THE UNIQUE ASPECTS OF ABU MANSUR AL-MATURIDI'S WORKS

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Abstract

It is well-known that the Maturidite doctrine is one of the two main theological schools in the Islamic world. The widespread acceptance and prominence of this school are undoubtedly due to the significant influence of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi's works. Two of his main works have reached us: Kitab al-Tawhid, which is devoted to the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah, and his Qur'anic exegesis titled Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah. In this tafsir as well, the verses of the Qur'an are primarily interpreted from a theological perspective. These two works served as the cornerstone of the Maturidite theological school. Therefore, understanding Maturidite theology and its unique features begins with the study of Imam al-Maturidi's writings. To properly comprehend and grasp the essence of any work, it is of utmost importance to understand its writing style and methodology.

Keywords: Maturidism, theology, style, methodology, tafsir.

Introduction

The esteemed scholar (ʿAllāma) set as his principal goal the comprehensive substantiation of the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah, presenting decisive evidence for each theological issue within Sunni doctrine. W. Rudolph writes the following about Kitab al-Tawhid:

"This work does not merely compile the fundamental tenets of faith and provide concise definitions for them. Its aim is to examine the entirety of Islamic theology and to demonstrate that it must be acknowledged as a coherent system based on irrefutable evidence" [Rudolph W., 2001:151].

The same can be said about Ta'wilat Ahl al-Sunnah. That is, the scholar pays significant attention to proving the doctrines of Ahl al-Sunnah thoroughly, through both transmitted (naqli) and rational-logical ('aqli) arguments. Although Rudolph adopts a critical tone toward al-Maturidi and Maturidism, he nevertheless acknowledges the scholar's mastery in argumentation.

A central feature of al-Maturidi's intellectual legacy is his polemical and refutational style. The primary motivation for this approach was his desire to eliminate theological disputes, which he saw as the root cause of many problems in the Islamic world, and to unite all Muslims under the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah.

Materials and Methods

During the time of al-Maturidi, there were intense debates and discussions in Transoxiana concerning theological and jurisprudential matters. These intellectual currents undoubtedly influenced the activities of the scholar himself.

Abu Zahra writes the following regarding the history of Transoxiana:

"This region was a center for debates and discussions in the fields of jurisprudence and legal theory. Jurisprudential debates primarily took place between the Hanafis and the Shafi'is. Such gatherings would invigorate the mosques through scholarly disputation" [Muhammad Abu Zahra, 1995:164].

In reality, the roots of these phenomena go much further back – tracing as far as the time of the Companions. Not long after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), disagreements and disputes arose over the matter of the caliphate, and debates flared over theological issues that are beyond human comprehension. As a result, conflicting opinions began to surface.

The issues that caused much of these disputes included: the nature and conditions of faith (īmān), whether actions are integral to faith, debates surrounding disbelief (kufr) and associating partners with God (shirk), whether the names and attributes of God are eternal (qadīm) or created (ḥādith), human free will and divine predestination (qadar), the ultimate fate of Muslims who commit major sins, and whether the Qur'an is created or uncreated – among others.

A study of Islamic history reveals that such debates and controversies over theological matters have been persistent throughout time. It is also historically evident that such disagreements sometimes led to bloody conflicts. Scholars of Sunni orthodoxy made significant efforts to resolve these doctrinal disputes. As a result, the influence and harm caused by sects and deviant groups in the Islamic world gradually diminished.

Among the scholars of Transoxiana, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi made a substantial contribution by establishing an independent school of theology (ʿilm al-ʿaqīdah) and helping to safeguard the Muslim community from the misleading doctrines of deviant sects.

Undoubtedly, al-Maturidi's greatest service was his comprehensive refutation – based on both transmitted (naqli) and rational (ʿaqli) arguments – of the claims put forth by various sects that opposed Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah in his time. For instance, he wrote refutations against the works of leading Muʿtazilite figures, whose teachings had caused considerable unrest in the Muslim world, and he intellectually defeated them on multiple fronts.

To better understand the scholarly persona of Imam al-Maturidi, it is essential to closely examine the methods and approaches he employed. In articulating his views and refuting opposing opinions, al-Maturidi predominantly relied on persuasive reasoning. As will be seen in the following sections, he placed great importance on reason and knowledge alongside transmitted reports. Thus, while citing relevant textual evidence on one hand, he also supported his arguments through rational proof, as well as sociological and historical evidence [Ahmet A.K., 2008:48].

Results

In refuting the claims of deviant sects, the scholar (al-ʿAllāma) adopted an impartial and scholarly approach. He would first study the claims of the sect in question in full, and only then present his refutations based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, followed by rational, logical, and, where appropriate, philosophical arguments as academic evidence. It is essential to highlight al-Maturidi's virtues in scholarly debates—his objectivity, respect for differing opinions, and his ability to thoroughly substantiate his own views with sound reasoning.

Al-Maturidi classified the sources of attaining knowledge and understanding the truths of existence into three categories, all of which he referenced in his works as bases for his arguments and reasoning:

- Sensory perception (ʿiyān),
- Transmitted reports (akhbār),
- Rational inquiry (naẓar) [al-Maturidi, 2011: 69].

A close examination of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi's exegetical method reveals that he never elevated reason above revelation. Rather, he resorted to rational arguments only in cases where transmitted proofs (naqli) were ambiguous (mutashābih) or lacked definitiveness, in order to support the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah.

Furthermore, al-Maturidi would only comment on ambiguous matters within Qur'anic exegesis when there was scholarly benefit to be gained. Otherwise, he would defer such knowledge to Allah and avoid unnecessary debate. For example, while referencing the differing interpretations by exegetes regarding the nature of the tree mentioned in Surah al-Baqarah (2:35), which led to the descent of Adam (peace be upon him) and his spouse from Paradise, he neither affirms any specific opinion nor engages in dispute. Instead, he expresses his stance as follows:

"It is not permissible to speak about its nature without revelation. No revelation (i.e., verse) has come that interprets this matter. Therefore, affirming any of these views with certainty is impermissible" [al-Maturidi, 2005-2007: 90].

Based on this principle, Imam al-Maturidi avoids speculative assertions when discussing any religious group or sect. If precise information is lacking, he presents all existing views and known reports, then leaves the conclusion to the reader. In doing so, he prevents hypothetical opinions from being accepted as established facts.

For instance, while discussing the Sābi'ūn in his tafsir, he writes:

"There is disagreement regarding the Sābi'ūn. Some say: 'They are a people who worship angels and read the Torah.' Others state: 'They were worshippers of celestial bodies; a group between the Magians and Christians; or a people between the Jews and Magians.' Still others claim: 'They followed the beliefs of heretics and believed in two gods.' As there is no surviving scripture from them, we have no certain knowledge about who they were" [al-Maturidi, 2005-2007: 147].

One of the contemporary scholars, Muhammad Fazl Muhammad Abu Jabal, comments on the role of rational opinion (ra'y) in al-Maturidi's exegetical method as follows:

"Imam al-Maturidi frequently appeals to reason in his exegesis. The reason for this, in short, may be attributed to his intellectual alignment with the 'Iraqi School' – also known as the 'School of Rational Opinion' (madhhab al-ra'y). This school was founded by the great Companion ʿAbdullah ibn Masʿud (may Allah be pleased with him), and after him, many renowned scholars upheld and advanced its principles. Among its most prominent representatives were Abu Hanifa al-Nuʿman and his two famous students: Abu Yusuf and Muhammad ibn al-Hasan. These scholars had a profound influence on the intellectual and scientific life of Islamic civilization. Imam al-Maturidi was also a representative of this school – indeed, one of the leading figures who helped shape its foundational principles. However, he was not merely a follower or imitator; rather, he possessed distinct, original, and innovative characteristics of his own".

Discussion

It is known that many researchers who view the Maturidite doctrine critically accuse the scholar (Imam al-Maturidi) of relying excessively on reason and giving it precedence over transmitted evidence (naql). These accusations often stem from a superficial understanding of Maturidism or from studying it in a one-sided manner.

Even one of the renowned scholars, Muhammad Abu Zahra, while comparing Maturidism with Ashʿarism, emphasizes that al-Maturidi placed significant emphasis on rationality, stating the following:

"However, upon a deeper study of the views of al-Maturidi and al-Ashʿari, we observe that there is indeed a difference in their respective approaches to the use of reason in theological matters. There is no doubt that both imams attempt to employ reason and logical proofs in substantiating the theological doctrines found in the Qur'an. While both of them rely on the creeds presented in the Qur'an, one of them grants a greater 'authority' to reason than the other.

For instance, in Ashʿarism, the obligation to know God only arises once the divine call (daʿwah) to the true religion has been delivered. In contrast, Maturidism holds that recognizing God is rationally obligatory (wājib ʿaqlan), even if the call has not yet reached the person. In this regard, al-Maturidi follows the path of Abu Hanifa..." [Muhammad Abu Zahra, 1995:167].

Abu Zahra attempts to support his view with such examples. In reality, however, this perspective is widely held in the Arab world, particularly among those who adhere to Ashʿarism.

As a rebuttal to this view, it should be noted that in Kitab al-Tawhid, when al-Maturidi outlines the foundations of knowledge, he places rational inference (naẓar) last among the sources. Moreover, when confronting those who reject the use of reason as valid evidence in matters of creed, he first responds using transmitted sources (naql). For instance, he cites verses from the Qur'an such as:

"We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves..." (Fussilat: 53)

"Do they not look at the camels – how they are created? And at the sky – how it is raised? And at the mountains – how they are fixed firm? And at the earth – how it is spread out?" (al-Ghāshiyah: 17-20)

These verses emphasize that Allah commands and encourages His servants to engage in rational reflection. It is likely that such expressions in the Qur'an – like "Do they not reflect?" – led al-Maturidi to refer to rational arguments as naẓar (deliberation) [al-Maturidi, 2011:73].

Furthermore, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi fiercely opposed the Muʿtazilites, who prioritized reason over revelation. Yet, in order to refute these sects – who regarded reason as the primary standard – he was compelled to rely more heavily on rational and logical reasoning. This is because, in many cases, errors rooted in rational arguments must be corrected through rational counterarguments.

One who denies naẓar (rational inference) has no argument other than naẓar (i.e., reason) itself. This demonstrates that rational evidence is required even to refute rational arguments. To understand the wisdom behind creation – and to recognize that it was not brought into existence without purpose – one must engage in rational reflection. Likewise, in order to determine who created the universe, whether it exists by itself, whether it was created later or has always existed, reason must be employed. All of this proves that there is no path to knowledge other than through naẓar (rational reasoning) [al-Maturidi, 2011:73].

From this, it becomes clear that al-Maturidi's frequent use of rational and logical arguments does not indicate that he prioritized reason over revelation. Rather, he employed rational arguments to effectively refute those who placed undue emphasis on reason, or to reinforce and clarify transmitted proofs.

"Indeed, the allies (awliyā') of Allah will have no fear, nor will they grieve – those who believed and were God-conscious" (Yūnus: 62-63).

In particular, regarding the interpretation of the above verse, Imam Maturidi says the following: "The Mu'tazilites say about these words of Allah, the Glorious and Exalted: 'This verse proves that those who commit major sins are not true believers. Because if they were true believers, they would certainly be considered friends of Allah. If they were friends of Allah, there would be no fear or anxiety for them. Therefore, undoubtedly, the fear and anxiety experienced by those who commit major sins indicates that they are not believers. They do not have the friendship that comes from faith.' However, in our opinion, and Allah knows best: the verse 'Indeed, there is no fear for the friends (awliya) of Allah, nor shall they grieve' applies to a specific time. It is possible that those who commit major sins may also experience no fear or anxiety for a certain period. There is no definitive proof from the verse that Allah's friends will never experience any fear or anxiety from beginning to end. Therefore, from Allah's statement 'Indeed, there is no fear for the friends of Allah, nor shall they grieve,' the fear and anxiety referred to is that which pertains to this worldly life. Because their fear and anxiety are directed toward the Hereafter. When it says, 'Indeed, there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve,' it likely refers to Paradise, since if they enter Paradise, they will be free from all things that cause them distress.'" [Maturidi, 2005-2007: 78].

Thus, the scholar debates the Mu'tazilites and those who prioritize reason and logic above all else using their own method. On one hand, by confronting these groups with the reasoning and proofs they themselves prefer, he aims for them to see and understand their own errors. On the other hand, he strengthens the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah with intellectual and logical evidence. As a result of these efforts, Maturidi was able to practically demonstrate that the Ahl al-Sunnah creed is far superior in terms of logical foundation compared to the teachings of other sects.

Conclusion

It can be seen that Maturidi's method in explaining doctrinal issues in the Qur'an is based on and defends the theological views formed within the Hanafi tradition. Where necessary, he also enriches these views by citing evidence from Qur'anic verses. Considering the characteristics of his time, he referred to many theological schools and presented well-rounded refutations against them. His tafsir stands out as it gathers the doctrinal ideas and beliefs of various theological currents in one place.

The style and methodology of the scholar's works were greatly influenced by the socio-political processes of his era, as well as by the struggle to preserve pure Islamic creed, which gave his works significant scientific value.

Furthermore, as can be seen from the above evidence, Maturidi first gathered the views of each theological school separately and then gave systematic refutations to them. When analyzing these refutations, it becomes clear that they primarily rely on textual (naqli) evidence, while logical and rational proofs are mostly brought to support and explain these textual evidences.

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