed for the emergence of a theological school which utilized the methods of the Muʿtazilah to propound Sunni Traditionalist teachings, and served as middle ground between the rationalists who upheld reason and the Traditionalists who upheld revelation, and only revelation as the source of theological truths. Al-Māturīdī’s school took the middle

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262 Ibid., 319.
263 Ibid., 219.
position between the proposed middle positions, the Muʿtazilites and the Ashʿarites, and used their shared methods to find a doctrinal balance between both dogma and reason.

On the issue of anthropomorphic descriptions of God, theologians wrestled with contrasting views of God as either an absolute transcendence, which promotes an image of an impersonal God, or relied heavily on tashbīh depictions to the point of arguing for a corporeal God with a body, hands, and feet. To curb both extremes, Sunni Traditionalists came to the compromise that these descriptions must be taken as a reality and accepted as God’s word, but understood without asking how (bi-lā kayf). Rationalistic theologians could not accommodate the reality of such descriptions and resorted to metaphorical interpretation (taʾwil) to explain away the tashbīh verses which did not coincide with their vision of Divine transcendence. On the famous Kalām subject of the relationship of the Divine Attributes to the Divine Essence, and the eternality of such Attributes, theologians took various approaches which corresponded to their view of Divine Unity. As we saw earlier, the Muʿtazilites could not accept the reality of any co-eternal Attributes because this was contradictory to their view of Divine unity where God alone was eternal. The Kullābites, Ashʿarites, and other Sunni Traditionalists believed that the Attributes must be co-eternal with the Essence but not identical with it, arguing this proof from one Attribute in particular, that of God’s Speech, which must be eternal since the Qurʾan is eternal and uncreated.

The Muʿtazilites distinguished between active and essential Attributes (ṣifāt al-fiʿl and ṣifāt adh-dhat), or those that refer to God’s acts and those that refer to the Essence, but absolved all Divine Attributes in the Essence, declaring that Attributes like God’s Knowledge are identical with the Essence.264 Al-Ashʿarī and al-Māturīdī accepted this distinction but argued differently on the eternality of Attributes. The Ashʿarites held that the active Attributes are not eternal “at least by

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264 Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, 316.
implication” since “God could not be ‘creating’ (khāliq) or ‘providing’ (rāziq) until creatures exist.” The Māturīdite work *Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-akbar* criticized this Ashʿarite doctrine for implying a difference between the Divine Essence and Attributes and suggesting that some Attributes are other than it, and for describing a change in his Attributes, which implies a change in God. This is why al-Māturīdī and his followers claimed all of God’s Attributes to be eternal. All of these schools accepted that God is eternal, but the question of additional eternal Attributes became a point of contention, since, for some, an eternal Attribute implies a multiplicity of eternals. To some extent, all argued that the Attributes are inevitably linked to God’s Essence, but accurately defining this relationship was difficult, and led to a variety of opinions.

In our survey of the development of the various schools of theology, different schools also emphasized different Attributes of God when compiling their doctrines. For the Muʿtazilites, it was ultimately God’s unity and His justice which were most central to their doctrine, the Ashʿarites stressed God’s omnipotence and freedom, and the Māturīdites saw God’s wisdom as the best means of understanding core theological questions. These varying opinions reflect a difference in how Muslim theologians conceived of God. Was God simply beyond all comprehension, or was it absolutely necessary for human beings to understand His actions? Is God free to act as He wills, or is he bound by His Attribute of justice? On the question of why certain theological schools inclined towards an emphasis on certain Attributes rather than others, I believe these differences reflect the sheer diversity of theological positions which arose in the shaping of the Islamic tradition, and the varying contexts in which theologians found themselves. Although a number of different schools have been examined in this chapter, there are endless positions that other strains in Islamic theology took, which reflect a multiplicity of interpretations on the tradition.

265 Watt, 316.
266 Ibid., 316.
The technicality of the Essence and Attribute debate in the Islamic theological tradition reflects a desire to understand what the numerous Names and descriptions used in the Qur’an to describe God actually mean. Do the Qur’anic mentions of God’s “hands” or God’s “throne” indicate that there is a certain anthropomorphism to the literal reading of the text, and if so, how do we understand these in light of other Qur’anic descriptions of God which stress his dissimilarity from all of creation? These questions stumped theologians who worked to take these many Names, and contrasting depictions and reconcile them with the Islamic principle of God’s oneness. The different approaches taken are incredibly diverse, but reflect a pious effort to understand both the revelation, and the nature of the source of this revelation as He describes Himself.
CHAPTER 2
THE WAY OF REASON

As we discussed previously, Muslim theologians often utilized different tools to expound their views on various points of belief. The earliest mutakallimūn utilized methods derived from the science of fiqh such as qiyās (reasoning through analogy), whereas later theologians, inspired by Hellenistic logic and debate used rational discourse to either verify Traditionalist positions (as the Ash’arites and Māturīdites did), or propose ‘unorthodox’ interpretations of revelation based on their rationalist perspective (like the Mu’tazilites). The prevailing schools of Sunnī Islamic theology in the formative period, which still wield influence to this day, were those that took the middle position on this issue, and were able to argue for Traditionalist positions using the rationalistic means first introduced by Muslim theologians who were influenced by the Greek philosophical tradition. Thus, in any overview of the Islamic theological tradition, it is impossible to ignore the impact of Greek philosophy on the early mutakallimūn, since the threat posed by the rationalistic Muʿtazilites was what prompted Sunnī Traditionalist theologians to work to comprehend and utilize the former’s methods. In order to better understand Kalām, we must turn our attention toward another major Islamic intellectual tradition, that of philosophy or falsafah, which blossomed alongside the Islamic theological tradition. Islamic philosophy both influenced the theological tradition, and was in many ways influenced by it.

I. Falsafah: Philosophy or Theosophy?

Ziai argues that like Kalām, Islamic philosophy grew out of a desire to defend Islamic revelation against the arguments posed by the various religious and ethnic groups which existed
within the lands of the Islamic caliphate. These divergent groups engaged with Muslims in free
debate about theological issues such as God, creation, causality, free will and predestination,
debates which they had centuries of prior experience in, and skillfully argued for using Hellenistic
logic and rational debate. Certain members of the Muslim community thus turned to philosophy
in order to uphold tenets of Islamic faith, having seen the potential in arguing for Islam through a
rationalistic perspective, as their opponents did. These early Muslim philosophers argued that
philosophical reasoning was a better tool for such debates than qiyas, which had worked in
consolidating hadīth and Islamic law, but which they found was a weak tool to utilize in debates
about the ultimate questions they and their adversaries were wrestling with. The formative
period of Islamic philosophy contains other similarities to Kalām in that both major intellectual
schools engaged with the same questions, which were first posited by Kalām scholars. Thus,
even though the philosophers took care to distinguish philosophy from theology, the problems that
formed the nucleus of philosophical activity were first brought to attention by the early theological
debates. Yet, even though philosophy and theology engaged with the same set of ultimate
questions, unlike Kalām, philosophy enjoyed a marginal status in Islamic scholastic activity, and
was opposed by many Traditionalist jurists for its overtly rationalistic tendencies.

In the Arab world, the tradition of Islamic philosophy as an independent intellectual
perspective was overtaken by kalām and doctrinal Sufism (ma’rifah) in areas west of Iraq after the
thirteenth century, such that the study of philosophy became marginalized in Islamic centers of

267 Hossein Ziai. “Islamic Philosophy (falsafa)” in The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology, edited
269 Ziai, “Islamic Philosophy (falsafa),” 59.
270 Ziai, 55.
271 Ziai, 56.
272 Ibid., 56.
learning. Nevertheless, in eastern Islamic lands such as Persia, and the general region from Iraq to India, the study of Islamic philosophy remained vibrant, and the discipline continued for centuries through oral transmission. As Nasr notes, in traditional Islamic centers of learning such as Qom, Iran, Islamic philosophy is considered even more significant than jurisprudence, and notably overshadows kalām in such intellectual circles. Thus, although some Western narratives claim that philosophy died out entirely in Islamic lands with Ibn Rushd (1126 – 1198 CE), these narratives fails to take into account the subsequent centuries of Islamic philosophy after him.

The Islamic tradition of philosophy, or falsafah, is based on Arabic translations of major works in the Greco-Alexandrian philosophical heritage which were made available to Muslims in the 9th century. However, this is not to say that the Islamic philosophical tradition is simply Greek philosophy in Arabic; instead, Muslim philosophers integrated various aspects of the Greek tradition into the Islamic perspective, which led to the formation of distinct philosophical schools. The term falsafah itself is an Arabized version of the Greek term philosōphia, which Ziai defines as a “rational process aimed at knowing the nature of things and expressing the result in a systematic way.” To describe this tradition of systematic philosophy, the term hikmah, or “wisdom,” has also been used, and it was over the term hikmah that great debates took place, since Sufis, philosophers, and theologians alike claimed that each of their respective discipline was the

276 Nasr, 12. Such narratives prevailed in Western intellectual histories mainly because the influence of Islamic philosophy on the West had diminished after Ibn Rushd.
277 Nasr. "Philosophy."
278 Nasr, “Philosophy.”
279 Ziai, 57.
true science of *ḥikmah*. The Islamic philosophers argued that *falsafah* was synonymous to the Qur’anic term *ḥikmah* since the source of all wisdom was divine. Thus, some scholars like Corbin and Nasr prefer the term “thesosophy” claiming it explains the more esoteric and mystical underpinnings of the holistic Islamic philosophical systems which sought to combine various Islamic intellectual traditions. As Nasr explains, although modern philosophy is often considered antithetical to religion, most Islamic philosophers were devout Muslims who firmly believed in the “possibility of gaining certitude intellectually” and argued that their rational approach to understanding religion allowed them to gain a heightened understanding of God and creation. For Ziai, especially after Ibn Sīnā (980 – 1037 CE), who is often called the greatest Islamic philosopher, the history of Islamic philosophy can be thought of as a “quest to refine and construct holistic philosophical systems” which also “uphold the deduced validity of revealed truths” illustrating the extent to which the paths of reason and revelation are intertwined in Islamic thought.

**II. Early Islamic Philosophy**

Islamic philosophy, much like Islamic theology, was often sponsored by the state, and it was largely due to the support of the Abbasids that large-scale translations of certain Greek texts into Arabic were made possible. Al-Ma’mūn (813 – 833 CE), the very same caliph who enacted the *miḥna*, is credited with organizing the work of translation on a much larger scale by setting up

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280 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Meaning and Concept of Philosophy in Islam” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 23. This debate stems from Hadith such as “The acquisition of *ḥikma* is incumbent upon you and the good resides in *ḥikma*.” Scholars from each discipline thus argued that the wisdom found in these schools was the one the prophetic tradition referred to.


284 Ziai, 57.
institutions such as the House of Wisdom (*bayt al-hikma*) in Baghdad, where philosophical works were translated, copied, and edited, all the while being stored in an ever-growing library.\textsuperscript{285} Other developments that took place under the Abbasids included developments in translation such as using collated manuscripts as the basis for translation, and the beginning of translations from the original Greek, rather than Syriac.\textsuperscript{286} Most of the Greek works that were translated during this time had to do with science and philosophy, since the caliphs were interested in learning more about Greek medical science to help protect their own health and the health of their subjects. This is why many early Muslim philosophers were also physicians, who contributed greatly to the field of medicine. Astrological and astronomical works were also given precedence in translation, but the true turning point was when some members of the religious establishment turned towards philosophy and its logical methods to use in their discussions with people of other religions.\textsuperscript{287} Such scholars felt the need to bring the philosophical conclusions of the Greek texts in line with Islamic doctrines. We can see the culmination of such motives in the works of Abū-Yusuf Ya’qūb ibn-Is’hāq Al-Kindī (c. 800–866 CE), one of the first Islamic philosophers and the only one of Arab descent.\textsuperscript{288} Al-Kindī’s works are described as “Greek philosophy for Muslims” since he took upon himself to try and synthesize Greek philosophy and Islamic thought.\textsuperscript{289} Al-Kindī notably shared the views of the Mu’tazilites on many theological issues, since he lived around the time of their rise to prominence during the caliphate of Al-Mu’taṣim (833 –842 CE), and he was considered closer to Islamic theological thought than other early Muslim philosophers.\textsuperscript{290}

\textsuperscript{286} Watt, *Islamic Theology and Philosophy*, 41.
\textsuperscript{287} Watt, 44.
\textsuperscript{288} Watt, 45.
\textsuperscript{289} Watt, 45.
\textsuperscript{290} Watt, 46.
For Al-Kindī, the Neoplatonic doctrine of God was similar to the type of monotheism outlined in the Qur’an, and the truths revealed to prophets were equivalent to metaphysical knowledge, such that there was no contradiction between revelation and philosophy.291 Al-Kindī argued that God is “the first Truth who is the cause of all truth” and the cause of all beings, arguing for a “unified cause of unity for all things” which must transcend any kind of predication.292 Based on his ideas of God alone being eternal, and denying God’s Attributes, al-Kindī’s positions seem to be similar to the Mu’tazila.293 Also like the Mu’tazila, al-Kindī argues that God cannot be known through the intellect, and that we can only describe God using negative theology, or in other words describe what He is not.294 For al-Kindī, God’s Unity and the proof of His Divinity is upheld in that one can gain intellectual certainty of God, but the intellect is only able to describe God solely in negative terms.295 Thus, the question of the Divine Attributes serves as a chief point of contact between Mu’tazilite kalām and al-Kindī’s philosophy since both chose to assert God’s absolute oneness through negative theology.296

III. The Avicennian Turn and the Avicennian Tradition

The central figure in Islamic philosophy is Ibn Sinā, also known as Avicenna (980–1037 CE), and many scholars assert that we should conceive of the tradition of Islamic philosophy as the tradition that builds up to and stems from his works.297 Until Avicenna, the traditions of falsafah and Kalām remained largely separate schools of thought, even though each was greatly influenced

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291 Watt, 46.
by the other. However after Avicenna, these two distinct schools merged and a post-Avicennan Kalām emerged which was a synthesis of Avicenna’s metaphysics and Islamic doctrine. The philosophizing of Sunni kalām by Avicenna has been called the “Avicennian Turn,” and is notably one of the most important developments in Islamic intellectual history, since questions of morality and free will which were central to the formative period of Kalām were replaced by the metaphysical and ontological questions that Avicenna raised. Wisnovsky argues that the early elements of this turn appeared even in Māturīdī Kitab al-Tawḥīd, which reveals that by Māturīdī’s time, earlier issues dealt with by Kalām had already started to be replaced by more philosophical concerns. Thus, the Kalām discourse that emerged from the Avicennian Turn was centered on metaphysical and ontological matters such as the nature of being and existence (wujūd) and the relationship between an entity and essence (dhāt) and its attributes (sifāt).

The Avicennian Turn also radically configured Islamic discourse on the question of eternality, which was previously linked to createdness. As we saw with the Muʿtazilah, rationalist theologians believed that anything which can be said to be created cannot be eternal, which is why groups like the Muʿtazilah argued that the Qur’an was uncreated, because if God’s Speech and His other Attributes were eternal then they would share in divinity. However, after Ibn Sīnā, eternality meant that something was necessary, or that must exist, whereas a created thing or something that is caused is only conceived of as “possible” (since it can cease to exist). Thus the influence of

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302 Spannaus, 588.
303 Spannaus, 588.
Avicenna extends even to Kalām and arguably other strands of Islamic thought, such as Sufism, as we will come to see in chapter three.

The impact of the Avicennian Turn in Kalām and the subsequent Avicennian tradition that emerged from it can be seen in later Islamic philosophy and theology. Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence, and the difference he outlines between necessary existence and possible existence opened up new concerns for subsequent mutakallimūn. Such post-Avicennian mutakallimūn agreed that Avicenna’s analysis of God as the Necessary Existence in itself served as a powerful proof for God’s existence, but they understood this to be indicative of God’s transcendence, not the causal relationship between God and the world. One of the most important questions they dealt with was whether or not God’s existence could be understood as an Attribute. They pondered whether God’s existence could be viewed of as something additional to His Self or Essence, like they understood God’s other Attributes of knowledge (‘ilm), power (qudrah), and life (ḥayāt). Post-Avicennian mutakallimūn argued that necessity of existence could be considered a meta-attribute, instead of the Attribute of eternity which was conceived of as the most important meta-attribute previously, but which quickly led to complications since a multiplicity of eternal things infringed upon Divine Oneness. For these later theologians, God’s Self and Attributes are necessary of existence, but the Attributes were not necessary of existence in themselves, since attributes are not “selves” but only “predicates of selves.” They concluded that God’s Attributes are necessary of existence in God’s Self. Because of this synthesis of

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305 Ibid., 133.
306 Wisnovsky, 128.
307 Wisnovsky, 130.
308 Ibid., 130.
309 Ibid., 130.
Muslim doctrine and Avicennian metaphysics, Wisnovsky calls the *mutakallimūn* “the torch bearers of the Avicennian tradition in Islamic intellectual history.”

Ibn Sīnā was born in a village called Afshana, near the city of Bukhara in modern-day Uzbekistan, where he grew up studying Arabic grammar and literature, theology, and the Qur’an, disciplines in which he demonstrated tremendous intellectual promise. Avicenna’s religious education was completed by the time he was ten, and he was then tutored in philosophy and logic by a traveling scholar named Nātilī, who quickly realized that his student exceeded even himself in his understanding of ancient texts. Avicenna continued to study the Greek sciences on his own, after his master left in pursuit of another pupil who was in greater need of his guidance. In his course of self-study, he first examined works on mathematics, medicine, and physics, and then studied logic, natural philosophy, and metaphysics. He finished his course of self-education in eight years, and wrote that by the time he was eighteen he had completed his study of all of these sciences, such that he learned nothing new afterwards, but his understanding of the texts matured.

Nasr writes that Ibn Sīnā is ultimately a “philosopher of Being,” because his conception of knowledge involves “the analogy of the beings of particular things with Being itself which stands above and anterior to the Universe.” Ibn Sīnā essentially conceives of Being as the inner reality of each thing, and the source of goodness, beauty, and the cause of perception. Central to his ‘philosophy of Being’ is the separation between essence (*māhiyya*) and existence (*wujūd*) on the

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310 Ibid., 133.
311 Wisnovsky, 94.
312 Wisnovsky, 95.
313 Ibid., 95.
314 Ibid., 96.
one hand, and the tripartite division between the Necessary (wājib), contingent (mumkin), and impossible (mumtani’) beings on the other.\(^{317}\) In his ontological scheme, only in God or the Necessary Being (wājib al-wujūd) can essence and existence be united, since the Necessary Being is the source of all existence.\(^{318}\) For Ibn Sīnā the notion of essence answers the question ‘what is it?’\(^{319}\), because if one knows the essence of something, one knows the attributes of that thing as well.\(^{320}\) Avicenna addresses the question of Divine Attributes and Essence namely through this ontological framework. God, as the Necessary Being exists “due-to-Itself” such that He has no essence or quiddity (māhiyya) other than His existence (wujūd).\(^{321}\) In this sense, like the Mu’tazilah before him, Avicenna’s ontology undermines the personal character of God, and the various ways in which the Divine is experienced by believers, through an adherence to a purely intellectual understanding of God.\(^{322}\) This radical reduction of the God of Muslims to simply the “Necessary Existent” was preposterous for al-Ghazālī. As Wisnovsky explains, al-Ghazālī argued that if Avicenna expected Muslim intellectuals to simply reduce all of the names and acts of God “so clearly and powerfully described in the Qur’ān to one single, simple name – the necessary of existence in itself – and to one single, simple act – self intellection” then not much of Islamic doctrine would be left.\(^{323}\)

317 Ibid., 198.
318 Ibid., 198-199.
319 Ibid., 198. *Quid est?* or in Arabic *ma hiyya*?
320 Ibid., 198.
IV. Al-Ghazālī’s Critique of Falsafah

The most significant response to this shift in philosophical thinking sparked by Avicenna thus came from Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī who criticized the Peripatetic views of Muslim philosophers, and Avicenna in particular.\(^\text{324}\) In his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* al-Ghazālī helps explain some of the general philosophical ideas about the issue of the Divine names, and refutes Avicenna’s beliefs using the framework of Ash’arī *kalām*. For al-Ghazālī, the philosophers claimed that it was impossible to affirm Attributes of Knowledge, Power, and Will for God, arguing that the Divine Names revealed in the Qur’an were to be used “verbally” since they are “referentially” reduced to the Divine Essence.\(^\text{325}\) He claims that the philosophers deny the Attributes out of a desire to prevent the “plurality” that arises from affirming their existence.\(^\text{326}\) For al-Ghazālī, such a belief is opposed by “all the Muslims,” with the only exception being the philosophically inclined Mu’tazila.\(^\text{327}\) Al-Ghazālī argues that if an attribute, and that to which it is attributed are not the same, then each will be in need of the other in order “to be.” However, if both are free of a need for the other, then both would be necessary existents in and of themselves, which overrides the concept of a single necessary existent upon which all existents emanate.\(^\text{328}\) If one lacks a need of another, but is needed by it, it effectively becomes the *cause* of the other, which means that which is in need is characterized by a lack, which cannot apply to the Divine.\(^\text{329}\) Thus, for al-Ghazālī the “incoherence” of such a belief is clear, since the improbability of both scenarios

\(^{324}\) El-Bizri, 132.
\(^{326}\) Al-Ghazālī, 97.
\(^{327}\) Al-Ghazālī, 97.
\(^{328}\) El-Bizri, 132.
\(^{329}\) El-Bizri, 132.
means that the essence of the “Necessary Existent is eternal without agents, and so are His attributes.”

Al-Ghazālī also refutes a second claim made by the philosophers regarding the Divine Attributes, namely that affirming the Divine Attributes implies that the Necessary Existent cannot be entirely self-sufficient; in other words, because the Divine does not need anything other than Himself, He does not need the Attributes. However, such ideas are part of a “language of rhetorical preaching that is feeble in the extreme” for al-Ghazālī, since the “attributes of perfection do not separate from the essence of the Perfect, so as to say that He is in need of another.” In this statement, al-Ghazālī upholds the Ash’arite doctrine that the Attributes are not simply reduced to the Essence, but are “coeternal with it without cause.” The “incoherence” of the philosophers is also clear in their affirmation that God is a knower, since affirming this fact is indicative of accepting an addition to the Divine Essence, namely the Attribute of Knowledge. Where Avicenna argues that God knows Himself and everything else in a universal way, al-Ghazālī argues that such a position is an affirmation of God’s Attribute of knowledge. Thus, the philosophers continue their avoidance of plurality through a denial of any Attribute, even going so far as to claim that “if the First were to have a quiddity characterized by existence then this would constitute multiplicity” based on the Avicennian view that the Essence and existence of the Necessary Existent are unified. However, for al-Ghazālī, if the Essence is His Will, Power, or Knowledge, then this means that these Attributes are self-subsisting, but this is impossible because this implies multiple necessary existents.

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330 Ibid., 132.
331 Ibid., 132.
332 Al-Ghazālī, 101.
333 El-Bizri, 132.
334 Ibid., 134.
335 Ibid., 134.
336 Ibid., 134.
Al-Ghazālī’s critique of the philosophers sparked developments in the traditions of *Kalām* and *falsafah*, since many later philosophers responded to his refutations and many theologians began to integrate some aspects of the philosophical tradition into their works.\(^{337}\) Although al-Ghazālī was the most influential Muslim theologian to engage with Avicenna’s thought, by the eleventh century, Avicenna’s system had become one of the most important challenges to *Kalām*. Ibn Sinā’s teachings had a significant influence even on those theologians who rejected aspects of his philosophy, reflecting the extent to which his system had permeated later discourse about the ontological and metaphysical topics he introduced.\(^{338}\) In the *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī refutes those Avicennian ideas he deemed contrary to Islamic belief, and he ultimately concluded that three of these theories were entirely opposed to Muslim belief: the philosophers’ theory of a pre-eternal world, Avicenna’s theory that God knows universals rather than particulars, and Avicenna’s theory of an immortal soul that denies bodily resurrection.\(^{339}\) His refutation of these three Avicennian theories and labeling of such beliefs as infidelity (*kufr*) was very influential in guiding the direction of all future philosophical works in Islamic intellectual history, since scholars felt that they had to respond to al-Ghazālī.\(^{340}\) Al-Ghazālī’s ability to explain philosophical doctrine also allowed for the teaching of what was an accepted type of philosophy, namely the use of rational methods to expound traditional Muslim belief on certain issues.\(^{341}\) Thus, al-Ghazālī’s work, which some argued brought about the end of the tradition of *falsafah*, actually gave the tradition a new

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\(^{337}\) Ibid., 134.
\(^{340}\) Ziai. “Islamic Philosophy (*falsafa*),” 68.
\(^{341}\) Ziai, 68.
motivation and scope.\textsuperscript{342} Imam Ghazālī’s works even served as a “textbook genre of falsafah” which was accepted and studied in many scholastic centers.\textsuperscript{343}

\textbf{V. Philosophy and Mysticism: Mullā Ṣadrā’s al-ḥikmah al-muta’āliyah}

Al-Ghazālī’s critique of falsafah also had an impact in the Islamic East, where falsafah was combined with the tradition of gnosis (‘irfān), a synthesis which provided the mystical tradition with a language that helped to articulate the mystical experience of “pure consciousness.”\textsuperscript{344} The integration of falsafah and mysticism not only allowed for the means to provide an account of the mystical experience, but also a practice that allows for the attainment of the highest form of knowledge.\textsuperscript{345} Mullā Ṣadrā, or Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (c. 1571–1640 CE), one of the most important figures in the history of post-Avicennan philosophy, and one of the greatest Islamic metaphysicians from the Muslim East,\textsuperscript{346} was one of the figures who combined his philosophy and mysticism to produce a new system of philosophy. Mullā Ṣadrā founded a new school of Islamic thought, which he termed the “transcendent theosophy” or al-ḥikmah al-muta’āliyah, which seamlessly synthesized Sunnī and Shī‘ī kalām, the Peripatetic or mashshā‘ī school of Ibn Sinā,\textsuperscript{347} ishrāq or the school of Illumination founded by Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–1191 CE), and ‘irfān or speculative Sufism, mainly in terms of the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240 CE).\textsuperscript{348} Mullā Ṣadrā’s ‘Transcendent Philosophy’ represents a new trend in Islamic philosophy, which is

\textsuperscript{342} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{343} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{345} Rizvi, “Mysticism and Philosophy,” 226.
\textsuperscript{346} Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Philosophy."
\textsuperscript{347} The Peripatetic school represents a synthesis of Islamic doctrine, Aristotelianism, and Neoplatonism. Its founder was al-Kindī, but its chief proponent was Ibn Sinā. This school was the most prominent school in early Islamic philosophy. See Nasr, "Philosophy."
\textsuperscript{348} Nasr, "Philosophy."
neither Peripatetic nor Illuminationist, but a synthesis of both which takes the best arguments from each to form a new system.\textsuperscript{349} His vast knowledge of the Qur’an and hadīth, Islamic philosophy and theology, and Sufism combined with his intellectual prowess as a philosopher and gnostic allowed him to synthesize the millennium of Islamic thought which preceded him.\textsuperscript{350} His creative philosophical framework had a strong influence on subsequent Islamic philosophy, and to this day in regions such as Persia, Iraq, and the Indian subcontinent Mullā Ṣadrā’s school of thought continues to be a powerful intellectual tradition.\textsuperscript{351}

Mullā Ṣadrā’s transcendent philosophy sought to combine three kinds of knowledge, revealed knowledge (through the Qur’an), logical or demonstrative knowledge (burhān), and mystical or realized knowledge (ʿirfān).\textsuperscript{352} The combination of these three paths of human knowledge was central to Ṣadrā’s philosophy, and why his intellectual perspective is called al-ḥikmah al-mutaʿāliyah or “transcendent philosophy,” since the synthesis of these three modes of knowing allows for one to truly possess the highest level of knowledge, such that the philosopher or theosopher characterizes themselves with the Divine Qualities in order to become “God-like.”\textsuperscript{353} The foundation of this theosophy is the science of being (wujūd), by which Mullā Ṣadrā refers to existence of objects, and the existence of Pure Being.\textsuperscript{354} For Mullā Ṣadrā, existence is the principal reality that includes all that is, a view which contrasts with those held by Suhrawardī and other philosophers who argued for the primacy of essence. Whereas other philosophers argued that what gives reality to things is essence, Mullā Ṣadrā argued that it is existence which is the most apparent

\textsuperscript{350} Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Mullā Ṣadrā: his teachings,” in History of Islamic Philosophy, 643.
\textsuperscript{351} Nasr, “Philosophy.”
\textsuperscript{353} Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Mullā Ṣadrā: his teachings,” in History of Islamic Philosophy, 645.
\textsuperscript{354} Nasr, “Mullā Ṣadrā: his teachings,” 646.
and visible feature of a thing’s reality. Based on this theory, his “gradational ontology” sees “all beings as a symphony of the infinite modalities and manifestations of one single existence.”

This theory is directly influenced by his Illuminationist philosophical leanings and the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī where the philosopher is ultimately able to experience reality as pure Being.

In his *al-Maẓāhir al-Ilāhīyah fī Asrār al-‘ulūm al-Kamālīyah* (“The Divine Manifestations of the Secrets of the Perfecting Sciences”) Mullā Ṣadrā states that “acquiring the true divine wisdom” and “completing the material intellects” occurs by knowing “Allāh and His Attributes, His kingdom and dominion, and knowing the Hereafter and its stations and states” in order to become a true “wayfarer on the path of gnosis” and “proximity to the Merciful.” Thus, in order to attain the gnostic experience of the unity of being (*wujūd*) which occurs once the gnostic realizes that it is only *wujūd* which bestows reality upon any one thing, such that every single thing has no reality in itself, one has to know God’s Attributes. Mullā Ṣadrā thus devotes an entire section of his *al-Maẓāhir* to explain the “Unity of His Attributes of Perfection,” where he argues that the Divine Attributes are “absolutely immaterial and are not added to His essence.” For Mullā Ṣadrā, the only difference between the Attributes is in meaning, since all of the Attributes of perfection derive from the Divine Essence. He argues that the Attributes essentially represent the same Essence, since “His knowledge is His very power, His power is His very knowledge, and His will is both of them.” This argument is derived from Ibn Sīnā who writes in his *al-Ta‘liqāt* that “the First is not multiplied because of the multiplicity of His Attributes, for each one of His

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355 Kalin, “Mullā Ṣadrā,” 46.
356 Kalin, 46.
360 Ibid., 36.
361 Ibid., 36.
Attributes when realized becomes the Attribute for His other Attribute.” Thus, for Ibn Sīnā and Mullā Şadrā, saying that all of the Attributes are essentially reducible to the one Essence does not divest God of His Attributes, but explains the unity of the Attributes in regards to the Divine essence, since all of them derive from a single essence.

Mullā Şadrā supplements his position by citing a quote from ʿAlī ibn ʿAbī Ṭālib: “The perfection of monotheism is to dissociate all Attributes from Him,” which he interprets not as a call to purify the Essence of the meanings of the Attributes (since doing so is tantamount to “denying His Attributes, which is manifest disbelief”), but instead as a warning to dissociate “any Attributes additional to His Essence according to its existence and reality.” Thus, Mullā Şadrā agrees that one can say “His Attributes are equal to Him,” as the philosophers do, and also say “They are not Him” or “They are neither Him nor other than Him” which is the Ash’arite view of the Divine Names and Attributes. He goes on to explain that the knowledge of the Divine Names and Attributes is a “sacred knowledge” which allowed Adam to surpass even the angels, as narrated in Qur'anic verses 2:31-33. Mullā Şadrā writes that the Name is “the concept that is predicated upon the essence” such that the difference between name and attribute is like the difference between “white” and “whiteness,” where the named thing may be one, while the names are many, since they are “intellectual predicates” or “definitions for the essence they describe.” He concludes that all beings are manifestations or glimmers of God’s Attributes, in varying degrees, whereas the Prophet Muḥammad is “the manifestation of all the divine Attributes in an equal way” and is thus “like the equator in all realms of existence.” In this view, the Divine Names and

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362 Ibid., 43.
363 Ibid., 36.
364 Ibid., 36.
365 Ibid., 41. This belief is a direct reference to the work of Ibn al-'Arabī, who argued for this interpretation of the Divine names, and the importance of Adam being taught all of the names.
366 Ibid., 41.
367 Ibid., 44.
Attributes become more than simply a doctrine but also a praxis of human perfection, which the wayfarer can use to attain the desired proximity to the Divine. This idea is central to the Islamic mystical tradition, where the gnostic can strive towards perfection by taking on the Divine Names and qualities, such that the self is annihilated, subsisting in pure Being alone.

**VI. Reconciling Reason and Experience: The Aims of Falsafah**

Mullā Ṣadrā defines philosophy as the “perfecting of the human soul through cognition of the realities of existents as they truly are” which allows human beings to “ascribe a rational order to the world and acquire a resemblance to the Creator according to the measure of human capacity.”

In this regard, philosophy is considered a “way of life” and most importantly a “path to salvation” in training the soul. The ultimate goal of such philosophy or wisdom reflects the Platonic emphasis on *theosis* or *ta'alluh*, the idea of “becoming god so far as is possible,” an emulation which is central to the Sufi teaching of qualifying oneself with the Attributes of God. Islamic philosophy, as we discussed earlier in this section, was never merely “theoretical inquiry seeking knowledge for its own sake” but rather always had a purpose of upholding revelation through reason, and acquiring knowledge about the Divine in relation to human beings. Knowledge of the Divine of course can come about in many different ways for different people, and many of the figures examined in this section gained a proficiency in multiple streams of Islamic thought, often settling only for a unique synthesis of those systems which they found the most appealing. Al-Ghazālī, for example, found philosophy inadequate because it was an indirect

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368 Rizvi, “Mysticism and Philosophy,” 230.
369 Rizvi, 229.
370 Rizvi, 229.
371 Ibid., 226.
means of acquiring truth, whereas mysticism allowed one to experience or taste (*dhawq*) the state of truth and combine knowledge and action to achieve certainty.\textsuperscript{372}

Al-Ghazālī’s distaste of the purely intellectual mode of gaining certainty illustrates the early break in Islamic intellectual history between the paths of reason and experience. Later Islamic philosophers in the East, and perhaps most importantly, Mullā Ṣadrā, were able to reconcile reason and experience by recovering a philosophy which “combined rational discourse with intuitive experience” and discovered a method for inquiry into the truth which allows for spiritual perfection and salvation.\textsuperscript{373} Islamic mysticism as the esoteric (*batīn*) dimension of Islam is essentially a path of knowledge, which is why Nasr argues that Islamic philosophy and mysticism have had a close relationship in the history of Islamic thought, such that we can say that the Islamic philosophers “belong to the same spiritual family as the Sufis, both being concerned with the attainment of ultimate knowledge.”\textsuperscript{374} Even in early Islamic Peripatetic philosophy, such as that of Ibn Sīnā we can see his interest in Sufism, since he devoted entire works to defending mysticism and the attainment of hidden knowledge about the spiritual world by gnostics.\textsuperscript{375} In the Islamic West, the tradition of Islamic philosophy was permeated by Sufism, as all of the Islamic philosophers of Spain evinced a mystical dimension to their thought.\textsuperscript{376} The eventual synthesis of philosophy and mysticism that emerged in Persia with Suhrawardī and later Mullā Ṣadrā bound philosophy to spiritual purification and the mystical life, which became so influential that it characterized most subsequent Islamic philosophy.\textsuperscript{377}

\textsuperscript{372} Ibid., 224.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid., 225.
\textsuperscript{375} Nasr, “Introduction to the Mystical Tradition,” 368.
\textsuperscript{376} Nasr, 369.
\textsuperscript{377} Nasr, 370.
Thus, early Islamic philosophy shares many of the views on the doctrine of the Names and Attributes as rationalist theologians did. For these rational scholars, the Divine Attributes cannot be considered additional to the Divine Essence, since such a view violates Divine Unity. Thus, the philosophers hold that the Attributes are equal to God’s Essence and not separate from It. Yet, for Islamic philosophers, this position is not a denial of the Attributes, since they hold that the Attributes are only different in meaning and all of them represent the same Divine Essence. On the subject of the doctrine of *tawḥīd* and the Divine Names, philosophers such as Ibn Ṣīnā argue that Divine Unity is not compromised due to the multiplicity of the Attributes because the Attributes are all unified in the Divine Essence. Like many Islamic theologians, some philosophers also tended to emphasize certain characteristics of God to shape their conception of the Divine. Ibn Ṣīnā’s view of God is centered around His Being and Existence, compared to the Mu’tazilite emphasis on Divine Unity, and the Ash’arite and Māturīdite emphasis on God’s Omnipotence and Wisdom respectively. The theological and philosophical schools of thought we have mentioned thus far kept in mind the *tanzīh* view of the Divine. Although Traditionalist theologians tried to reconcile the tashbīh verses of the Qur’an, these theologians did not fully explore the meanings of these verses. Ṣūfī thought was able to take those tashbīh verses and reconcile them with the tanzīh verses of the Qur’an, and offer a take on the Divine Names that is at once grounded in the tradition, and unlike anything we have seen thus far in our study of these intellectual traditions. Unlike the theologians and philosophers, the Ṣūfīs combine theory with practice, and explain that the Names are central to understanding what it means to be human beings.
Sufism or Taṣawwuf is often called the inner dimension of Islam, as it is the direct contemplation of the Divine Reality with the ultimate aim of gaining direct access to knowledge of the Truth. Rather than being something foreign to Islam, Sufism is an intensification of the spiritual path found in the religious tradition, and all Şūfī masters claim spiritual ‘descent’ to the Prophet himself. Like other schools of Islamic thought, Sufism has been passed down by such masters who help guide their students in shaping their character (khuluq) and bringing it into conformity with the prophetic model. This process acquired a name, the science of human character traits (akhlāq), which characterized the ultimate aims of Sufism, what the “greatest master” (al-Shaykh al-Akbar) of Sufism, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240 CE) defined as “assuming the character traits of God.” For Şūfī sages like Ibn ʿArabī, all human beings have the ability to actualize the Divine traits latent in their very own souls by virtue of being created in God’s image. The Şūfī path requires the soul to traverse various stations (maqāmāt) of “spiritual ascent” and overcome the various psychological states (aḥwāl) in order to approach the Divine Reality. Thus, Sufism or the mystical dimension of Islam, deals with experiencing the Divine Reality rather than trying to come to know the object of worship through intellectual exercises alone like kalām or falsafah. Whereas other schools of Islamic thought tended to emphasize Divine transcendence above all else, Şūfīs emphasized those verses of the Qur’an and those Names and

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380 Muḥyī al-Dīn or “Reviver of Religion” and al-Shaykh al-Akbar “the Greatest Master” are the most common titles used to refer to Ibn ʿArabī.
381 William Chittick, “Sufi Thought and Practice.”
382 Ibid.
Attributes which indicated God’s immanence and presence, and argued that rational proofs and theological arguments undermined the personal relationship between God and human beings. For the Şūfīs, God’s Nearness is more real than His Distance, because the Attributes of Beauty are what ultimately allow human beings to come to love God.383

I. The Şūfī Path

The term Sufism derives from šūf or “the one who wears wool,” and the term was used to describe the coarse woolen garment worn by the early Muslim ascetics.384 Gradually the designation was extended to those Muslims who distinguished themselves from the community by stressing certain Qur’anic and prophetic teachings and practices.385 Al-Junayd (c. 830–910), one of the most famous Şūfī saints of the early period, explains that Sufism is not mere ascetism, however, since “Sufism is not [achieved] by much praying and fasting, but it is the security of the heart and the generosity of the soul.”386 The ascetic aspect of Sufism comes from the break with the world and the desires of the ego in favor of yearning for the Divine Beloved alone; “Sufism is to possess nothing and to be possessed by nothing.”387 Sufism has also been defined as “an interiorization of Islam, a personal experience of the central mystery of Islam, that of tawḥīd” or affirming that God is One.388 For Şūfīs like al-Hujwīrī (d. c. 1072) “knowledge is immense and life is short,” meaning that the only knowledge which is obligatory for a human being is that which brings one closer to the object of worship.389 In the Şūfī view, true knowledge cannot be achieved through books, because experiential knowledge is far superior to anything than can be taught.

383 Ibid.
385 Chittick, “Sufi Thought and Practice.”
386 Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 14.
387 Schimmel, 15.
388 Ibid., 17.
389 Ibid., 17.
Thus, many Ṣūfīs report throwing away their books after attaining the knowledge they sought, and as Schimmel notes, one of the first steps for some mystics was to “break the ink-pots and to tear the books.”\(^3^9^0\) Some Ṣūfī masters reportedly cleansed the minds of their students of all they had studied in order to purify them, and others report having dreams which urged them to cast all of their books into the nearest river.\(^3^9^1\) Nonetheless, even though Ṣūfīs condemned the bookishness of scholars and chastised their disciples to “strive to lift the veil, not to collect books,” the Ṣūfīs were amongst the most prolific Muslim writers, with numerous Ṣūfī writers like Ibn ʿArabī producing some of the lengthiest extant works in Islamic intellectual history, such as his magnum opus al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah (The Meccan Openings) which spans thousands of pages.\(^3^9^2\)

Some authors chose the term \(iḥsān\) or “doing what is beautiful” to describe the phenomenon of Sufism.\(^3^9^3\) \(iḥsān\) is frequently mentioned in the Qur’an, and God says that He loves those who possess this quality.\(^3^9^4\) The term \(iḥsān\) is also mentioned in the famous hadīth of Gabriel, where the Prophet describes \(iḥsān\) as the innermost dimension of faith that arises from a deepened understanding and allows one to “worship God as if you see Him.”\(^3^9^5\) Whereas \(iḥsān\) was actualized through Ṣūfī teachings and practices, the other two parts of the religion that the Prophet was questioned about: \(islām\) (“submission” or “correct activity”) and \(imān\) (“faith” or “correct

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\(^{3^9^0}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{3^9^1}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{3^9^2}\) Ibid., 18. Ibn ʿArabī’s encyclopedic Meccan Openings contains 560 chapters which cover everything from metaphysics, the various sacred sciences, and reflections on his own mystical experiences. Traditional sources attribute several hundred works to Ibn ʿArabī, which include spiritual treatises and abstract metaphysical ruminations and volumes of love poetry, many of which still exist in manuscript form in the author’s own hand. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn ʿArabī. Harvard University Press, 1964, 97-98.

\(^{3^9^3}\) Chittick, “Sufi Thought and Practice.” Burckhardt translates \(iḥsān\) as ‘spiritual virtue’ since these virtues reflect Divine Qualities. Ṣūfī doctrine identifies love as the principal virtue since it allows for a continual awareness of the Divine presence. The development of these virtues, which are acquired through the various spiritual stations, is essential to spiritual concentration, the continued practice of which allows for access to knowledge of the Real. See: Titus Burckhardt. An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine. Kazi Publications, 1976, 88-89.

\(^{3^9^4}\) Chittick, “Sufi Thought and Practice.”

\(^{3^9^5}\) Ibid.
understanding”) are manifested through the sharī‘ah and jurisprudence, and kalām respectively.396 Where the sharī‘ah outlines the way in which people can submit their actions to the instructions of the Qur’an and the sunnah, and Kalām defines the contents of faith and provides a rational defense for Qur’anic teachings, Sufism combines both theory and practice and explains how Muslims can “strengthen their understanding and observance of Islam in order to find God’s presence in themselves and the world.”397 The Şūfis argue that the element of iḥsān allows for the complete interiorization of Islam, since the believer recognizes that he or she is in the presence of God and must behave with the utmost sincerity (ikhlāṣ) while experiencing the “all-embracing Divine presence.”398 To achieve this spiritual station, Şūfis intensified Islamic ritual practice through an increased focus on adhering to the Sunnah, especially in terms of the ritual remembrance of God (dhikr).

II. The Continual Remembrance of God: The Gateway to Gnosis and Love

The remembrance of God (dhikr) is central to Şūfī doctrine and praxis, since gnosis is the fruit of continuously practicing dhikr.399 In his Şūfī manual on the excellence of invocation, Al-Qaṣd Al-Mujarrad fī Marifat Al-Ism Al-Mufrad (The Key to Salvation and the Lamp of Souls), Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh al-Iskandarī (1259–1310 CE) the renowned Şūfī saint of the Shādhili order, writes that it is the remembrance of God’s Name which opens “sealed hearts,” lifts the “veil of defects,” and “purifies the innermost nature of hearts to confer upon them His own mysterious Self.”400 For Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh, dhikr is the very “foundation of the Path” and the “pivotal support” which ultimately...
leads to ‘experiential’ knowledge of the One.\textsuperscript{401} As he explains, only \textit{dhikr} liberates human beings from ignorance and forgetfulness, allowing for the permanent realization of the Truth, a statement which echoes Prophetic sayings such as: “The world and all that is in it is accursed, except for the remembrance of God,” and “Let thy tongue be always moist with the remembrance of God,” which advocate for a continual remembrance of God at all times.\textsuperscript{402} The centrality of \textit{dhikr} in Islamic spirituality is made clear in such Prophetic traditions, and Qur’anic verses such as 2:152: \textit{So Remember Me and I shall remember you}, 13:28: \textit{Are not hearts at peace in the remembrance of God}, and 29:45: \textit{The remembrance of God is surely greater}.\textsuperscript{403} As Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh explains, \textit{dhikr} can take the form of supplication, remembrance of God’s messengers, prophets, saints, or occur through a deed such as reciting the Qur’an, invoking a Name of God, poetry, singing, or telling a story, since all of these various actions remind one of God.\textsuperscript{404} Thus, any person who meditates on any Act, Attribute, or Command of God, or any of His signs which permeate the heavens and the earth, practices remembrance.\textsuperscript{405}

The practice of \textit{dhikr} allows the soul to continually focus on God, an action which delivers spiritual nourishment to the heart in order to bring it closer to God.\textsuperscript{406} ‘Ā’ishah al-Bā‘ūniyyah (c. 1456 –1517 CE), one of the great women scholars and mystics in Islamic history, explains, through remembrance, “the ascension to union will occur, the door of closeness will be opened, and [the mystic] will be ushered into the presence of vision, and seated on the carpet of intimacy.”\textsuperscript{407} Ibn

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{401} Al-Iskandari, 45.
\item \textsuperscript{403} Nasr et al., 623. For other Qur’anic verses on the importance of \textit{dhikr}, see Qur’an 33:41-42, 3:191, 33:35, 3:41, and 76:25.
\item \textsuperscript{404} Al-Iskandari, 45.
\item \textsuperscript{405} Al-Iskandari, 45.
\item \textsuperscript{406} Schimmel, 168. See also Al-Iskandari, 74-75
\end{itemize}
‘Aṭā Allāh echoes al-Bāʿuniyyah’s statement, noting that invoking is the “door to spiritual union” and the “greatest of gateways” leading to God’s love. Remembrance is thus considered essential since the spiritual station of the one who invokes constantly is exalted such that the one who invokes achieves closeness with God. Sincere and sustained remembrance extinguishes the self, a station Ṣūfīs call \textit{fanā’}, where everything but God fades away. However, after the state of extinction of the self, the state of \textit{baqā’} or subsistence occurs, where the soul persists in God, and attains a spiritual “union” with God. \textit{Dhikr} thus purifies the heart of other than God, allowing for the heart rather than the tongue to affirm the doctrine of \textit{tawḥīd}. The end result of love is “total absorption” or vanishment of the lover in the presence of the Beloved. Because of this, Ibn ʿArabī called love the “highest station of the soul” since it allows for the “complete absorption of the human will by Divine attraction.”

\textit{Dhikr} is therefore considered the pinnacle of human actions, and the invocation is given such an exalted status in terms of religious practice primarily because it leads to the station of ‘mystical union.’ However, in order to bring about such a spiritual transformation, the state of the heart must be changed. In the Ṣūfī and Islamic perspective, the heart (\textit{al-qalb}), rather than the mind, is the seat of consciousness, and the “eye of the heart” (\textit{ʿayn al-qalb}) must be opened in order to truly actualize \textit{tawḥīd} and attain spiritual union with God. The heart is called the mystery (\textit{as-sirr}) or the “inapprehensible point” where the human being meets God. The heart’s role as the meeting place between human beings and the Divine has foundations in a Divine saying revealed through the Prophet in which God said, “The heavens and the earth cannot contain Me,

\footnotesize{408} Al-Iskandari, 73-75.
\footnotesize{409} Al-Iskandari, 47.
\footnotesize{410} Burckhardt, 34.
\footnotesize{411} Burckhardt, 96.
but the heart of my believing servant does contain Me.”⁴¹² Al-Bāʾūniyyah explains that the lover’s heart is the “place of vision,” which God fills with the “light of love” in order to reveal His Essence.⁴¹³ For the Śūfīs, it is love of the Divine which “seizes” hearts and the very existence of the mystic themselves, because love “effaces being and annihilates everything.”⁴¹⁴ However, like al-Bāʾūniyyah notes, “love is God’s grace,” and the way in which God’s love for the worshipper becomes clear is through His selection of the worshipper for the secret by “seizing him with the Beloved’s attraction and effacing annihilations until the worshipper is without a sense of self in light of the sun of true oneness.”⁴¹⁵

This state of absorption signals the perfection of human knowledge, since knowledge of God, the object of worship and love, is the goal of the way in that knowledge of the Divine transforms the heart and penetrates the soul.⁴¹⁶ The Śūfī path thus strives for a balance between knowledge and love, even though various Śūfīs have emphasized either the way of knowledge (such as al-Junayd and Ibn ‘Arabī) or the way of love (like Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (717–801 CE), and ‘Āʾishah al-Bāʾuniyyah).⁴¹⁷ The last two stations on the mystical path, love (maḥabbah) and gnosis (maʿrifah), have often been considered complementary to one another, however oftentimes either love or gnosis was upheld as the superior station of the soul.⁴¹⁸ As al-Ghazālī explains, love and knowledge are inextricably linked, since “love without gnosis is impossible – one can only love what one knows.”⁴¹⁹ Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh holds that gnosis is “the perception of something as it is in its essence and attributes.”⁴²⁰ However, he also notes that

⁴¹² Burckhardt, 96.
⁴¹³ Al-Bāʾuniyyah, The Principles of Sufism, 90.
⁴¹⁴ Al-Bāʾuniyyah, 90.
⁴¹⁵ Ibid, 93.
⁴¹⁶ Burckhardt, 32.
⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 31.
⁴¹⁸ Schimmel, 130.
⁴¹⁹ Schimmel, 130.
⁴²⁰ Al-ISKANDARĪ, 112.
because of this dual perception as both essence and attribute, gnosis of the Creator is the most difficult types of gnosis, because “God has no likeness,” and His Essence is only known to Himself.421 The difficulty of gnosis of God has also been mentioned in Prophetic traditions such as “Meditate not on the Essence but on the Qualities of God and on His Grace.”422 In book thirty-nine, On Meditation (Kitāb al-Tafakkur), of his 40-volume magnum opus, The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyā‘ Ulūm al-Dīn), al-Ghazālī explains that the Prophetic warning against trying to contemplate the Divine Essence exists because human beings do not have the strength to endure such reflection and “cannot know its magnitude.”423 Al-Ghazālī writes that the greatest station of meditation is indeed upon the Divine Essence and Attributes,424 but, as Burckhardt explains, since the Divine Essence cannot be grasped by human thought, worshippers can only conceive of the Divine Names and Qualities.425 Yet in spite of this, Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh writes that God has enjoined upon Creation “the gnosis of His Essence, His Names, and His Attributes” since everything which has been given being “is conscious of the Being of its creator to the extent of its capacity.”426 The heart of the believer affirms the oneness of God’s Essence, and the gnostic, whom God causes to contemplate His Names and Attributes, gains certitude through religious devotions and contemplation. Since the organ of true knowledge or gnosis is the heart, “knowledge of God always engenders love,” because the perfection of human knowledge is when nothing human remains, since the object of both human knowledge and love is God.427 Through sincere contemplation of the Divine, the hearts of believers are transformed such that “their inner meanings

421 Al-Iskandarī, 112.
422 Burckhardt, 106.
424 Al-Ghazālī. On Meditation, “The Virtue of Meditation.”
425 Burckhardt, 107.
426 Al- Iskandarī, 112.
427 Burckhardt, 33.
are His Attributes, their reality is His Essence."⁴²⁸ Knowledge of the Divine Names and Attributes and sustained contemplation of them are thus central to gnosis and love, and the attainment of spiritual union.

III. Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh al-Iskandarī on the Science of Using the Divine Names in Dhikr

Because of the crucial role of the Divine Names in remembrance, different Ṣūfī authors have offered their interpretations of how to acquire the benefit of the various Names in religious devotions. Another definition Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh gives for dhikr is the “repetition of the Name of the Invoked by the heart and the tongue,” which refers to the Ṣūfī practice of invoking the Divine Names. The invocation by the tongue refers to the invocation of the letters of God’s Names, a practice which he briefly outlines in his manual. In this manual of invocation, Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh tells his readers that God’s Most Beautiful Names are “medicine for the maladies of the heart,” and explains the spiritual benefit gained by invoking the various Names. He explains that the Name al-Hādī (“The Guide”) is beneficial during spiritual retreat (khalwah) because it eliminates the states of “dispersion and distraction,” and allows the invoker to remember that his continual seeking of God’s help is “what is sought from him.”⁴²⁹ Invoking the Name al-Ghanī (“the Rich”) is recommended for those who wish to disengage from worldly attachments but have difficulty doing so alone.⁴³⁰ The invocation of the Name al-Hannān (“The Affectionate”) during spiritual retreats “strengthens intimacy until it takes its practitioner to love,” whereas the Name al-Barr (“The Benign”) bestows intimacy and “partial insight” but does not lead to union.⁴³¹ Invoking the Divine Name ar-Raqīb (“the Watcher”) awakens the forgetful from their slumber, allows the

⁴²⁸ Al-Ḥāṣimī, 82.
⁴²⁹ Al-Iskandarī, 80.
⁴³⁰ Ibid., 81.
⁴³¹ Ibid., 83.
“wakeful” to remain in such a state, and frees pious worshippers from hypocrisy.\footnote{Ibid., 82.} However, Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh notes that neither gnostics nor those who have control over their actions need to invoke this Name, since their spiritual station indicates that they are fully aware of this Divine Quality.\footnote{Ibid., 82.} Yet, for those suffering an illness of the heart due to the “malady of forgetfulness,” he argues that the repeated invocation of this Name allows worshippers to reach the “state of presence with God” due to their pious devotion and invocation with the heart.\footnote{Ibid., 82.}

Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh explains the virtues of invocation and instructs the reader on how dozens of other Names are to be used in ritual practice. Many of the Names he mentions, which we have also mentioned here, lead to spiritual union or love, whereas others lead to varying degrees of “illumination.” He explains that the invocation of His Names such as \textit{al-Fattāḥ} (“the Opener”) and \textit{al-Awwal} (“the First”) hasten illumination, whereas the Name \textit{al-Nūr} (“the Light”), although quick to bestow “light and insight on those in retreat,” rarely ever bestows total illumination on the one who invokes it.\footnote{Ibid., 84.} He also offers a list of Names which 
\textit{shaykhs} (spiritual guides) should advise their students to use in various stages of the spiritual path, such as recommending the Name \textit{al-Muʿīd} (“the Restorer”) to those students whom the shaykh fears will become imbalanced after illumination and could benefit from temporary “veiling.”\footnote{Ibid., 86.} Through invocation of various Names and Qualities, the wayfarer is ultimately able to reflect on different Divine Qualities which most pertain to his or her situation and attain the goal of gnosis and love of God.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[432] Ibid., 82.
\item[433] Ibid., 82.
\item[434] Ibid., 82.
\item[435] Ibid., 84.
\item[436] Ibid., 86.
\end{footnotes}
IV. Ibn ‘Arabī’s Doctrine of the Divine Names

Perhaps the lengthiest contemplation on the Divine Names comes from the writings of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240 CE), the great Andalusian mystic whom Nasr calls the “expositor par excellence of gnosis.” Ibn ‘Arabī is known in Islamic intellectual history as the one who explicitly formulated the theoretical and metaphysical doctrines of Sufism and exposited the spiritual universe of Sufism and its theoretical aspects such that anyone can contemplate the Ṣūfī path. Although many of the formulations he uses, such as the transcendent unity of Being (waḥdat al-wujūd) and the Perfect or Universal man (al-insān al-kamīl), are given such designations for the first time in his works, Nasr explains that these doctrines existed earlier in the tradition, but had never been presented in such a systematic manner. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabī became widely known partly because of his formulation of the doctrines of Sufism and his ability to explain and clarify essential Ṣūfī doctrines. Although his legacy has sometimes been viewed as a shift to a more theoretical trend in Sufism, or a movement towards pantheism, what Ibn ‘Arabī’s explicit formulation of Ṣūfī doctrine really indicates is a need for further explanation and clarification of Ṣūfī thought, especially since by his time Islamic civilization had drawn further away from the source of revelation and needed additional explanations in the face of what Nasr calls ‘diminished spiritual insight.’ Ibn ‘Arabī’s reformation of Ṣūfī doctrine was so successful that it has “dominated the spiritual and intellectual life of Islam ever since.” Thus, when looking to the

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440 Nasr, 91.
441 Ibid., 91
Ṣūfī view of the Divine Names and Attributes, it is only appropriate that we look to Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrines for guidance.

William Chittick writes that almost every page of Ibn ‘Arabī’s magnum opus, al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah (“The Meccan Openings”) deals with the question of the Divine Name and Attributes either indirectly or directly. Furthermore, he notes that the Divine Names “provide the backdrop to everything [Ibn ‘Arabī] says,” since all of his works contain the theme of the Divine Names and Attributes. Chittick argues that the “Divine names are the single most important concept to be found” in his works since everything “Divine or cosmic, is related back to them.” However, this is not unusual, since most works in Islamic intellectual history that discuss God always speak of God in terms of the specific Names He has used to describe Himself. Chittick calls the Divine Names the “connecting thread” of the Qur’an because of the way in which they repeatedly appear throughout the text. The Names summarize what can be said and understood about God, so Ibn ‘Arabī’s emphasis on the Names is due to the subject matter at hand. For Ibn ‘Arabī, everything from the Divine Essence to the most “insignificant creature in the cosmos” is related to the Divine Names and Attributes. Furthermore, the Divine Essence, which is indeed unknown in Itself, is named by the Names, meaning that the Essence and Attributes are not two realities of Essence and Name, but a single reality called the Essence, which is given specific Names in given contexts, and from particular points of view.

The question at the heart of all of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works is: how can I find God? Ibn ‘Arabī argues that the desire to seek and find God motivates all human beings, as it gives them their

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443 Sam‘ānī, liii.
445 Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge, 33.
446 Ibid., 33.
humanity.\textsuperscript{447} Once human beings answer this question, it becomes vital for them to \textit{verify} the truth of their answer, not simply through theory but through finding God “in fact.”\textsuperscript{448} For Ibn ‘Arabī, those who are able to find God are the “People of Unveiling and Finding” (\textit{ahl al-kashf wa’l-wujūd}) since they were able to lift the veils that bar them from recognizing their Lord, in order to “stand in His Presence.”\textsuperscript{449} Ibn ‘Arabī holds that the goal these “Verifiers” (\textit{muḥaqqiqūn}) have attained is open to everyone, and he outlines the path to such knowledge of the true nature of the cosmos and man in extreme detail in his works.\textsuperscript{450} The idea connected with Ibn ‘Arabī, \textit{waḥdat al-wujūd}, the “Oneness of Being” or “Unity of Being,” reflects something of this journey, since the word “\textit{wujūd}” can also be translated as “finding.”\textsuperscript{451} Although his works appear outwardly philosophical, or concerned solely with the mental concept of being, Chittick states that Ibn ‘Arabī’s main concern in his works is the experience of God’s Being, an experience Şūfīs often call “taste” (\textit{dhawq}).\textsuperscript{452} Here, we will not delve into the all of the metaphysical concepts Ibn ‘Arabī touches across his works, but will aim to explain how the Divine Names and Attributes serve as a means for attaining gnosis in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī, particularly in terms of achieving the state of human perfection through the systematic actualization of the entire set of Divine Attributes. Although the concepts we outline here may seem largely theoretical, the reader must keep in mind that Sufism is conceived of as the way of \textit{experience}, rather than simply of following revelation or reason.

Finding God, for Ibn ‘Arabī, leads to bewilderment, the bewilderment of “finding and knowing God and not-knowing Him at the same time.”\textsuperscript{453} As he explains, all human beings, and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{447} Ibid., 3.
\item \textsuperscript{448} Ibid., 3.
\item \textsuperscript{449} Ibid.
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in fact all of creation, oscillate between affirmation and negation, finding and losing, knowing and not-knowing. The Verifiers are able to recognize this human situation because they know that the answer to every question regarding God or the world must be expressed as “Yes and no” or He/not He (huwa lā huwa), since everything contains traces of God’s Names and Attributes which allow us to affirm similarity, but the Essence is, by virtue of its very nature, transcendent. The Verifiers are able to see the nature of the universe for what it really is; rather than ecstatically uttering “All is He” (hama ūst) as some Ṣūfīs tended to do in mystical trance, the Verifiers are able to say “All is He, all is not He.” Thus, the question, “how can I find God?” that prompts the human being’s search for meaning is really a question of removing those veils that hide the true nature of things.

The mystery of He/not He begins in the Divine Self, and from there cascades down to every level of existence, the most important of which (for our purposes) are the world (which for Ibn Arabī is all that is not God) and human beings. As Chittick explains, the Divine Presence is the “location” of where Allāh is found, or at least “where we can affirm that what we found is He.” This “location” includes the Divine Essence (dhāt) which is God in Himself, and the Divine Names (asmā’) which are the relationships between the Essence and everything else other than He. Allāh, or the “all-comprehensive Name,” refers to the Essence, Attributes, and acts of God. The Essence is God in Himself without relation to anything else, and as such is entirely unknowable to anyone but God. Thus, God as an Essence is understood in contrast to God’s Attributes which are

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454 The formula of Tawhīd, the Shahadah (there is no god but God) is perhaps the most famous example of this in Islamic thought, since it contains affirmation of the Oneness of God, but the second part of the statement also includes the negation of all else but God.

455 Ibid. The parallels of knowing and not-knowing will be covered in the following section.

456 Ibid., 4.

457 Ibid., 4.

458 Ibid., 4.

459 Ibid., 5.

460 Ibid., 5.
predicated on the relationships God has with the cosmos, such as being its Creator (*al-Khāliq*), Maker (*al-Bārī*), Shaper (*al-Muṣawwir*). Ibn ‘Arabi’s concept of this paradoxical relation between the Divine Essence and the Attributes is explained by Chittick:

Inasmuch as God’s Essence is Independent of the worlds, the cosmos is Not He, but inasmuch as God freely assumes relationships with the worlds through attributes…the cosmos manifests He.462

If we examine any aspect of creation, God is of course independent of that thing due to His transcendence. At the same time, each thing displays something of the Divine Attributes, so it is said to be similar to God in some way. Ibn ‘Arabī identifies this contrast, and employs two theological terms to explain the incomparability of the Divine Essence and the undeniable similarity of the Attributes to creation. He states that the Divine Essence is incomparable (*tanzīh*) to all things by virtue of its Oneness, whereas the Attributes, which are many, are displayed by created things as well, and are in some way “similar” (*tashbīh*) to creation.463 These two ways of conceptualizing God’s relationship with the cosmos are central to Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, since *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* also indicate He/Not He. When viewing the Essence as God’s incomparability, we can say little about God besides negate all else from Him, yet the Essence is God “as He is in Himself” before He revealed Himself to creation. Thus, ontologically, incomparability is the ultimate reference point for God, since it denotes the very Essence of God in Himself, without relation to any other thing.464 The Divine Attributes, however, are also necessary for human beings to understand God, since God names Himself through them in the Qur’an and calls upon human beings to call Him by them.465 The Divine Names and Attributes are reflected in all of the cosmos,

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461 Ibid., 9.
462 Ibid., 9.
463 Ibid., 9.
464 Ibid., 9.
since God’s Power, Mercy, Love, Justice, and Beauty can be seen in all that He has made, in everything from natural marvels to the most miniscule creature in creation.\textsuperscript{466} For Ibn ‘Arabī, because the Divine Names manifest in all of creation, the Divine Names are considered the primary reference points from which knowledge about the cosmos can be gained.\textsuperscript{467} However, this also means that in order to understand anything about God’s creation, we must also trace the Attributes which they display back to their “ontological root,” which is God Himself.\textsuperscript{468} The existence of the creature is ultimately derived from God’s Being, its strength is derived from God’s Power, and its knowledge from God’s knowledge. This exercise can be repeated endlessly for each Name to explain the Divine roots of all of creation, a task which would fill thousands of pages to properly explain, which is one of the reasons why Chittick says that Ibn ‘Arabī’s \textit{Futūḥāt} spans an astonishing 17,000 pages, rather than a few hundred.\textsuperscript{469}

Whereas the \textit{mutakallimūn} stressed \textit{tanzīh} or God’s incomparability, Ibn ‘Arabī argues for a balanced approach to \textit{tanzīh} and \textit{tashbīh}, since he believes that neither can be used to exhaustively describe God.\textsuperscript{470} For Ibn ‘Arabī, \textit{tanzīh} and \textit{tashbīh} correspond to the two broad categories of Divine Attributes as identified by Muslim thinkers, namely Attributes of Mercy (\textit{Raḥmah}) and Wrath (\textit{Ghaḍab}), or Bounty (\textit{Faḍl}) and Justice (‘\textit{Adl}), or Beauty (\textit{Jamāl}) and Majesty (\textit{Jalāl}), or Gentleness (\textit{Luṭf}) and Severity (\textit{Qahr}).\textsuperscript{471} The Qur’ān and tradition associate the Attributes of Beauty and Gentleness with God’s nearness to His creatures, and the Attributes of Severity, Wrath, and Majesty with His distance from creatures.\textsuperscript{472} Ibn ‘Arabī writes that God

\textsuperscript{466} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{467} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{468} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{472} Ibid., 501.
can be understood of in terms of *tanzīh* inasmuch as God is inaccessible, but *tashbīh* because the Qurʾān states that *He is closer the human being than the jugular vein* (50:16). Furthermore, he explains that when the Qurʾān states that God created human beings with His own two Hands (38:75), this means that God employed Attributes of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* to bring “His own image into existence,” which allows for God to be mysteriously both “present with His creatures and absent from them” or Inward and Outward, Manifest and Nonmanifest at the same time. The Verifier (*muḥaqqiq*) is able to perceive of God’s presence in all things, through his faculty of imagination (*khayāl*), which is able to establish relationships and bridge gaps that reason cannot, which allows him to see God in all things and focus on God’s nearness in addition to His distance. By doing so, the Verifiers are able to see the relationship between God and the world in full, without emphasizing either *tanzīh* (as the theologians and philosophers tended to do) or *tashbīh*. The Verifiers are able to recognize the true nature of things through an “intuitive integration of paradox,” or the actualization of Sahl al-Tustari’s saying, “one knows God by the Union of the contrary qualities which relate to Him.” The Verifiers are said to see with both the “eye of imagination” and the “eye of reason,” which allows them to realize perfect knowledge through the heart and attain a balance between reason (which affirms *tanzīh*) and unveiling (which stresses *tashbīh*) in order to experience a full disclosure of the Divine. However, Ibn ʿArabī does note those scriptural foundations which seem to assert the precedence of the Attributes of Mercy over those of Wrath, such as *My Mercy embraces all things* (7:156) or the hadīth qudsi, “*My Mercy takes precedence over My Wrath,*” which indicate that Attributes which reflect Mercy are more central to the human experience than the Attributes of Wrath.

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473 Ibid., 501.
474 Ibid., 501.
475 Burckhardt, 30.
476 Chittick, 502.
The Attributes of God represent those qualities - what Nasr calls “principal modalities” - from which “all qualities of Being and all modalities of knowledge derive.”\(^{477}\) Although God transcends all qualities, He is not devoid of them, because the apparently paradoxical relationship between the Divine Essence and Attributes for Ibn ʿArabī is resolved somewhere in between incomparability (\textit{tanzīḥ}) and similarity (\textit{tashbīḥ}), since God’s transcendence and his Qualities which are mirrored in creation, reference God’s Essence.\(^{478}\) Ibn ʿArabī conceives of the Names as the “Divine possibilities immanent in the Universe,” or the means through which He manifests in the Universe, in addition to the way in which He describes Himself in the Qur’an. The Names can then be conceived of as paths which lead to God, and a means of ascending to the “unitive knowledge of the Divine Reality.”\(^{479}\) As we explained above, the Divine Names are central to \textit{dhikr} and manifest in the spiritual life of Muslims as the object of contemplation, since they lead to spiritual realization.\(^{480}\)

\textit{Takhalluq bi Akhlāq Allāh: Qualifying Oneself Through the Attributes of God}

Every Name of God has a loci of manifestation (\textit{maẓāhir}) in the cosmos; some are hidden, and others are apparent, which indicates that the universe as a whole manifests all the Names of God, since every existent thing contains one or more of the Attributes of Being in various modes.\(^{481}\) The Divine Attributes also manifest in a relative sense in created things, although they apply to only God in an absolute sense. The human being is considered unique in Ibn ʿArabī’s doctrine because all of the Divine Attributes can be actualized by the one who perfects his faith and affirms

\(^{477}\) Nasr, \textit{Three Muslim Sages}, 109.
\(^{478}\) Nasr, 109.
\(^{479}\) Ibid., 109.
\(^{480}\) Ibid., 109.
\(^{481}\) Chittick, \textit{The Sufi Path of Knowledge}, 16.
**tawḥīd** in his innermost being. Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontological scheme conceives of the human being as the *microcosm*, since human beings display within themselves the entire set of Divine Attributes which are attributed to the cosmos (which is conceived of as the *macrocosm*). The human soul ultimately acts as the intermediary between the luminous and dark aspects of human existence, since it is considered “the locus of our individual awareness.”

Being created from the “most intense light of existence” and the dullest “dust of the universe” allows for human beings to contain a luminous spiritual dimension within their being that is contrasted with the other dark and dense nature pole of human being. The human soul thus contains unlimited possibilities for development through a heightened awareness of its own dual nature and the dualities present in the nature of all of existence. Ibn ‘Arabī’s ruminations on the potentiality of the soul echoes the tradition attributed to the Prophet which states, “he who knows himself (*nafsahu*) knows his Lord.”

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482 Chittick, 17.
483 Cf. Qur’an 15:28-29; 32:7-9; and 38:71-72.
484 Ibid., 17.
485 Ibid., 17.
486 Ibid., 17.
487 Burckhardt, 42.
its entirety requires human beings to understand that every Attribute of God has been placed in the human soul, because God created Adam “upon His own form” or His own “image.” Ibn ʿArabī takes this to mean that whereas the Divine Names and Attributes are scattered in the cosmos, they are gathered and concentrated in human beings, such that the human being serves as the locus of manifestation for the entire set of Divine Attributes. The growth of the human soul is characterized by a movement from darkness to light, and the gradual acquisition of Divine Attributes, since the soul is light and dark, and also contains every Name of God. As the human soul strives towards self-discovery it matures and gains more knowledge of itself, which in turn allows it to know God. For Ibn ʿArabī, the stages and stations of the mystical path can then be seen as stages in the process of actualizing various Divine Names, and striving towards human perfection. As we saw above in the writings of Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh al-Iskandarī, acquiring the theurgic power of certain Names through repeated invocation leads to the Ģūfī goals of love and knowledge. Because the human being is able to actualize the Divine Names, the human soul contains an immense potentiality for spiritual growth, but due to its dual nature, the soul has a capacity for deviation and moral degradation.

Whereas human beings can appear outwardly human on this earth, inwardly it is possible for them to transcend themselves or lower their status to that of animals. The return of all things to God is a central theme in the Qur’an, which constantly reminds human beings that they will return to God after all of their toils and trials in this world. Although most things are said to return in the same form in which they were created, the human being is able to return to God in a markedly changed spiritual state; whether that changed state is good or bad depends on the ability of each

488 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 17.
489 Ibid., 17.
490 Ibid., 17.
491 Ibid., 19.
human being’s ability to actualize their “human” potential. Human beings, by virtue of their nature, are also able to return to God in this world by following the Prophetic example and the path laid down in the traditions and in scripture. The return can be what Ibn ʿArabī calls “compulsory return” (rujūʿ iḍṭirārī) which is the route all created things will take, regardless of their will. 492 The Qurʾān reminds us about this truth when God says, O Man, you are laboring towards your Lord laboriously, and you shall encounter Him! (84:6).

Chittick explains that the other paths human beings can take, such as following the path of their own caprice or greed, also take them back to God, but leads to his or her encounter with one of the many Faces of God, the meeting with which may not be pleasant. 493 The Divine Names also give us an idea of what these Faces are like, since they give us insight into the “Divine roots of all things.” 494 Each Name is therefore considered a Face of God, or a specific Self-Disclosure that appears to each human being based on the state of his or her own soul. Because human beings are able to choose their route of return, by virtue of being created in God’s form, they are able to actualize their humanity through realizing the Divine forms latent in their being. Where human beings, in a sense, enter the world as fledgling souls containing an infinite potentiality with them, they can actualize the Divine forms within their being and soar to stand before the Divine presence, or they can leave the world without having developed any of these possibilities, and without having acquired the virtues associated with the luminous aspect of the soul. To give another example using the theme of light, Chittick explains that human beings begin as empty shells or as dim apparitions which appear on the farthest of walls, which are separated by Absolute Light by the most massive

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492 Ibid., 20. Here Ibn ʿArabī begins to touch upon another one of the key themes in his works, that of predestination and free will, a topic which does not pertain to our study of his doctrine of the Divine Names. If interested, see: Chittick’s The Sufi Path of Knowledge, 309-329.
493 The Qurʾān states: Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God (2:115), which is quoted by Ibn ʿArabī to indicate the way in which God’s Faces or Names are what each person on the path to return faces.
494 Ibid., 20.
chasm, what appears to be an “endless void.” The task assigned to human beings is to connect the apparition to the Light it manifests, a process which requires an intensification of light in order to overcome the surrounding darkness. According to this model, the human body, which is the apparition, “remains a fixed reality until death” but the human consciousness is able to travel towards the Light. The extent to which the human being strives toward the Absolute Light reflects their waystation on the spiritual path. Some are satisfied in simply gazing at the dim apparitions, others seek out varying intensities of the Light, whereas a group of select others, most notably the Ṣūfīs, can only be satisfied with gazing at the Absolute Light alone.

The Qur’ānic prayer, Guide us on the straight path (1:5), can be thought of as a call to ascend the path and the varying degrees of light, but also as expressing a desire to increase one’s actualization of the various Divine Attributes such as Life, Knowledge, Power, Generosity, Patience, and so on. When human beings desire to increase these qualities in their own souls, they begin the process of actualizing the Divine forms latent in the primordial nature of human beings. Ibn ‘Arabī calls this process takhalluq or “assuming the traits,” which is related to the word khuluq or “character trait.” The term khuluq has scriptural roots, since in the Qur’ān, God tells the Prophet that he has a khuluq ʿazīm “sublime morals,” or “exalted character.” The word khuluq is also related to the word for creation (khalq) which for Ibn ‘Arabī is indicative of the fact that what the Qurʾān is referring to is not only the Prophet’s moral character but also his ability to

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495 Ibid., 20.
496 Ibid., 20.
497 Ibid., 20.
498 Ibid., 21.
499 Ibid., 21.
500 Ibid., 21.
501 This term has many connotations, and it has also been translated as: “mighty morality,” “sublime nature,” “tremendous nature,” and “tremendous character.” See Chittick, 21.
realize the “potentialities of his primordial nature.” By actualizing the Qualities of Beauty such as kindness, patience, benevolence, gratitude, and piety, the Prophet was able to actualize the Divine Attributes that reside within the depths of the human soul, and thus “participate in the fullness of human existence” in order to display the qualities of Being. The practice of acquiring these character traits is an important part of the Islamic tradition, as many Prophetic traditions mention cultivating morals, and shaping one’s character through the acquisition of virtues. When the Prophet was asked, “which part of faith is most excellent?” He replied with, “A beautiful character.” Other aḥadīth which relate to this one include: “The most perfect of the faithful in faith is the most beautiful of them in character”; “The best thing in the Scale on the Day of Judgement will be a beautiful character”; “The Prophet used to command people to observe noble character traits”; and “I was sent to complete the beautiful character traits.” For Ibn ‘Arabī, the connection between these noble character traits and the Divine Names of Beauty is that the moral traits the Prophet was referring to are Divine Attributes such as Love, Compassion, Kindness, Mercy, Faith, Generosity, Patience, and Wisdom.

The Prophetic command for human beings to observe these traits, in the view of Ibn ‘Arabī, is to call on human beings to qualify themselves through the Attributes of God, or in other words, ‘assume’ the character traits of God (takhalluq bi akhlāq Allah) which are identical to the Names of God. Here Ibn ‘Arabī expounds in detail the central Şūfī doctrine of qualifying oneself through the Attributes of God. Al-Junayd defined mystical love as a state where “the qualities of the Beloved replace the qualities of the lover,” meaning that the union which the Şūfis of his time

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502 Ibid., 21. According to this reading, the Prophet is then also considered the sublime human being or the Perfect Man (al-insān al-kāmil) which is another of Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrines as we will below.
503 Ibid., 21.
504 Ibid., 21.
505 Ibid., 21. These aḥadīth can be found in all of the major ḥadīth sources such as Bukhārī, Muslim, etc.
506 Ibid., 22.
507 Ibid., 22.
spoke of so passionately was a transformation of the lover or seeker, “on the level of attributes.”

Al-Ghazālī writes that the goal of the Ṣūfī path is to actualize one’s inner ta’ālūh or “being like unto Allāh” which can also be called “deiformity” or “theomorphism.” Thus, the goal of union for the Ṣūfīs is really actualizing these Divine potentialities within oneself and recognizing the human connection to the Creator. It is essential to mention here that Ṣūfī masters like Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Junayd are not talking about takhallyq or “assuming” the character traits of Majesty or Divine distance, since doing so is likened to claiming divinity for oneself, which is an unforgiveable sin. The Divine traits of Majesty reveal the distance between human beings and God, so human beings cannot even begin to gain proximity to them or even aspire to assume them.

Al-Insān al-Kāmil: The Perfect Man and the Prophetic Paradigm

The human being who is able to manifest all of the Divine Attributes serves as an exemplary disclosure of the possibilities of the “human theomorphic state,” in that he serves as a model of human perfection. Ibn ‘Arabī calls such a person who achieves such realization, “the Perfect Human Being” (al-insān al-kāmil), which is one of his most famous doctrines. For Ibn ‘Arabī, only the Perfect Human Being can see things as they really are, and bear witness to the relationships between the things that permeate existence. The Perfect Human Being, as the “total theophany” (tajallī) of the Divine Names, serves as the “prototype of the universe” and also as

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508 Schimmel, 58.
510 Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge, 24.
511 Ibid., 24.
512 Ibid., 28.
513 Ibid., 27.
514 Ibid., 28.
“the prototype of man” in that he contains “within himself all of the possibilities found in the Universe.”\textsuperscript{515} The Perfect Human Being also serves as the model of the spiritual life in that he has realized all of the possibilities, and all of the states of being “inherent within the human state and has come to know, in all its fullness, what it means to be a man.”\textsuperscript{516} The Perfect Human Being is then first and foremost exemplified through the prophets, especially in the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad, and then through the great saints, especially those who were said to be the “poles” or Qutb of their age. Prophets and saints appear outwardly like all other human beings, but their inner reality or inward nature reflects the possibilities inherent in the human soul. The Prophet has often been called the first Ṣūfī, and Ibn ‘Arabī places him at the very center of his doctrine of the Perfect Human Being, since following the Prophetic example in its entirety allows human beings to actualize the Divine character traits denoted by the Names.

The Perfect Human Being’s vision combines the two lenses through which to view the universe, man, and also God, namely those of tanẓīh and tashbīh or incomparability and similarity.\textsuperscript{517} The first lens through which Perfect Human Being views reality is through the rational faculty, which declares God’s Unity (tawḥīd) and is able to affirm God’s Oneness through the cosmos. The second lens is that of imagination which is able to help him transcend the boundaries of reason to perceive God’s Self-Disclosure or theophany in all of existence.\textsuperscript{518} Whereas the limits of reason allow human beings to only get so far as to affirm God’s similarity with the aid of revelation, imagination allows the Perfect Human Being to grasp that everything reflects something of the doctrine of He/not He. Imagination (khayāl) allows human beings to grasp that God’s Self-Disclosure can never be “known with precision” since this Disclosure

\textsuperscript{515} Nasr, \textit{Three Muslim Sages}, 110.  
\textsuperscript{516} Nasr, 111.  
\textsuperscript{517} Ibid., 29.  
\textsuperscript{518} Ibid., 29.
includes the unknowable Essence. Although reason desires to understand the exact relationships present in existence in terms of either/or, Perfect man is able to see the nature of relationships clearly and knows that “all things are neither/nor, both/and, but never either/or.” The Perfect Human Being is able to open up the imagination due to his spiritual realization and attain the total vision of God’s Self-Disclosure, where he is unable to know “how” God discloses Himself but where he “sees Him doing so.” An encounter with the Divine Self-Disclosure opens the heart of the Perfect Human Being towards “infinite wisdom” which allows him to see the created order for what it really is.

Human perfection means manifesting God’s Names in their wholeness, such that the Perfect Human Being is the “fullest outward expression” of Being Itself. The Perfect Human Being alone is able to actualize all of the Divine character traits, or Qualities of Being through the actualization of theomorphism. The human individual who displays all of the Divine Names and Qualities is the expression of God’s Self-Disclosure such that the “Name Allāh shines forth in him in infinite splendor.” Through affirming the Divine Attributes, the Perfect Human Being (the microcosm) becomes identical with the cosmos (the macrocosm) which become two mirrors reflecting one another. Yet it is only in the Perfect Human Being that all things are brought together through the Perfect Human Being’s status as the “all comprehensive engendered thing” (al-kawn al-jāmi`) where all Divine Attributes are concentrated in a single place.

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519 Ibid., 29.
520 Ibid., 29.
521 Ibid., 30.
522 Ibid., 30.
523 Ibid., 30.
524 Ibid., 30.
V. The Divine Names: Human Beings, the World, and God

Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of the Divine Names offers a path for human perfection from which the true human nature can be realized. What is unique about his approach to the Divine Names is that these Qualities tell us a great deal about ourselves and also help us come to know God. Sustained reflection on these Qualities allows the worshipper to not only learn more about the object of desire but also the very character traits the Prophet called on human beings to acquire. Thus, anything which can be said to be good or beautiful of our character traits is only because these are derived from God’s Beautiful character traits. As I mentioned at the start of this section, Ibn ‘Arabī was called the “expositor par excellence of gnosis” because he was able to explain the inner dimension of Islam in such detail and explain how human perfection leads to a meeting with God in this world. Whereas he begins with trying to find God, he ultimately ends with the human being, the knowledge of which is essential to gaining any knowledge about the Creator, since “he who knows himself knows his Lord.” Yet, this knowledge or the word used to describe it (‘arafa) in this Prophetic tradition means something more like recognition rather than gaining some sort of new information. The knowledge that arises from knowing oneself is thus simply renewed knowledge of what “one already knows in one’s innermost being.”525 This re-cognition is central to Sufism as ma’rifah and ‘irfān, which are other names for Sufism, also represent this theme of recognition, which is at once self-recognition and simultaneously God’s recognition.526 Adam was taught all of the Names, but he forgot (20:115) and thus God had to repeatedly send reminders to human beings to remind them of what they had forgotten, which was a knowledge that was central to their very being itself.527 Remembrance of God through these Names allows human beings to

527 Ibid., 1744.
actualize those character traits which are essential to their primordial nature, and which must become manifest in order to bring about human perfection and wholeness.  

Recovering the *fitrah* or the primordial nature and achieving “deiformity” allows for human beings to become fully human by realizing “the meaning of *tawḥīd* in the depths of the human heart.” As Chittick explains, the Ṣūfī path can be summed up as a path where “each human being is called to recognize Hidden Treasure, to recollect the names taught to Adam, to love the true Beloved, and to be embraced by the true Lover.” The first step, recognizing the Hidden Treasure is based upon the *ḥadīth qudsi* which states “I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be recognized; so I created the creatures so that I would be recognized.” This Divine saying shows that God created the world to be known, which is why he gave human beings the ability to recognize Him in every facet of existence. Human recognition of the Hidden Treasure engenders love, which allows human beings to act as the Self-Disclosures of the Most Beautiful Names. As Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (1209–1274 CE), one of Ibn ‘Arabī’s students explains, the human soul, by virtue of being taught all the Names by God is “God’s revealed book” because God states, *We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth* (41:53). Al-Qūnawī claims that this verse indicates that for human beings, knowledge of their own souls is “knowledge of the Book.” Signs and traces of the Divine Names and Attributes permeate the universe, which is a theatre of Divine Self-Disclosure. Those who are able to see the manifestation of God in these signs by seeing them as signs of the Real are able to recognize the cosmos for what it really is. In his *Kitab al-Hikam*, Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh writes, “The Real

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528 Ibid., 1744.
529 Ibid., 1748.
530 Ibid., 1748.
531 Ibid., 1746.
532 Ibid., 1741.
is not veiled from you. Rather, it is you who are veiled from seeing It." Once the veils of ignorance are lifted, and the Truth becomes apparent, the human being contemplates Him in everything. Contemplation upon the signs of God which penetrate every aspect of the universe, the human soul, and revelation leads human beings to recognize that everything in the universe is a Self-Disclosure of the Divine. The relationships between human beings and the cosmos, the cosmos and God, and God to all of creation attest to the Oneness of God and His total Self-Disclosure as both Majesty and Beauty, Distant and Near, and Inward and Outward. Only when creatures affirm God’s revelation as both He and Not He can they truly affirm *tawḥīd* and display the Divine Mystery on their own theatre of existence.

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534 Al-İskandarī. *Ṣūfī Aphorisms (Kitab al-Hikam)*, 47.
AFTERWORD

Schimmel explains that the central mystery of Islam is tawḥīd, or affirming that God is One, which Muslims can interiorize through an experience of God’s Oneness.535 In the Islamic view, attesting to God’s Oneness is the goal of all human beings, since the Qur’an, and in fact all of sacred history, is a reminder that there is no god but God. This message permeates all of existence, and all created things are called upon to glorify the Creator. Nasr calls the shahādah the “supreme statement of both Divine Unity and Transcendence,” since it teaches human beings about God Oneness through negation and affirmation.536 When Muslims repeat the testimony of faith, they affirm God’s Transcendence by negating all else from Him. With the shahādah as a framework, one can take this negation a step further, and say that there is no knowledge but God’s Knowledge, no mercy but God’s Mercy, no beauty but the Divine Beauty, no power but the Divine power, and so on.537 This exercise can be repeated with every Divine Name to endlessly negate all else from God, and affirm that nothing in the universe shares in God’s Unity, since everything can only be conceived of in relation to Him.

Thus, the Divine Names serve as ways to know God and return to Him.538 When God calls upon readers of the Qur’an to enumerate His Names, the practice of doing so allows Muslims to continually affirm His Oneness (tawḥīd) and to understand their relationship to the Divine. Therefore, where we begin with many Divine Names, we ultimately are led back, as is the case with all things, to the One. By affirming that God is One, human beings interiorize the Divine Mystery and come to learn their role in the grand theatre of the universe. If it seems as though God has Attributes which seem similar to the created order, the Ṣūfīs would say that human beings

535 Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 17.
537 Nasr, xxv.
538 Ibid., xxv.
really reflect Divine Attributes which are central to their existence, by virtue of being created in God’s form (sūrah). Thus, all Attributes, whether they indicate incomparability or similarity, only attest to God’s Absolute Oneness and Transcendence. Only God displays these Character Traits absolutely; human beings can only ever display the Attributes in a limited sense.

Examining the Divine Names allows human beings to know God in terms of His similarity and His incomparability, and also enables them to reflect on those character traits which are essential to being fully human. Thus, knowledge of ourselves, and our inner being, which contains the entire set of Divine Attributes is a prerequisite for gaining any knowledge of God. By actualizing those character traits which are the roots of all that exists, human beings are able to recognize the meaning of Divine Oneness in the depths of their hearts. Once they affirm God’s Oneness in their being, human beings are able to recognize God’s total Self-Disclosure as both Near and Far, Inward and Outward, Beauty and Majesty.

Although the ways of revelation and reason only allow human beings to come to understand God in terms of His dissimilarity from the created order, the way of experience allows human beings to understand God in terms of both registers He uses to describe Himself, tanzīh and tashbīh. Throughout their lives, human beings experience God as Immanent and Transcendent, Manifest and Hidden. Their experiences of the One God constantly oscillate between these two states. In order to know God, human beings must transcend paradox and synthesize their opposing experiences of the Divine. In our survey of the approaches to the Divine Names and Attributes, only a few thinkers were able to explain how these opposing views fit together, and offer some of the most profound insights on what the Divine Names and Attributes tell us about God, the world, and most surprisingly, ourselves. Even though the earliest theologians began to allude to the Divine Mystery, Ibn ‘Arabī was able to transform the Ashʿarī doctrine of a paradoxical view of the Divine
Names and Attributes in relation to the Divine Essence into an intricate metaphysical doctrine. Whereas al-Ashʿarī recognized that we can understand God in terms of paradox, and that it is possible that God’s Attributes can be neither identical to, nor other than the Divine Essence, Ibn ʿArabī was able to explain what this paradox tells us about the nature of the created order.

The call to characterize oneself by the Attributes of God insofar as humanly possible is one of the most interesting findings we come across when researching the Divine Names. This doctrine goes beyond mere theory and offers a practice, a way of spiritual realization and a method of transcending our limited understanding of God, the world, and ourselves. Not only is this idea rooted in the Prophetic tradition of cultivating beautiful virtues, but this doctrine features across the Abrahamic faiths. For Maimonides (1138–1204), the influential Jewish philosopher and Torah scholar, knowledge of God comes directly from knowledge of His Attributes, which in turn allows us to gain knowledge of His Acts. Through knowledge of God’s acts, human beings learn that their chief purpose is to “make their acts similar to the acts of God,” a call that is reflected in scriptural verses which say, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2), and “He is gracious, so be you also gracious; He is merciful, so be you also merciful” (Talmud. 1:54). In this view, the Divine Qualities of Mercy, Grace, and even Holiness call for reflection, and more importantly, actualization.

Acquiring these characteristics is quite difficult, since human beings display their own juxtaposition of qualities that bar them from recognizing their own share in the Divine Qualities. The human being is composed of God’s Spirit, which is an intense light, and dense and dark clay, and actualizing one’s human potential requires one to see the light which is at the center of one’s being, and see through the dark clay that prevents them from seeing that the Divine is already

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present. Those human beings who are able to uncover the luminous part of their soul, are able to transcend their own ignorance of the nature of things, and fix themselves on the Divine Light. They are also able to recognize the part of the Divine Light which resides in their own being. This journey towards knowledge of ourselves is inward and outward, composed of finding and not-finding, affirmation and negation. These contradictions, or rather paradoxes, are an unshakable fact of the created order. Human beings spend their entire lifetimes finding God, all the while cultivating an understanding of the dualities present in their very own souls. Reason and logic constrain our understanding of the world, God, and ourselves, whereas our faculty of imagination allows us to recognize the paradoxes of creation and integrate opposites – Yes and No, He and Not He. The very structures which are present in every created thing are constantly in opposition. Yet, human beings are called upon to recognize the One amongst the multiplicity, and find Him even when the world or reason may bar them from knowledge of Him.
INTRODUCTION


Yusuf, Hamza. The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥawi (Zaytuna Institute, 2007).

CHAPTER 1


Gomaa, Ali. “An Introduction to Kalām (Islamic Theology).”


Chapter 2


CHAPTER 3


CONCLUSION


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