

THE LIFE OF ABU MANSUR AL-MATURIDI AND HIS ROLE IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzed the opinions of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi on the issue of human perfection. Abu Mansur al-Maturidi is one of the most influential theologians in the Muslim World. He emerged in the tenth century in Central Asia and established his own theological school, al-Maturidiyyah; a school that played and continues to play a pivotal role in the formation of the Sunni synthetic theological movement in the Muslim world.

Keywords: human perfection, Maturidi, Hanafi, Muslim.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье проанализировано мнение Абу Мансура аль-Матуриди по вопросу о совершенстве человека. Абу Мансур аль-Матуриди — один из самых влиятельных богословов мусульманского мира. Он появился в десятом веке в Средней Азии и основал собственную богословскую школу аль-Матуридийя; школа, которая играла и продолжает играть ключевую роль в формировании суннитского синтетического богословского движения в мусульманском мире.

Ключевые слова: человеческое совершенство, Матуриди, ханафиты, мусульмане.

INTRODUCTION

Abu Mansur al-Maturidi was a prominent Muslim scholar of the tenth century. Many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars consider him one of the founding fathers of Sunni synthetic theology. This recognition does not come as a surprise since al-Maturidi founded one of the two main schools of theology in Islam: al-Maturidiyyah, a venerable theological institution, which has been followed and continues to be embraced and respected by billions of Muslims across centuries around the globe. Tashkubra states, “one should know that the leaders of the Sunni Muslims, in theology, are two; one of them is Ḥanafī and the second is Shafī’ī” (Tashkubrazadah, 1985).

Nonetheless, despite the fact he is one of the theologians of the epoch, the degree of focus on his life and context of his rise, in biographical and academic literature, is so modest that Badawī classifies it as “unfitting and unfair to his calibre”. The biographers who wrote about him, such as al-Laknawī, al-Sam’ani, al-Qurashi,

Ṭashkubra, al-Bayadi, al-Zabidi, Abu Mu'in al-Nasafi provide short sketches of al-Maturidi's life and even less on the socio-political and theological context of his region and its influence on his academic constitution.

Al-Maturidi is a man whose appellations and epithets overshadow his name, a practice quite common in Islamic literature. Nicknames and titles serve as distinguishing markers for people who had very common names. Al-Maturidi's full name was Muhammad son of Muhammad son of Mahmoud. Nonetheless, he is famously known by his kunya Abu Mansur and his nickname al-Maturidi, which means "the one from the city of Maturid" referring to his birthplace.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Al-Maturidi grew up in Central Asia. This region is known in classical Arab literature as ما وراء النهر ("Ma wara' al-nahr" - the land beyond the river), in reference to a river referred to in Arabic as Jayḥun, which is famous in classical antiquity as the Oxus River. As Hugh Kennedy explains, "these lands were considered to be part of Khurasan, the vast province that also included North East Iran" which was of great strategic, political and economic importance (Kennedy, 2007).

Little is known about al-Maturidi's family. Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, biographers and heresiographers have provided little information about his personal life. Even his ethnic background seems to be subject to debate and assumptions among biographers and chroniclers. As far as his date of birth is concerned, none of the historians and biographers who wrote about al-Maturidi's life provides the exact date. Ibrahim and Sayyid Awaḍayn state, "the researcher in the life of al-Maturidi will not be able to find recorded, his exact date of birth..." (al-Maturidi, 1994). As a result, some scholars speculate on his date of birth and others attempt to deduce it by extraneous factors. Ibrahim and Sayyid Awaḍayn state, "and whatever the matter may be, the researcher finds no escape from studying the biographies of his teachers in order to estimate his life period...". This method led Ibrahim and Sayyid to conclude al-Maturidi was born before 862 CE. In other words, al-Maturidi was born during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil, before the birth of Abu Ḥasan al-Ash'ari (d. 936 CE), one of the most prominent Muslim theologians who founded the Ash'ari synthetic school of theology, minimally by 25 to 27 years. This is a significant finding as far as the evolution of Islamic synthetic theology is concerned. As far as his date of death is concerned, most biographers concur that al-Maturidi died in 944 CE and was buried in Samarqand.

At the first instance, the difference of opinions about al-Maturidi's dates of birth and death may seem trivial. However, these dates are crucial to determine a number

of important factors, among them the period in which he lived, the political and academic climate he grew in, the calibre of the scholars from whom he acquired knowledge, and the academic developments, controversies and challenges that he, as a scholar at his time, faced. It is also important to establish whether al-Maturidi or al-Ash'ari was the first to provide a basis for Sunni synthetic theology.

Despite the ambiguity and lack of specific details about his personal life, the available information proves constructive. It is apparent through deduction that al-Maturidi lived during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil. This marks a focal point in the history of Islam and evolution of Islamic disciplines. Many historians and biographers, such as Ibn Abi Ya'la (d. 1131 CE), a famous Hanbali Muslim scholar, Ibn al-Athir, Suyuti (d. 1505 CE), a prominent Muslim scholar, and Wakil, a contemporary Muslim scholar, confirm that al-Mutawakkil is the caliph that ended the political dominance of the Mu'tazilites over the central government in Baghdad. He ended the trial of "the creation of the Qur'an" that was imposed throughout the Muslim world, and released Ahmad Ibn Hanbal from prison and honoured him (Izziddin, 1987). At the same time, this is the era that witnessed the launch of the traditionalists of their counter-radical campaign against the Mu'tazilites and caused the migration of many of the latter to the region where al-Maturidi lived. Another valuable insight one gains from the dates is that al-Maturidi was born approximately 25 years before the birth of the renowned Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari, who founded the famous Sunni Ash'ari theological school.

Al-Maturidi had the privilege of studying under a number of prominent scholars who excelled in various Islamic sciences, such as jurisprudence and theology. One of al-Maturidi's early teachers was Abu Bakr Ahmad Ibn Ishaq al-Jawzajani. There is little information available about his personal life, but he was one of the few scholars that proved their prominence in all sciences. He was Abu Nasr al-Ayadi's main teachers, who was also one of al-Maturidi's teachers. It seems al-Maturidi began learning at the hands of Abu Bakr and then continued his tuition under Abu Nasr.

Abu Nasr Ahmad Ibn al-Abbas al-Ansari was one of al-Maturidi's main teachers. Qurashi speaks of his reputation, "he was a man that has no equal in the land in knowledge, piety, writings, perseverance and courage". Nasafi draws a similar portrait, "... as far as knowledge is concerned he was an ocean that none can reach its end. He was an Imam in all the disciplines". Interestingly, Hamza al-Sahmi (d. 1036 CE), a Muslim historian, sheds further light on Abu Nasr's personality and advises he is "from the school of the people of ra'y". In other words, he was from the school of Abu Hanifa. By extension, this indicates Abu Bakr al-Jawzajani is also Hanafi, since he was Abu Nasr's sole teacher.

The excellence of al-Maturidi as a theologian overshadows his important contributions in the other Islamic disciplines. Nonetheless, the wealth of his oeuvre demonstrates he contributed to the main fundamental Islamic disciplines.

One of the fundamental Islamic disciplines in which al-Maturidi wrote is *usul al-fiqh*. Khalifa, Ṭash Kubra, al-Laknawi, Baghdadi list two books for al-Maturidi in this discipline: *Kitab al-Jadal* (The Book of Debate) and *Ma'axaz al-Shari'ah* (The Methodologies of Islamic Sharia).

Furthermore, according to Khalifa, these two books became the main references for Ḥanafi scholars in the field of *usul al-fiqh* until the twelfth century. In other words, for more than two centuries, Ḥanafi scholars studied, taught and relied on al-Maturidi's books to shape the understanding of the Ḥanafi school in the discipline of *usul al-fiqh* and by extension the discipline of Islamic jurisprudence. This establishes that al-Maturidi's scholarship and prominence is not and cannot be confined to the field of theology. More importantly, it demonstrates al-Maturidi was a leading scholar who left his mark in every field he studied. Unfortunately, these two books no longer exist.

It is clear the environment, circumstances of the region and era influenced al-Maturidi's education, motivations and academic contributions. The region in which he grew up and studied was economically prosperous and affluent. In addition, it enjoyed a permanent state of political stability and security; therefore, it was an appropriate environment for al-Maturidi and all scholars to study, research and teach. The religious piety of the Samanid kings and their reverence of knowledge ensured the community of scholars and intellectuals were encouraged and supported by the state. The policies they applied not only promoted the freedom of religious study and research, but also catered for the needs of all scholars and intellectuals, be they locals or visitors. The multiculturalism and freedom of religion the region enjoyed opened the gate to close and frequent cultural, intellectual and religious interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims.

CONCLUSION

The engagement between the Muslim and non-Muslim orientations within the same society and exposure to new sources of knowledge and reason stimulated Muslim scholars to seek new instruments of debate and improvise new methods to counter the non-traditional narratives. Al-Maturidi was at the forefront of this movement in his region and the Muslim world. This necessitated him to make important contributions in theology and Qur'anic exegesis because he would construct his new theological arguments on the latter to protect the conventional rhetoric that was applied by Muslims in the traditional cities. It further promoted the

use of aql, intellect and logic, in theological thought and debates. Thus, it enriched Muslims with new arguments to support their creed.

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