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IMĀM AL-MĀTURĪDĪ AND THE FORMATION OF THE MĀTURĪDĪ DOCTRINE

Jaloliddin Mamasoliyev

Second-year master's student in Theology (Islamic theology, philosophy and the Māturīdī doctrine), Tashkent Islamic Institute named after Imām al-Bukhārī, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Abstract. *The article analyses the life, the scholarly activity, the works and the doctrinal views of Imām Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī. It examines the circumstances in which the Māturīdī school took shape, its method founded upon the balance between reason and transmission, and its positions on the questions of faith, of the divine decree and determination, and of the attributes of God. The place of the imām in the polemics of his age with the Mu'tazila, the Jahmiyya, the Karrāmiyya and other groups is set out, as is the role of his immediate pupils and of the following generations in systematizing his teaching. The spread of Māturīdism in Transoxiana, in Turkistan and in the Ottoman state, and its significance at the present day as a scholarly foundation against religious intolerance and doctrinal extremism, are likewise shown.*

Keywords: *Imām al-Māturīdī, Māturīdism, kalām, reason and transmission, faith, divine decree and determination, Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunna, Ḥanafī school.*

INTRODUCTION

In the history of Islamic doctrinal thought Imām Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Māturīdī al-Ḥanafī al-Samarqandī occupies a place of his own. He is one of the great theologians who grounded the creed of the people of the Sunna and the Community upon the harmony of reason and transmission. The doctrinal method elaborated by al-Māturīdī afterwards spread widely in Central Asia, in Transoxiana, in Turkistan, in the Ottoman state and in other regions, and it became the doctrinal foundation of the Ḥanafī school of law (al-Māturīdī, 2001:147).

The purpose of the present article is to set out, on the basis of the imām's own works and of the writings of his successors, the conditions in which his teaching was formed, the principles of his method, and the course by which that method became the prevailing doctrinal orientation of the region.

MAIN PART

Imām al-Māturīdī was born in Samarqand in the second half of the third century of the Hijra. Although the sources do not indicate the date of his birth precisely, they record

that he died in the year 333 AH (al-Nasafī, 1993:253). Samarqand was at that time one of the major scholarly centres in which the sciences of jurisprudence, of ḥadīth and of kalām flourished. Al-Māturīdī received his education from such scholars of the Ḥanafī school of law as Abū Bakr al-Jūzjānī, Abū Naṣr al-ʿIyāḍī and Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Ishāq al-Jūzjānī. He afterwards himself taught jurisprudence and kalām, and he trained such pupils as Abū Aḥmad al-ʿIyāḍī, Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Sayyid al-Rustughfanī, Abū Bakr al-Samarqandī, Makḥūl al-Nasafī, Abū al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī and Abū al-Yusr al-Bazdawī. In accordance with his testament he was buried in the cemetery of Chākardīza in Samarqand (al-Nasafī, 1993:253).

The principal works of al-Māturīdī are «Kitāb al-Tawḥīd» (The Book of the Divine Oneness) and «Taʾwīlāt ahl al-sunna». «Kitāb al-Tawḥīd» is regarded as the first work of Muslim theology in which a theory of knowledge is expounded. In its introduction, which contains a definition of the science of kalām, three sources of knowledge are indicated: the organs of sense, transmission, and the acquisition of information by means of the intellect. Without stepping outside the bounds of pure religion, al-Māturīdī exalts the intellect and emphasizes the importance of logically grounded knowledge (al-Māturīdī, 2001:147). In the book the views of the erring groups of that age are analysed and shown to be remote from the truth, and al-Māturīdī affirmed that the cause of all straying upon the path of religion lies in blind following of hypocritical persons.

As a theologian al-Māturīdī composed treatises embracing such important doctrinal questions as particular volition, belief and the life of the hereafter. Among these are «Maʾkhaḍh al-sharīʿa» (The Sources of the Revealed Law), «Kitāb al-uṣūl» (The Book of the Foundations of Religious Doctrine) and «Kitāb al-jadal» (The Book of Dialectics). He expounded and developed the views of Abū Ḥanīfa, and he perfected the foundations of the Islamic creed elaborated by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (873–935), purifying the Sunnī creed of the unsound doctrines that had found their way into it (al-Shahrastānī, 2005:164). The views of al-Māturīdī became in his own time a cause of the cultural and scholarly flourishing of the region, since he explained the foundations of religion by rational argument and developed the ideas of the right of choice and of the establishment of social concord.

Al-Māturīdī composed in all some fifteen works. Seven of his works on kalām and two on jurisprudence have not survived, and those that have reached us have been studied only in part. His work devoted to the exegesis of the Qurʾān, «Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān», and the book that forms its organic continuation, «Irshād al-mubtadiʾīn fī

tajwīd Kalām Rabb al-‘ālamīn» (A Guide for Those Beginning to Recite the Qur’ān), are preserved in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan (al-Māturīdī, 2005:I/235).

Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī was successful both in Samarqand itself and in the disputations that he conducted with the representatives of the various schools around it. He entered into debate with the Karrāmiyya, the Shī‘a and the Mu‘tazila, and he devoted one of his works to the refutation of their views. In the age in which he lived the doctrinal views of the Mu‘tazila, the Jahmiyya, the Qarāmiṭa and other groups were widespread, and the Sunnī creed stood in need of defence (al-Shahrastānī, 2005:164). It was in these circumstances that Imām al-Māturīdī consolidated the creed of the people of the Sunna upon the basis of scholarly proofs.

At the centre of the teaching of Imām al-Māturīdī stands the question of the balance between reason and transmission. In his view the intellect is able to be an independent instrument in the knowledge of the existence of God Most High, whereas the rulings of the revealed law and their particulars are determined by revelation. This approach places Māturīdism neither within an absolutely rationalist nor within an absolutely traditionalist orientation (al-Māturīdī, 2005:I/235). Al-Māturīdī devoted particular attention to the question of the intellect. In his view the intellect is a great favour bestowed by God Most High upon His servants, and by means of it a human being is able to apprehend the existence, the oneness and the majesty of the Creator.

At the same time he emphasizes human responsibility: although the possibility of knowing the truth by means of the intellect exists, revelation perfects this knowledge and directs it upon the right path. In this respect he does not set the intellect against revelation, but interprets it in harmony with revelation. In the question of moral obligation also he chose the moderate path, setting forth that a human being is responsible in those matters that he is able to apprehend by his intellect, whereas the particulars and the forms of worship are determined by revelation alone (al-Māturīdī, 2001:147). This approach served to make the Māturīdī creed a living and an adaptable one.

In the question of the attributes of God Most High al-Māturīdī follows the path of entrusting their modality to God while affirming them. He did not deny the attributes, yet he strictly refrained from likening them to the attributes of created beings. In the question of faith he defined faith as the assent of the heart and emphasized that works are not a constituent part of faith; at the same time he did not deny the importance of works, holding them to pertain to the perfection of faith (al-Nasafī, 1993:253).

The relation between faith and works is reckoned one of the important questions of al-Māturīdī's teaching. Defining faith as the assent of the heart, he holds confession with the tongue to be necessary for the rulings of this world. Works do not enter into the essential reality of faith, but they secure its perfection and its beauty. By this view al-Māturīdī gives a scholarly refutation of the extreme approaches of the Khawārij and of the Mu'tazila. In the question of the Muslim who has committed a grave sin he likewise defends the position of the people of the Sunna, holding that the one who has committed a grave sin does not depart from faith but remains a believer who has sinned. The referral of the judgment to the will of God Most High shows that Māturīdism is a tolerant teaching founded upon hope (al-Nasafī, 1993:253).

In the question of the divine decree and determination al-Māturīdī, while acknowledging the voluntary acts of human beings, sets forth that these occur within the compass of the knowledge and the will of God Most High. This view is assessed as a middle method free both of the determinism of the Jabriyya and of the excess of the Mu'tazila (al-Nasafī, 1993:253).

The most celebrated work ascribed to Imām al-Māturīdī is «Kitāb al-Tawhīd», in which doctrinal questions are analysed by a profound theological method. This work was written as a scholarly refutation of the doctrinal views of the Mu'tazila and of other groups. His commentary upon the Qur'ān, celebrated under the title «Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunna», is likewise reckoned an important source, and in it the verses relating to doctrine are expounded from the Ḥanafī and Māturīdī point of view (al-Māturīdī, 2005:I/235). Although al-Māturīdī entered principally into scholarly debate with the Mu'tazila, he also analysed the views of other groups and exposed by proofs the doctrinal errors of such currents as the Jahmiyya, the Mushabbiha and the Qarāmiṭa (al-Shahrastānī, 2005:164).

The immediate pupils of Imām al-Māturīdī and the scholars of the following generations systematized his teaching and spread it widely. Such scholars as Abū al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī, Najm al-Dīn 'Umar al-Nasafī and 'Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Ūshī played an important part in the consolidation of the Māturīdī creed. As a result Māturīdism, closely bound up with the Ḥanafī school of law, became one of the principal orientations of the Sunnī creed (al-Nasafī, 1993:253).

There are also features held in common with the school of al-Ash'arī, and both enter within the compass of the people of the Sunna; in the question of the intellect,

however, Māturīdism is distinguished by its comparatively broader approach (al-Nasafī, 1993:253). For centuries Māturīdism was the principal doctrinal orientation in the territory of Transoxiana and Turkistan, and in the period of the Ottoman state the Ḥanafī and Māturīdī creed was likewise adopted as the official confession. At the present day the religious thought of the Muslims of Central Asia is formed in the main upon the basis of Māturīdism. In the contemporary age this teaching serves as an important scholarly foundation against religious intolerance and doctrinal extremism, and this school, which propagates the harmony of reason and revelation, acquires an actual significance in securing scholarly dialogue and religious tolerance (al-Nasafī al-Najm, n.d.).

CONCLUSION

Imām al-Māturīdī is the founder of a moderate and scholarly grounded school that left a deep trace in Islamic doctrinal thought. His teaching, while preserving the balance between reason, revelation and human responsibility, served the unity and the stability of the Muslim community. It is a teaching that is neither absolutely rationalist nor absolutely traditionalist, and the method that holds the middle between the determinism of the Jabriyya and the excess of the Mu‘tazila has retained its value to the present day (al-Nasafī, 1993:253). At the present time also Māturīdism deserves to be studied profoundly as a scholarly heritage, since the harmony of reason and revelation that it propagates remains a foundation for religious tolerance and for scholarly dialogue.

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