What human beings can know about God’s essence and attributes is a question which has occupied the minds of both philosophers and theologians. Since the beginning of the second/eighth century Muslim theologians have dealt with this question, generally coming to two opposing conclusions: a. God’s essence cannot be known; and b. God’s essence can be known. Similarly, opinions differed concerning His attributes. Actually, the Qur’ān itself can serve as a source for discussion of this issue. The Qur’ānic verses “There is no thing like Him” (42.11) and “There is no one equal to Him” (112.4) prove, when taken literally, that God’s essence and attributes cannot really be known, for God is unlike anything. However, Muslim speculative theologians have found Qur’ānic verses, which do not differentiate between God’s essence and attributes, wanting, and, therefore, sought to provide speculative answers to this question. Ğahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 129/746), who seems to have been the first theologian to deal with this topic, stated that God is not a thing (ṣayr) which may be understood as “God is not a
being”. Like Plotinus, Ġahm comes to the conclusion that God is not a being, because He is infinite and undefined. Consequently, God is other than creation and totally transcendent, which means that He is above all attributes. Another conclusion which one can draw from the denial of God’s being is the impossibility to apply attributes, which are understood as entities existing in God, to God, for that which is not a being cannot be divided into parts and be composite like created things.

Presenting corroboration neither Qur’anic nor speculative,DIRRĀ ibn ‘Amr (d. 200/815), Ḥafṣ al-Fard (fl. at the beginning of the ninth century), and Sufyān ibn Saḥbān (or Saḥṭān) believed that God would create a sixth sense in the Resurrection whereby people would know God’s essence. Thus God’s essence can be known only by a divine act. Most of the speculative theologians, Muṭṭazilites, Ḥāriqītēs, Śītītes, and Murḡītītes, rejected this view.

The head of the Baṣrī school of the Muṭṭazīlīs Abū al-Hudayl al-‘Allāf (d. 235/850) derives from God’s incorporeality and simplicity that His attributes are identical to His essence. In other words, the attributes belong to the divine essence but tell us nothing about it. Hence God is absolutely transcendent. One cannot perceive or define His essence by the intellect. Only through God’s acts, which can be known through the signs He leaves in the universe, can we know about Him. However, Abū al-Hudayl holds that to see God in the world to come means to know Him. Like most of the Muṭṭazīlīs, he does not state the object of this knowledge, and we can only assume that by knowing God he means knowing His essence. Two Muṭṭazīlīs, Ḥīsām al-Fuwaṭī (d. before 218/833) and his disciple ‘Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 250/864) go further in asserting the impossibility of man’s knowledge of God’s essence, claiming that since God is incorporeal He can be perceived

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4 A Murḡītī jurisprudent and speculative theologian. Al-Hayyāt, Kitāb al-intisār, ed. H.S. Nyberg (Cairo 1925) with A.N. Nader trans. into French, Beirut 1957, p. 140, n. 112. He was probably a contemporary of Dirrā and Ḥafṣ.