CHAPTER 8

An Outline of al-Māturīdī’s Teachings

Prolegomena: Epistemology

The K. al-Tawḥīd begins, as we have seen, with an discussion of epistemological questions.1 Therein, al-Māturīdī explains why people follow numerous false beliefs and heresies and then clarifies which pathways of knowledge should be tread instead so that all the correct insights of religion can ultimately be attained. He presents his alternatives confidently, and as expected, displays an optimistic perspective on what can possibly be known. He does not discuss, for example, whether or not there are, in fact, proofs for the truth of a particular religion; that they exist is supposed to be certain.2 It is only a matter of how they are to be found and what can prevent people from knowing them.

Al-Māturīdī arrives at the latter—i.e., the cause of all error—very quickly. It is the widespread phenomenon of belief based on authority (taqlīd), the inclination of so many to latch onto one or another intellectual or religious figure without actually understanding or even fathoming the bases of their views. The consequence of this is that by now every sect and orientation has found its adherents. This is also to blame for the persistence of these devotees in their adoption of deviant teachings and their belief that they are in the sole possession of the truth.3

Whoever frees himself of taqlīd, however, recognizes the criteria that will help him arrive at the proper doctrine. Such a person knows, namely, that among the many preachers who purport to possess religious truths, one must be located who does not merely make claims but also proves his teachings with convincing arguments.4 We have the means at our disposal to carry out this rather difficult task because humans have access to three methods that make them capable of differentiating between truth and falsehood: the senses (ʿiyān as a pars pro toto) which we share with all living beings; inquiry (naẓar) with

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2 Cf. Tawḥīd, 3.12f.: illā an yakūna li-ḥadīn . . . ḥujjatu ʿaqīlin . . . wa burhānun . . . fa huwa al-muḥiqqu.
3 Ibid., 3.6–11; on the critique of taqlīd, cf. also 59.13, 95.6, 111.14, 123.8, 168.8, 168.15, 197.2, 223.5, 363.19.
4 Ibid., 3.11–4.4.
our own intellect (ʿaql); and transmission (samʿ/akhbār), in as much as it can be secured.⁵ These never cease to help us find the answers to secular questions, and as such can also be of use in matters of religion, though certainly the importance of the senses retreats somewhat while rational inquiry and transmission carry a weightier role.⁶

What al-Māturīdī presents here is not conceptually new, and I have treated it in more detail elsewhere.⁷ Thus it suffices at this point to emphasize again what can be described as the two characteristic features of his epistemology. First, al-Māturīdī is dependent on older Muʿtazilite models, since he knows a tripartite schemata for obtaining knowledge, but not the bipartite classification of necessary (ḍarūrī) and acquired (muktasab) knowledge which came to prominence with al-Jubbāʾī. Second, our theologian distinguishes himself by leaving people a relatively large degree of freedom for rational speculation to act. The intellect is said to be capable of proving the existence of God from His creation and of knowing what good and bad acts are. This greatly distinguishes al-Māturīdī’s epistemology from that of al-Ashʿarī, who did not give human thought a comparable type of autonomy and fundamentally restricted the priority of the intellect in favor of transmission.

The consequences that follow from this epistemological framework are important for our subsequent examinations because they essentially determine the form in which al-Māturīdī argues and demonstrates his arguments. Indeed, he does not restrict himself to mentioning his epistemological foundations only once, as in the introduction to the K. al-Tawḥīd. On the contrary, he is concerned with reiterating these principles explicitly when he states that a certain argument is based on the impressions of the senses, rational inferences, or statements of transmission (especially the Qurʾān, seldom the ḥadīth).

This makes his discourse admittedly cumbersome at times. Furthermore, as we will soon see, his categorization of arguments into one of three categories does not work in all cases. But this resolute application of method creates a noticeable result overall: It leads al-Māturīdī to secure his theological views, when possible, on multiple epistemological grounds. This means that in regard to almost all the details of his theological doctrine, we are told why they are acceptable from the intellect as well as from transmission, and if possible also from the perspective of the senses.⁸ Our theologian thus adheres to the principles of his introductory statements throughout the course of his work,

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⁵ Ibid., 7.1–11.4.
⁶ Ibid., 4.5–6 ult.
⁷ Rudolph, “Ratio und Überlieferung.”