Sufis and Muʿtazilites

Theological Engagements of Ibn ʿArabī

Aydogan Kars

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

INTRODUCTION: MUʿTAZILISM IN IBN ʿARABĪ'S CONTEXT

This paper introduces Ibn ʿArabī's depictions of, encounters with, and responses to the preeminent Islamic theological school, Muʿtazilism. Ibn ʿArabī flourished during the eclipse of Muʿtazilism, yet his corpus demonstrates close familiarity with their theological claims. Therefore an analysis of his depictions of Muʿtazilism gives us important insights on the transmission and reception of ideas within the Islamicate world. This study explores six major theological themes that played key roles in his engagement with Muʿtazilism, particularly in the encyclopaedic *Meccan Openings* [*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*]: (i) divine role in human actions and agency; (ii) epistemological sources of theological speculation; (iii) divine attributes; (iv) divine knowability; (v) vision of God; (vi) divine justice and mercy in the afterlife. In most of these cases, Ibn ʿArabī's approach to Muʿtazilism is not only well-informed, but also empathetic rather than dismissive. His personal encounter with al-Qabrafīqī, a Muʿtazilite Sufi in Seville, and his corpus indicate Ibn ʿArabī's informed engagements with both Basran and Baghdadian Muʿtazilite teachings. He took them seriously as a major theological school that relies on legitimate religious precepts, provides compelling and still relevant ideas, and honours divine transcendence and unity.

By the time of Ibn ʿArabī, Muʿtazilism had made an unmistakable impact on Islamic theology, yet largely dissolved into a variety of movements. On the other hand, in the field of theology, later schools or movements were not the only channels between the Muʿtazilites and the Sufis of the 12th and 13th

centuries. Sufis still had direct access to Muʿtazilite works. In a miraculous instance of mind-reading, Aḥmad-i Jām (d.1141) of Khurasan surprisingly declared to his disciples that it is ethically forbidden [*ḥarām*] to read books that vilify the Muʿtazilites.[1] Muʿtazilism indeed survived into the 13th century and maintained direct contact with the Sufis of the time. The most important Persian hagiographical source produced in the Yasavī tradition, *Gleams* [*Lamaḥāt*] by ʿĀlim Shaykh (d.1632) narrates a possible 13th century Sufi-Muʿtazilite confrontation between Ḥakīm ʿAṭāʾ and the theologians in Khuwarazm, the stronghold of Muʿtazilism.[2] Ibn ʿArabī's four parallel accounts on his debate with the Muʿtazilite Sufi master al-Qabrafīqī (*fl*. late 12th century) of Andalus provides a striking, informative example enlightening Muʿtazilite activities and reception in the far west. Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064) spoke of 'Andalusian Muʿtazilites' as a distinct school, but the presence of Muʿtazilism in Andalus was rather meagre. Especially after the fall of the Idrīsīs and the dominance of the theological literalism of the Mālikī scholars by the 9th century, they lost their power in the region. Later, Ibn Rushd (d.1198) claimed that none of the Muʿtazilite writings reached the Iberian Peninsula, thus he could not learn the methods they adopted in discussing the divine existence from their own sources. The founding figure of the Almohad revolution, Ibn Tūmart (d.1130) criticised the Muʿtazilites harshly but also so superficially that his caricature of Muʿtazilism can rather support Ibn Rushd's claim.[3]

The case of al-Qabrafīqī not only reminds us that the two categories 'Sufism' and 'Muʿtazilism' had crossovers from early on. It also demonstrates Muʿtazilite activity in Andalus well into the end of the 12th century, and illustrates the presence of more nuanced responses among Sufis. However sparse, such appearances might mirror the prominence of Muʿtazilism

1. Aḥmad-i Jām, *The Colossal Elephant and His Spiritual Feats*, trans. H. Moayyad and F. Lewis (Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, CA, 2004), 293–4.

2. Devin DeWeese, *Studies on Sufism in Central Asia* (Ashgate, Farnham, 2012), IX, 390, 408.

3. Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Tūmart, *Sharḥ Murshidat Muḥammad ibn Tūmart* (Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, Beirut, 1993), 15–17.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

among non-Muslim, like the Karaite, groups in Andalus as well as a new wave of Muʿtazilism after the systematisation of their teachings in the east. In the 11th century Muʿtazilism saw a resurgence under the Buyid patronage that would have wider and long-term repercussions in the Islamicate world at large. When Ibn Khaldūn (d.1406) listed the four books that he considered 'the basic works and pillars' of legal theory, two of them were the influential works of the Muʿtazilite scholars of this period: ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (d.1025) and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d.1044). As the divergences between ʿAbd al-Jabbār and Abū al-Ḥusayn, or between Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī (d.916) and his son Abū Hāshim (d.933) indicate, Muʿtazilite scholars could display sharp disagreements among themselves. Still, already by the 10th century, a theological programme with 'five principles' (*al-uṣūl al-khamsa*), which are commonly traced back to Abū al-Hudhayl, was formulated by the Muʿtazilite scholars as we find in al-Kaʿbī (d.931) or al-Masʿūdī (d.956):

1. *tawḥīd*, the unity of God,
2. *ʿadl*, the justice of God,
3. *al-waʿd wa-l -waʿīd*, the 'promise and the threat'; punishment of the unrepentant grave sinner,
4. *al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn*, the 'state in between', regarding the status of the grave sinner,
5. *al-amr bi-l -maʿrūf wa-l -nahy ʿan al-munkar*, commanding the right and forbidding the wrong.

Mostly conventional and acceptable as they might appear, these principles embodied sites of intense conflict. 'Divine justice', to begin with one of the most disputed themes, embodied a strong Muʿtazilite emphasis on the human responsibility and freewill in, and full accountability for, one's own actions. This most popular (and somewhat stereotypical) item in anti-Muʿtazilite polemics, the nature of human action, appears many times in Ibn ʿArabī's *Meccan Openings*, yet with a rare, nuanced sympathy.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

DIVINE ROLE IN HUMAN ACTIONS

Ibn ʿArabī's short and admittedly generic references do not allow us to see whether he was familiar with the divergent Muʿtazilite positions that the Bahshamite School and the school of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī took on the details of the topic of human actions. Yet his general depiction gives us an image that clearly resonates with the popular Muʿtazilite teachings of the Buyid resurgence. According to Ibn ʿArabī, Muʿtazilites argued that the agent in human actions was solely human beings. God was creating the power to act, yet the action belonged exclusively to the human agent. We find this position defended by many Muʿtazilite works and masters;[4] the circle of al-Qabrafīqī in Andalus was also following this very teaching. 'Al-Qabrafīqī and his companions … used to claim that it is human beings who create their actions,' until Ibn ʿArabī would convince them otherwise after a couple of encounters.

Ibn ʿArabī does not treat the Muʿtazilite teaching on human actions in detachment from the other prominent theological school. He rather mentions the Muʿtazilites generally in comparison with the Ashʿarites. As the major Sunni theological school that became increasingly influential after the 12th century, Ashʿarites tended to argue, as Ibn ʿArabī accurately described, that it is God who is the creator of human actions. Human beings *acquire* [*kasb*] them. The acquisition theory is actually only a variation on the teachings of the early scholar Ḍirār ibn ʿAmr (d.815), who associated with the Muʿtazilites. Yet in any case, it was widely used by the Ashʿarite scholars as a refutation of the later Muʿtazilite ascription of the creation of actions to the human agent. In the *Meccan Openings*, Ibn ʿArabī repeatedly contrasts the Ashʿarite theory of acquisition and the Muʿtazilite doctrine that God creates the power in human beings to create their own actions. He is well aware of the dispute and its diverse implications. Prayer, almsgiving, and

4. See e.g. ʿAbd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Asadābādī in R. Martin, M. Woodward, and D. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam* (Oneworld, Oxford, 1997), 97–8.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

sickness are some of the contexts where he cites the different applications of the Muʿtazilite and Ashʿarite approaches to human action. When we ask for divine power during a prayer of vision [*istikhāra*], as Ibn ʿArabī depicts it, we are in effect asking for a power that God may create in us according to a Muʿtazilite perspective, while we are simply calling the power of God, one of the divine attributes, from an Ashʿarite point of view. He also explores the implications of physical impediments before human action from Muʿtazilite and Ashʿarite perspectives. Accordingly, handicaps such as sickness indicate an obstacle before human acquisition of a divinely created action for the Ashʿarites, while for the Muʿtazilites they mean a rupture in the creation of that action in the first place.

In all of these cases, Ibn ʿArabī is approaching the Muʿtazilites as one of the most powerful theological schools. Rather than being dismissive or reductive, he actually finds cases where the Muʿtazilite position is stronger than that of the Ashʿarites:

> The production of actions [*ījād al-fiʿl*] does not occur through association [*shirk*]. The Muʿtazilites do not join the associationists, because the former unify the actions of human beings in human beings [*waḥḥadū afʿāl al-ʿubbād li-l -ʿubbād*]. … They attribute the action to human beings through reasoning; and Law [*al-sharʿ*] endorses [*ṣaddaqa*] them. The Ashʿarites unify the actions of all of the possible entities [*mumkināt*], without making any distinction, to God through reasoning; and Law has supported them, but (only) via some possible aspects of the message. The proofs of the Muʿtazilites here are stronger on the surface [*ẓāhir*]; yet those of the Ashʿarites are stronger for the People of Unveiling among the People of God. Indeed, both of the two groups profess the divine unity [*tawḥīd*].[5]

There are three important moves in this passage. First, not dissimilar to the Aristotelian maxim that the philosophers followed, Ibn ʿArabī submits that both of these schools have a share in truth. In all of his discussions on the Muʿtazilites,

5. Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Bulak, Cairo, 1852), Ch.285, 2:701.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

Ibn ʿArabī is addressing a theological school that he has the utmost respect for. Such respect was not common, as many Ashʿarites, Ẓāhirites, and Ḥanbalites of his times adopted much harsher positions towards the Muʿtazilites. We find a clearly inclusive language in Ibn ʿArabī's engagement with Muʿtazilism, repeatedly calling the latter as among the people of divine unity whose school is a mark of divine mercy. Ibn ʿArabī's celebration of theological pluralism is most clear in his mention of the Muʿtazilites in another technical context: ritual ablution. In discussing the various mysteries of ritual ablution, he introduces the relevant verse, Q.5:6, pointing to the disagreement among Ashʿarites and Muʿtazilites on whether the head should be fully or partially washed. He explains that the interpretive divergence emerges from a grammatical nuance that he subsequently explores in detail. His conclusion is not a refutation of the Ashʿarite or the Muʿtazilite reading, but an emphasis on the expansiveness of the divine mercy. Accordingly, variations in human understanding are divinely intended, and to be celebrated rather than dismissed. All of these groups are following the religious precepts and divine rulings in their own ways.[6]

Second, Ibn ʿArabī somewhat surprisingly argues that the Muʿtazilites actually have stronger scriptural and logical proofs. The discursive prowess Ibn ʿArabī ascribes to Muʿtazilism finds repercussions in similar discussions on human actions. As an example, we can look at Chapter 294 of the *Meccan Openings*, entitled 'The Knowledge of the Meccan Muhammadan Station from the Mosaic Rank'. He argues that this station focuses on the power that God bestows upon human beings. This station, he writes, 'rejects the Ashʿarites, and empowers the Muʿtazilites in their ascription of actions to human agents'.[7] In a heavily Ashʿarite and increasingly anti-Muʿtazilite context, we observe Ibn ʿArabī resisting simplistic theological narratives let alone polemics.

6. Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, Ch.68, 1:380; Ch.350, 3:237–8.
7. Ibid. Ch.294, 2:746.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

Finally, the passage indicates the sense in which the Ashʿarite position on human actions is preferable from a Sufi perspective. Clearly, it is neither a discursive nor scriptural proof, insofar as the Muʿtazilites are superior to the Ashʿarites in both senses. The Ashʿarite position is more compelling, because it is closer to the unificatory Sufi principle: *there is no agent but God* [*lā fāʿil illā Allāh*]. He explains the principle with his well-known language of divine veiling:

> …all created things are veils. He is the agent behind the veil, while they do not *recognise* it. Those theologians, who ascribe the actions of the human beings to God in their createdness, *recognise* it. Yet they cannot *witness* it due to the veil of 'acquisition' with which God blinded their eyes. Likewise, He blinded the eyes of those who see the actions as belonging to creation… The one who does not *recognise* is the Muʿtazilite, and the one (who *recognises* but) does not *witness* is the Ashʿarite. Both have curtains on their eyes.[8]

The Ashʿarite position is closer to reality, according to Ibn ʿArabī, because it refuses to distinguish between the varieties of actions – invariably attributing all to God. There is no agent but God: a principle that we widely find among Sufis of his times. It was not an easy solution for Ibn ʿArabī. We note that the nature of human actions remained a rather unresolved, knotty theological issue for him for a very long time. As we read in a later passage in the *Meccan Openings*, only towards the end of his life, on 15 March, 1236 (6 Rajab, 633) the mystery was eventually unveiled. The way Ibn ʿArabī narrates the decisive experience is clearly an allusion to *Stations* by al-Niffarī (d.977), whereon Ibn ʿArabī and his students Bint al-Nafīs (d.1288) and al-Tilimsānī (d.1291) alike wrote commentaries:

> To me, this was among the most difficult problems; and it was not opened to me with certainty without any suspicion or doubt until tonight… It was difficult for me to decide between the 'acquisition' that a group (i.e., Ashʿarites) claims, and the creation (of actions) that another group (i.e., the Muʿtazilites) claims. The Real stood me in the ocular vision [*bi-kashf baṣarī*] of His creation of

8. Ibid. Ch.220, 2:568.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

> the first creature, which no creature precedes, as nothing but God was there, and said to me: 'is there anything of dupery [*talbīs*] or perplexity here?' I said: 'no.' He said to me: 'In this manner I unite whatever you see in creation. No single created thing has a trace here… I create things *beside* the causes, *not through* the causes [*'inda-l -asbāb lā-bi-l -asbāb*].'[9]

Here we arrive at Ibn ʿArabī's experiential resolution of the theological problem. In effect, it is nothing less than the visionary realisation of limitations of the theological discourse. Ibn ʿArabī acknowledges the discursive superiority and religious credentials of the Muʿtazilite approach to the role of the divine in human actions. Yet his own solution develops from his wider epistemological critique of theological reasoning. It is the Muʿtazilites, once again, who are his key conversation partners at this point.

SOURCES OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Sufism and Muʿtazilism were overlapping movements from early on. Yet the major epistemological source for Sufis, unveiling [*kashf*], is glaringly absent in the Muʿtazilite theological *summa*s. It was from the vantage point of this source that Ibn ʿArabī challenged the Muʿtazilite positions on various theological questions. Yet Muʿtazilites are criticised in this broad context jointly with other groups who deny personal experiences as an epistemological source. Accordingly, Peripatetic Philosophers, Muʿtazilites, and Ashʿarites make fundamental mistakes in theology, as they follow their own deficient interpretations [*taʾwīl*] based on their fallible reasoning, especially if the literal reading of the scriptural sources has problematic consequences. Yet, argues Ibn ʿArabī, personal unveilings can actually settle such interpretive problems, by bridging reason and scripture in its contemplative hermeneutics. In another passage, he adds the 'Brahmans' to these groups of rationalists who arrive at mistaken interpretations unable to listen to the visionary experiences. All of these groups, accordingly, will lose face if

9. Ibid. Ch.121, 2:227.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

they are presented with scriptural proofs that challenge their own interpretation. 'Thus reasoning has no clairvoyance,' argues Ibn ʿArabī, and invites all to the immediate, ubiquitous beckoning of divine unveiling in creation.[10]

Ibn ʿArabī's divergence from the Muʿtazilites and others, therefore, relates to the main sources of theological reasoning. He observes that the Muʿtazilites refuse what the Ashʿarites approve of God, and in turn, the Ashʿarites reject the Muʿtazilite doctrines. Not just that: these schools, as he observes, have conflicts and strong disagreements within themselves. (Here he mentions Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār as the foremost leader of the Muʿtazilites, comparing his authority with that of al-Juwaynī (d.1085) among the Ashʿarites.[11]) All these fierce polemics and disagreements among scholars, accordingly, arise from the lack of appreciating the immediate, visionary source of epistemology, hence of theology. In a discussion on pilgrimage, Ibn ʿArabī addresses this problem, asking what is the 'possessor' and 'mate' of the soul [*zawj al-nafs*]:

> This is an issue of disagreement among theologians: is the knowledge of God [*maʿrifat Allāh*] obliged on human beings through reasoning or Law [*al-sharʿ*]? In any case, the mate of the soul is Law for the Ashʿarite School, and reasoning for the Muʿtazilite School.[12]

Ibn ʿArabī's depiction is a bit stereotypical here, particularly on the Ashʿarite side. Al-Ashʿarī himself derived the obligation to know God from revelation, while some early Ashʿarites like al-Qalānisī (d.970) regard this obligation as stemming from reason. Especially after al-Juwaynī, Ashʿarites more clearly join the Muʿtazilites in deriving the obligation to know God from reason instead of, or in addition to, revelation. The ascription by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210) of an authoritative role to human reasoning as a source of religious knowledge clearly shows that Ashʿarism certainly did not fit neatly under mere scripturalism.

10. Ibid. Ch.226, 2:580; Ch.289, 2:718.
11. Ibid. Ch.322, 3:92.
12. Ibid. Ch.71, 1:774.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

Yet Muʿtazilites as pure rationalists and the Ashʿarites as pure scripturalists helped Ibn ʿArabī open a clear discursive space to play out his own mystical theology. Addressing the same issue of the most immanent, inalienable mate of the soul, Ibn ʿArabī elaborates his visionary epistemology in a section of the *Meccan Openings* titled 'the Wine of Love' [*sharāb al-ḥubb*]. Visionary knowledge emerges here as a form of divine love:

> The lover does not seek causes in the acts of the beloved, because causality is an attribute of reasoning, while the lover does not reason. …
>
> 'Love possesses the souls rather than reason.'
>
> The beloved, on the other hand, gives the best causes to his lover as the latter is under his possession. … So love leaves a trace on the lover, as it leaves a trace on the beloved. This is like the Muʿtazilite claim that *God is Willing through a will, which does not subsist in space; but He creates it – either in a substrate* [*maḥall*] *or not in a substrate, and wills through it*. This claim goes against reasonability [*khilāf al-maʿqūl*] by virtue of its affirmation of the rulings of meanings for the one who does not subsist with them. Similarly, love does not unite with reason in the same substrate. The ruling of love [*ḥukm al-ḥubb*] necessarily contradicts the ruling of reason [*yunāqiḍ ḥukm al-ʿaql*]. Hence, *reasoning is for speech* [*nuṭq*], *and passion for silence*.[13]

This passage is significant from a few angles. First, 'the Muʿtazilites' in Ibn ʿArabī's mind at this point become clearer. It was specifically al-Kaʿbī, the famous student of al-Khayyāṭ (d.913), who was known to have adopted the idiosyncratic approach to divine will that Ibn ʿArabī describes here. Al-Shahrastānī (d.1153) observes:

> al-Kaʿbī differs from his master (al-Khayyāṭ) on a few issues. One of them is his claim: *God's Will is not an attribute subsisting in His essence; nor does He will by His essence; nor is His will an occurrence – either in a substrate or not in a substrate*. When we say of God that He is willing, we mean that He is Knowing and Powerful, not coerced in His action nor averse to it.[14]

13. Ibid. Ch.89, 2:124.

14. Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, Beirut, 1992), 1:66–7.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

Ibn ʿArabī is unmistakably describing al-Kaʿbī's position in the *Meccan Openings*. The nature of the divine will was a point where al-Kaʿbī differed from both his own Muʿtazilite masters, and the Basran Muʿtazilites. Al-Juwaynī not only testifies to this disagreement, but also reports the inapplicability of the attribute of 'willing' according to al-Kaʿbī, and writes a refutation of it.[15] The head of the Baghdadian School, al-Kaʿbī was a Khurasanian theologian whom, as al-Māturīdī (d.944) observes, the Muʿtazilites considered 'the Imam of all the people of the world'. Indeed al-Kaʿbī was a major rival and influence at the same time for the Ḥanafī theologian of Transoxania. It is widely accepted that 'although he was highly regarded in his homeland as the leading theologian, there is no indication that al-Kaʿbī's school played any significant role after his lifetime'.[16] Yet Ibn ʿArabī is not only familiar with al-Kaʿbī's disputed position on the divine will. He also depicts it as 'the Muʿtazilite claim', which may indicate a more influential role al-Kaʿbī and Baghdadian Muʿtazilism played in the later history. Indeed, al-Kaʿbī's mark is evident also in al-Rāzī, Ibn ʿArabī's contemporary and correspondent. 'In the work of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, we find evidence of familiarity with al-Kaʿbī's articles not attested to elsewhere.'[17]

Second, Ibn ʿArabī is introducing love to the theological tension between rationalism and scripturalism. Neither reason nor scripture but divine love is the most intimate, inalienable source of knowledge about God. If not grounded on this visionary epistemology, reason will fall into contradictions as in the case of al-Kaʿbī. Divine love, on the other hand, does not yield itself easily to theological discourse, or even effability. Language fixes its referents, while the infinite manifestations of divine love are always fresh and unique. Hence visionary

15. ʿAbd al-Malik al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād ilā Qawāṭiʿ al-Adilla fī Uṣūl al-Iʿtiqād* (Maktabat al-Khānjī, Cairo, 1950), 62–3.

16. S. Schmidtke, 'The Muʿtazilite Movement (III): The Scholastic Phase', *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016), 161.

17. T. Jaffer, 'Muʿtazilite Aspects of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Thought', *Arabica*, Vo1.59, 2012, 510–35.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

epistemology cannot be easily conceptualised; and once conceptualised, it is a paradoxical discourse that it produces. Ibn ʿArabī makes his point by citing the Muʿtazilites along with other schools of thought:

> The Ashʿarites, Muʿtazilites, Ḥanbalites, and the ancients … have agreed on an issue where there is no disagreement. … They have been able to coin a terminology regarding whatever they have agreed upon. … On the other hand, the knowers are the People of God. They know that God does not disclose Himself in the same form to two different persons or twice in the same form. … There is a *sui generis* self-disclosure for each person that they see through their souls. … Thus they are not able to designate it terminologically. … They know, yet they cannot utter what they know. …
>
> > Truth is too sublime to know or to narrate,
> > and glorious – terms cannot restrain it.[18]

Accordingly, Ibn ʿArabī has reservations about theology as an inherently defective mode of approaching the divine. It not only neglects the personal, inalienable disclosure of God as a source of knowledge. But theology also operates in a discursive mode which will eventually turn to self-contradictions when it insists on sticking to rational explanations of the divine paradox. It is exactly this pitfall that seizes the Muʿtazilites, and all pure rationalists, according to Ibn ʿArabī.

DIVINE ATTRIBUTES: THEIR EMULATION AND ASCRIPTION TO GOD

In terms of the divine attributes, Muʿtazilism enters Ibn ʿArabī's theological atmosphere most prominently through his encounter with al-Qabrafīqī. Ibn ʿArabī narrates the encounter as follows:

> This is the station of Self-Subsistence [*maqām al-qayyūmiyya*]. ... Our companions disagreed on emulating this attribute [*yatakhallaqu bihi*]. I met Abū ʿAbd Allāh ibn Junayd al-Qabrafīqī among the masters of the (Sufi) path – originally from Ronda and of the

18. Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, Ch.369, 3:428.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

> Muʿtazilite School [*madhhab*]. I saw that he forbade [*yamnaʿ*] the emulation of Self-Subsistence, thus he rejected this from his school.[19]

In accordance with his Muʿtazilite affiliation, al-Qabrafīqī was precluding the divine attribute Self-Subsistence from human experience. The attribute that al-Qabrafīqī disallows for emulation, however, is not one of the classical negative names of God from an early Muʿtazilite perspective. Only a few early theologians, such as Wāṣil ibn ʿAṭāʾ, Ḍirār, al-Najjār, al-Naẓẓām (d.846), and the Ibāḍīs are known to have considered all attributes of God indiscriminately negative and inaccessible to human emulation. Al-Qabrafīqī is closer to the later Muʿtazilites than these early predecessors. Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, for example, claimed that God's unity, one of the five Muʿtazilite principles, meant that God did not share any positive or negative attributes with creation. ʿAbd al-Jabbār also makes the distinction between the essential attributes and actions of God, putting speech, justice, and will into the latter category. The divine actions beg relations with creation, while the essential attributes are free from any such relationality and are thus inaccessible to human emulation. God's non-delimitedness and independence [*ghināʾ*] is one of His essential attributes, though a negative one that He does not share with creation.[20] Al-Zamakhsharī (d.1144) also considers independence one of God's pre-eternal attributes.[21] It is safe to conclude that both Muʿtazilite masters considered Self-Subsistence, a divine name very close to Self-Sufficiency, a non-relational name of God, exclusively defining divine transcendence. The attribute that al-Qabrafīqī disallows for emulation reflects the later Muʿtazilite theological position,

19. For an English summary of the encounter, see C. Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, trans. P. Kingsley (Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, UK), 104.

20. ʿAbd al-Jabbār Ibn Aḥmad al-Asadābādī, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa* (Maktabat Wahba, Cairo, 1996), 129–30; Martin et al., *Defenders of Reason*, 92.

21. Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar Zamakhsharī, *Kitāb al-Minhāj fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* (al-Dār al-ʿArabiyya lil-ʿUlūm, Beirut, 2007), 15.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

in stark opposition to widespread Sufi positions on the divine attributes and their accessibility.

For Ibn ʿArabī, the encounter with al-Qabrafīqī is an occasion for explicating his own approach to the divine attributes; hence he narrates the encounter again and again in the *Meccan Openings* and the *Adornment of the Spiritually Transformed* [*Ḥilyat al-Abdāl*]. In his encounter with al-Qabrafīqī, Ibn ʿArabī states once again that for him 'it is permissible to emulate Self-Subsistence like *all* divine names'.[22] A consistent position is observed in his book devoted to the divine names and attributes, *Unveiling of the Meaning of the Secrets of the Beautiful Names* [*Kashf al-Maʿnā ʿan Sirr Asmāʾ al-Ḥusnā*]. Not just for the name 'the Self-Subsistent', but for each divine name he devotes three sections, which explore respectively how that name is connected [*taʾalluq*], realised [*taḥaqquq*], and emulated [*takhalluq*] by the wayfarers.

Ibn ʿArabī's approach to the emulation of divine Self-Subsistence mirrors not only Sufism – both Andalusian and Eastern – of his times, but also earlier periods. 'The view was that the saint was "invested" with one or another divine name or attribute' – Mayer calls it 'attributist' [*ṣifātī*] mysticism, and traces it back to al-Ḥallāj (d.922) and his student Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d.932).[23] According to al-Sarrāj (d.988)'s report, al-Wāsiṭī argued that all attributes of God could be emulated, except 'Allāh' and the 'All-Merciful'.[24] But even earlier than

22. Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, 'Kitāb al-Fanāʾ fī al-Mushāhada,' in *Rasāʾil Ibn ʿArabī* (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, Beirut), 392.

23. T. Mayer, 'Theology and Sufism' in *Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. T. Winter, 258–87 (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008), 267.

24. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, ed., trans., R. Nicholson (Brill, Leiden, 1914), 88–9 (Arabic text).

Indeed, this is exactly the position that Ibn ʿArabī adopts in his *Unveiling of the Meaning of the Secrets of the Beautiful Names* (see P. Beneito Arias, 'Les Nombres De Dios' (Ph.D. diss., University of Madrid, 1996) 2:18–24). Still, Ibn ʿArabī does not remove the possibility of *takhalluq* from these names, indicating that their *takhalluq* is not realised in positive terms, but as the affirmation of human incapacity and dependency on God.

This special approach to the names 'Allāh' and 'al-Raḥmān' can be traced to ʿAbd Allah al-Anṣārī (d.1089)'s reading of Q.17:110. See al-Anṣārī

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

al-Wāsiṭī, the visionary wife of Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d.*c*.892) as far away as Transoxania had already an unveiling whereby all the names of God 'become adorned' for her.[25] Al-Sulamī of Nishapur (d.1021) also claims that the wayfarer should traverse all of the ninety-nine stations, all of which are associated with a divine name, in order to attain subsistence with God.[26] In the south, Persian Sufi Rūzbihān Baqlī (d.1209) criticises 'the people of negation', who deny the attributes of God following rational abstraction in order to avoid likening God to creation.[27] Al-Qabrafīqī squarely fits into this group Baqlī targeted. In contrast, all divine attributes, including the essential ones, such as unity, are open to be possessed by human beings, to emulation and visionary experience; Self-Subsistence does not play an exceptional role in Baqlī's approach. The same view also applies for Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221) and his pupil Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī (d.1256).[28]

Long before the 13th century, it was the early Basran Sufi master Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896), who gave the name Self-Subsistence a higher rank than anyone else, thanks to a visionary experience. As he explains in his Qurʾanic exegesis:

> Q.2:255: *God, There is no god except Him, the Living, the Self-Subsistent*. This is the mightiest [*aʿẓam*] verse in God's Book, Exalted is He. Within it is God's Greatest Name, and it is written across the sky in green light in one line from East to West. This is how I saw it written on the Night of Power [*Laylat al-Qadr*] in ʿAbbādān:

in A. G. Farhadi, *Abdullāh Anṣārī of Herat* (Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 1996), 67.

25. Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *The Concept of Sainthood in Islamic Mysticism*, trans. B. Radtke and J. O'Kane, (Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 1996), 35.

26. Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Sulamī, *Three Early Sufi Texts*, trans. K. Honerkamp (Fons Vitae, Louisville, KY, 2009), 129–30.

27. Carl Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 1996), 41, 104, n.59.

28. Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī*, 162; Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī, *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return*, trans. H. Algar (Caravan Books, New York, 1982), 71; Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and ʿAlāʾuddawlah al-Simnānī, *al-Taʾwīlāt al-Najmiyyah fī al-Tafsīr al-Ishārī al-Ṣūfī* (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, Beirut, 2009), 1:327–8.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

> 'There is no god except Him, the Living, the Self-Subsistent.' The Living, the Self-Subsistent is the One who oversees everything pertaining to His creatures: their life spans, their actions, and their provision.[29]

Al-Tustarī follows the strategy of interpreting these two divine attributes as His overseeing, sustaining, and governance of creation – the reading of earlier exegetes al-Muqātil, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Mujāhid, al-Rabīʿ ibn Anas, al-Ḍaḥḥāk, and others. God's self-subsistence is His governance [*tadbīr*], empowering and giving success to believers.[30] Later Sufi exegetes al-Sulamī, whose compilation became one of the most popular exegetical works, and Rūzbihān Baqlī both quote al-Tustarī's approach to the name 'self-subsistent'.[31] The exegesis of al-Qushayrī (d.1072) follows the same strategy of defining God's self-subsistence as God's governance manifested in human actions: 'self-subsistence means His governance and supervision of everything.' The one who knows that God is self-subsistent

29. Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Fons Vitae, Louisville, KY, 2011), 29, 41; F. Hamza, S. Rizvi and F. Mayer, *An Anthology of Qurʾānic Commentaries* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008), 183; Kubrā and al-Simnānī *al-Taʾwīlāt*, 1:327–8.

Tustarī's description of Q.2:255 as 'the mightiest verse' [*al-aʿẓam*] in the Qurʾan strongly resonates with the popular prophetic tradition that Q.2:255 and Q.2:163 contain the mightiest name of God [*ism Allāh al-aʿẓam*]. See e.g. Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-Asmāʾ wa al-Ṣifāt* (al-Maktabat al-Azhariyya, Cairo, 1939), 104.

30. Cf. Hamza et al., *Anthology*, 127–297; al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, 126 (Q.20:111). Among others, al-Zamakhsharī's reading of *al-Qayyūm* in Q.2:255 also underlines that God is 'the constant executor of the management of creation and its preservation' (Hamza et al., *Anthology*, 170). Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī (d.1001)'s, al-Bayhaqī (d.1066)'s and Ibn Tūmart (d.1130)'s interpretations of the divine attribute 'al-Qayyūm' are similarly based on divine governance. Cf. al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-Asmāʾ*, 53–4; Ibn Tūmart. *Sharḥ Murshidat*, 11; Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī, *Kanz al-ʿUlūm wa al-Durr al-Manẓūm* (Dār al-Āfāq al-ʿArabiyya, Cairo, 1999), 29.

31. Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tafsīr*, altafsīr.com, Q.20:111; Rūzbihān Baqlī, *ʿArāʾis al-Bayān* (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, Beirut, 2008), 2:503.

will be freed from all internal and external turmoil, tensions, and dependencies. As the believer knows that God has the control of everything, they will not value any created thing.[32] The commentary by Aḥmad Samʿānī (d.1141) on the divine names simply translates al-Qushayrī's account from Arabic into Farsi, missing the subtle word-play al-Qushayrī made between 'self-subsistent' [*qayyūm*] and 'the value' [*qiyma*], which the freed wayfarer would remove from the world, and devote to the creator. Still, Samʿānī's work became popular among later Persian Sufis, including Rūmī (d.1273).[33] Popular works on the divine names by al-Ghazālī (d.1111) also followed al-Qushayrī's reading.[34]

Ibn ʿArabī is inheriting such a sustained tradition that considers the emulation of the divine attributes one of the pillars, and indeed, the very definition of Sufism. Hence the encounter with the Muʿtazilite Sufi helps him to highlight this well-established heritage. Still, as in other cases, Ibn ʿArabī's approach to Muʿtazilism is not only informed, but also sympathetic rather than polemical. The Muʿtazilite negation of the divine attributes, accordingly, aims to protect divine unity and transcendence. In the section on the divine name 'the everlasting', Ibn ʿArabī introduces the thorny theory of the divine paradox: only God unites two opposites [*jamʿ bayna al-ḍiddayn*]. The doctrine was powerfully enunciated by al-Kharrāz (d.899), whom Ibn ʿArabī and al-Qūnawī (d.1274) often cited; and found full expression in the Ḥallājian creed that widely circulated as the popular Sufi manuals of al-Kalābādhī (d.990) and al-Qushayrī, among others, quoted it.[35] Ibn ʿArabī argues that the divine transcendence of theological reasoning

32. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Sharḥ Asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā* (M. al-Amāna, Cairo, 1969), 209–11.

33. Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Samʿānī, *Rawḥ al-Arvāḥ* (Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i ʿIlmī va Farhangī, Tehran, 1989), 495; W. Chittick, 'The Myth of Adam's Fall in Aḥmad Samʿānī's Rawḥ al-Arwāḥ', in *The Heritage of Sufism*, Vol.1, ed. L. Lewisohn (Oneworld, Oxford, 1999), 337–60.

34. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā* (al-Maṭbaʿat al-Ṣabāḥ, Damascus, 1999), 110.

35. Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, *Miftāḥ Ghayb al-Jamʿ wa al-Wujūd*

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

and discourse that Sufis indicated via paradoxes is at least partially preserved by the Muʿtazilites:

> She unites the opposites in Her description,
> Negation about Her is affirmation of Her
> [*fa-nafyuhā fī ʿayn ithbātihā*].
>
> … According to the rationalists [*ʿuqalāʾ*] … the pillars [*arkān*] are four. The source is the universal – that which we are exploring in this section. We have added the reality of realities [*ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqāʾiq*], which … encompasses the creator and creation. None has mentioned it among the people of speculation [*arbāb al-naẓar*] except the People of God. Only the Muʿtazilites have pointed to something close to it. They said: 'God is Speaker by His Speakingness [*qāʾil bi-l -qāʾiliyya*]; Knower by His Knowingness [*ʿālim bi-l- ʿālimiyya*]; Powerful by His Powerfulness [*qādir bi-l -qādiriyya*].' Hence they escaped from affirming attributes extraneous to the divine ipseity [*ithbāt ṣifa zāʾida ʿalā dhāt al-ḥaqq*], absolving the Real [*tanzīhan li-l -ḥaqq*]. So they removed these additions, and approached the reality.[36]

This is yet another crucial passage in exploring the Muʿtazilites in Ibn ʿArabī's mind. Negation of the divine attributes was common to the Muʿtazilites, but the preference for 'Knowingness', 'Powerfulness', and 'Speakingness' in rejection of divine attributes was not. Al-Juwaynī and later Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328) attribute this preference to the Karrāmīs – a pietist movement that emerged in 9th-century Central Asia.[37] On the other hand, Karrāmiyya was in turn deeply influenced by Muʿtazilism, particularly the Basran School. Indeed, we find the idea associated with both leaders of the Basran Muʿtazilites, with a significant nuance. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī reports:

(Hathi Trust, 193?), MS.236. See https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015079131804

36. Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, Ch.122, 2:480.

37. Al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād*, 44; Aḥmad Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya, *Darʾ Taʿāruḍ al-ʿAql wa al-Naql* (Jāmiʿat al-Imām Muḥammad b. Saʿūd al-Islāmiyya, Saudi Arabia, 1991), 4:20.

> Our companions (i.e. the Ashʿarites) have agreed that God is knower by His knowledge, and powerful by His power. … Those who negate the states [*naffāh al-aḥwāl*] have assumed that knowledge is the same with knowingness, that power is the same with powerfulness, and that these two are attributes added to the divine ipseity. Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī and Abū Hāshim al-Jubbāʾī admitted that they are added, yet they named them 'knowingness' and 'powerfulness' rather than (simply) knowledge and power. Hence the conflict would be in reality (only) in terminology. Yet, Abū Hāshim argued that these are states, and states are unknowable, while the ipseity is known through the states. … Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī, however, accepted their knowability.[38]

Al-Rāzī strikingly introduces the verbal choice of the two Jubbāʾīs within the context of divine unknowability. Rather than the father, it is the son, Abū Hāshim, whose avoidance of common divine attributes was related to his emphasis of divine unknowability. Abū Hāshim's avoidance of the common phrase '*God is knower by His knowledge*', and his appeal to '*God is knower by His knowingness*', seem an attempt to escape from attributes to states in favour of absolving God from additions to His ipseity. Accordingly, the attribute is actually our act of attributing a state to the divine essence. After his report, al-Rāzī goes ahead and refutes specifically Abū Hāshim's position on unknowability. Al-Rāzī is unhappy with Abū Hāshim's approach exactly because it sides with divine unknowability, unlike the later Ashʿarite knowability that he defended, at least in this work.

Ibn ʿArabī's description, then, finds a specific repercussion in Abū Hāshim, one of the most prominent Muʿtazilite masters. In another case, he makes another correct observation on the negativist hermeneutics of the Muʿtazilites on the divine attributes. This is the scriptural attribute of divine jealousy [*ghayra*], and Ibn ʿArabī points to the divergent hermeneutical approaches of the Ashʿarites and Muʿtazilites towards this

38. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Muḥaṣṣal Afkār al-Mutaqaddimīn wa al-Mutaʾakhkhirīn min al-ʿUlamāʾ wa al-Mutakallimīn*. Wa-bi-dhaylihi Kitāb Talkhīṣ al-Muḥaṣṣal li-Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (Maktabat al-Kulliyyāt al-Azhariyya, Cairo, 1978), 180.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

attribute.[39] All in all, the *Meccan Openings* not only introduces the Muʿtazilite approach to the emulation and the nature of divine attributes to challenge it. It displays Ibn ʿArabī's appreciative engagement with it, and documents the presence of the later Muʿtazilite activity in southern Iberia in complex interactions and encounters with Sufism.

DIVINE IPSEITY: KNOWABILITY

Based on their negativist hermeneutics of the divine attributes, contemporary scholars have tended to define Muʿtazilites as 'negative theologians' of the Islamicate world. The appellation needs a modification: the Muʿtazilites predominantly followed a negative theology of the divine attributes, yet they were far from adopting negativist positions towards the divine essence. Many of them, like their Ashʿarite opponents, rather defended that the divine essence is knowable [*maʿlūm*; *maʿrūf*]. It was the essential knowledge of God that grounded their approach to the divine attributes, and names, as well as scriptural veracity, and ethics.

The elusiveness of the topic reveals itself in Ibn ʿArabī's equivocal treatment of the Muʿtazilite approach to the knowability of the divine essence. On a couple of occasions, he implies that the Muʿtazilites agree with him on the divine unknowability. In his discussion on the nature of the divine speech [*kalām Allāh*], he narrates that the Muʿtazilites attribute the agency in human speech to the speaker, i.e. the human being herself. The speech of God, on the other hand, is His very ipseity. Ibn ʿArabī assumes that the Muʿtazilite purpose in this identification is their supposed endorsement of divine unknowability:

> The Muʿtazilites said: 'The speaker is the one who creates the speech. As for the speech of those who cannot speak, it is God's speech.' … Everything can be described as speaker by virtue of having power [*qādir*] to speak – a skill that they have. The Real cannot be described as having power to speak, insofar as it would make His speech created. His speech is pre-eternal [*qadīm*] according to the path of the Ashʿarites, and it is His very essence according

39. Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, Ch.150, 2:271.

> to the rationalists [*ʿuqalāʾ*]. Then, the relationship of Speech to God is unknowable [*majhūla*]: it is not known as His ipseity is not known. Speech is affirmed to God only through religion [*sharʿan*], and it cannot be apprehended by the rational capacity…[40]

Ibn ʿArabī's depiction of the Muʿtazilites here is fundamentally similar to the accounts we find in al-Rāzī's monumental Qurʾanic commentary, and later, in Ibn Taymiyya's works. Strikingly, both Ibn ʿArabī and al-Rāzī bring into the discussion the Muʿtazilite reading of the speech that the Qurʾan attributes to non-animals, specifically, plants.[41] However, the unknowability of the divine nature that Ibn ʿArabī seems to ascribe to the Muʿtazilites conflicts with al-Rāzī's informed account on the Muʿtazilites in his theological works. Not only their prominent observers but also both early and later Muʿtazilites predominantly defended divine knowability, and criticised the defenders of divine unknowability. Ibn ʿArabī might be familiar on this point with a minority Muʿtazilite position that was associated with Abū Hāshim. In addition to the case of Abū Hāshim in al-Rāzī's account, Ḍirār was known to defend divine unknowability, which, in turn, was criticised by the later Muʿtazilite Abū Rashīd (d.*c*.1068) of Nishapur.[42] On the other hand, various popular Sunni sources tended to imply that the Muʿtazilites were defenders of divine unknowability. One of the most popular theological texts of Ibn ʿArabī's times, al-Juwaynī's *Book of Guidance* [*Kitāb al-Irshād*], for example, argued that the apprehension [*idrāk*] of God was not possible either in this world or in the afterlife specifically according to Abū Hāshim and his followers among the Muʿtazilites.[43] In any case, the divine unknowability that Ibn ʿArabī and others attributed to the

40. Ibid. Ch.119, 2:444.

41. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1981), 27:118; Aḥmad Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿat al-Fatawī* (Majmaʿ al-Malik Fahd, Saudi Arabia, 2004), 12:312.

42. Abū Rashīd al-Nīsābūrī in H. Ansari and S. Schmidtke, 'Muʿtazilism after ʿAbd al-Jabbār: Abū Rashīd al-Nīsābūrī's Kitāb Masāʾil al-Khilāf fī l-Uṣūl', *Studia Iranica*, 39 (2010) 225–76, 248–9.

43. Al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād*, 166.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

Muʿtazilites was not easy to buttress with the exception of Abū Hāshim and Ḍirār.

If Ibn ʿArabī adapted the assumption that the Muʿtazilites in general joined him in defence of the unknowability, we may speculate that he transmitted it to al-Qūnawī. In his correspondence with Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d.1274), al-Qūnawī makes a broad claim that 'everybody who ponders seriously agrees that the divine reality is unknowable [*majhūla*]'. In his informed response, al-Ṭūsī feels obliged to correct al-Qūnawī's generic statement, clarifying that the philosophers like himself defend unknowability, while the Muʿtazilites 'assert that the divine reality is rather knowable to human beings in its essence'.[44] In turn, al-Qūnawī's next letter accepts al-Ṭūsī's correction, situating Sufis on the side of Peripatetic Philosophy defending divine unknowability in opposition to the Muʿtazilites.[45]

In any case, we observe that Ibn ʿArabī's depiction of the Muʿtazilite position changed towards the end of the *Meccan Openings*. In his discussion on beatific vision, he now attests that Muʿtazilites defend the knowability of the divine essence:

> The one who presumes that God is apprehended [*idrāk*] by reason, and not apprehended by eyes, is reckless. He does not possess knowledge neither through reasoning, nor vision, nor the mysteries whereon they stand. Muʿtazilites are like this.[46]

Hence Ibn ʿArabī's depiction of the Muʿtazilite approach to the knowability of the divine nature is ambivalent. His earlier accounts associated divine unknowability with them, while his last discussion provides a probably more learned and historically accurate description. Yet the correction is accompanied with a major point of critique – not of the divine knowability, with which Ibn ʿArabī (and most Sufis of his times as a widely accepted rule) disagreed, but of the inadmissibility of the beatific vision.

44. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī and Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, *al-Murāsalāt* (Yuṭlabu min Dār al-Nashr Frānts Shtāynar, Stuttgart, 1995), 50, 100.

45. Ibid. 165–6.

46. Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, Ch.369, 3:439.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

VISION OF GOD

Ibn ʿArabī's critique of the Muʿtazilite rejection of the beatific vision is more complex than it appears. First, Ibn ʿArabī is not in disagreement with the majority of the Muʿtazilites in terms of the visionary inaccessibility of the divine nature. His critique is related to the total rejection of the divine immanence: how can one deny the vision of God, while He is manifest in every second and every phenomenon, immediately in our souls and far in the horizons? He argues that every being in creation has a share of the beatific vision, while the essence remains ultimately veiled behind all visions. Hence it is important not to reduce Ibn ʿArabī's critique to a defence of actually seeing God. Indeed, Ibn ʿArabī adopts a radically critical position towards such claims in his own works. In his *Fabulous Gryphon* [*ʿAnqāʾ Mughrib*], just to give an example, he explains that the veils of majesty will remain before His vision – *forever*:

> What! What do they want? And what are they seeking so far away? By God, surely no one can attain it! No soul can comprehend His gnosis, and no body can contain it. He is the Most-Precious, Who cannot be comprehended, and the Existent, Who takes possession but is not possessed. Hence, in learning of His attributes, intellects become perplexed and hearts confused – so how could they ever attain unto His Essence? … As for the gnosis of the divine ipseity [*maʿrifat al-dhāt*], it embraces the most-radiant light in a blindness, concealed by the veil of protecting-might, preserved in the divine attributes and names. … *The utmost of seekers is to remain behind that veil – here and in the Hereafter*. … But he who is among the people of insights and intuitions, disciplined in the requisite refinements [*ādāb*] – if he arrives only at the veil which He (Praised be He!) never lifts from His face, he (nevertheless) shall be given to understand His essence, even though actual knowledge of the divine essence is impossible, for there is no way to raise that veil as such.[47]

47. Ibn ʿArabī in G. T. Elmore, *The Fabulous Gryphon (ʿAnqāʾ Mughrib), on the Seal of the Saints and the Sun Rising in the West*, (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1995), 131–5.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

Quite unusually for his times, Ibn ʿArabī is claiming here that God will remain veiled not only in *this world*, but also in *the afterlife*. While the theological discussions on the possibility of the vision of God [*rū'ya*] focused primarily on this world, the vast majority of Muslim scholars from diverse schools, orientations, and backgrounds affirmed that God would somehow, or without 'how' [*bilā kayf*], unveil His reality at least in the afterlife. Ibn ʿArabī rather argues for the essential unknowability of God, and the presence of the veils of majesty even in the soteriological encounter, and reunion, after death.

Ibn ʿArabī's critique, then, relates to the Muʿtazilite lack of appreciation on the side of divine immanence and mercy that continuously discloses itself in unalienable and infinite forms in each second of time. Ibn ʿArabī explains the incorrect logic he identifies in the Muʿtazilite negation of the beatific vision:

> The gate of the knowledge of God in terms of His ipseity is locked to all except Himself. … The representatives of the Muʿtazila [*aṣḥāb al-Muʿtazila*] deny His vision yet without its (correct) proof. If they did not mention their reason at all, we could certify that they are knowledgeable on the issue![48]

When the Muʿtazilites commonly say that the vision of God's essence is impossible, they are correct, while they are actually unaware of the paradox of the veil through which God manifests Himself every second. In other words, the Muʿtazilites do not unite the eye of transcendence with that of immanence. Divine essence is never unveiled to beatific vision, yet She never deprives creation from the immediate access to Her manifestations in each second, and in peculiar, perpetually renewed, infinite forms. The Muʿtazilite position in terms of the beatific vision is a lack of appreciating divine immanence and perpetual mercy. Ibn ʿArabī will observe a similar lack in Muʿtazilite teachings – now in the field of eschatology.

48. Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, Ch.100, 2:205.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE: EXECUTION OF THE PROMISED

The last mention of al-Qabrafīqī's Muʿtazilite Sufi circle in the *Meccan Openings* adds a brief yet informative detail. Accordingly, al-Qabrafīqī's circle was following 'the path of Muʿtazila [*iʿtizāl*], who defend the execution of the promised [*infādh al-waʿīd*] and (human) creation of their actions [*khalq al-afʿāl*]'. Brief as it is, 'the execution of the promised' here is unmistakably the 'promise and the threat', one of the fundamental principles of Muʿtazilism. In his refutation of Muʿtazilism, Yaḥyā ibn Abī al-Khayr al-ʿImrānī (d.1163), the Shāfiʿī scholar of Yemen, for example, also named its third principle 'the execution of the promised'. The principle was inferred from divine justice, and suggested that God does not forgive grave sinners – even if they are believers – except through their repentance [*tawba*], and that God is obligated to reward the believer in the afterlife. It is only the natural conclusion of divine justice that good acts deserve praise and reward, while bad acts deserve the blame and punishment as long as they are intentionally performed, and not repented for.

An important component of Ibn ʿArabī's critical approach to the Muʿtazilite teachings relates to this principle of theodicy. In various places he mentions the principle, and expresses his dissatisfaction with its limitation of the divine. Among the Ashʿarites in particular, many were irritated with the Muʿtazilite emphasis on justice that eventually limits divine omnipotence, and obligates God to act accordingly in the afterlife. Yet this is not Ibn ʿArabī's concern. Indeed, he argues that God actually *obliges Himself* to mercy. It is exactly at this point that the Muʿtazilites limit God, by limiting His mercy rather than omnipotence. The title of the part that addresses the topic speaks for itself: Entrustment [*iʿtimād*] to the Promise Before Its Happening – and this is the *Entrustment to the Absence of Factuality in the Promise* [*al-maʿdūm li-ṣidq al-waʿd*].[49] God *promises* us to be just in the afterlife, but His *de facto* nature is, rather, excessive mercy. Hence the critique of Muʿtazilism

49. Ibid. Ch.124, 2:525.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

is about its unjustified limitation of, and pessimism regarding divine mercy in the afterlife:

> '*His mercy transcends His wrath* [*ghaḍab*].' To teach this, He said: 'assume benevolence about Me.' He put it as an imperative; thus whoever does not assume benevolence is rebelling against His order, and ignoring the requisites of the divine favour [*al-karam al-ilāhī*]. If the issue was between equals without any preference (of divine mercy over wrath), there would be suspicion, like of those who say: 'His justice does not affect His grace [*faḍl*], and His grace does not affect His justice.' Yet, insofar as His preference is involved in our assumption, the Real ordered us to prefer His benevolent aspect.[50]

Here Ibn ʿArabī is challenging the Muʿtazilite theory of divine justice, criticising its discounting of divine mercy in the afterlife. He argues that the Muʿtazilite principle of promise and threat ultimately encourages monasticism [*raḥbāniyya*] as it only stimulates fear, regret, and pessimism. 'The Muʿtazilites defend "the execution of the promised" about the one who dies without repentance.'[51] Yet this very fear and regret their doctrine creates, Ibn ʿArabī continues, is actually a hidden cause of divine mercy. With Her triumphant mercy, God will accept the regret of the sinners as a sufficient reason to forgive them. Hence it is a baffling surprise that awaits the pessimist Muʿtazilites in the afterlife:

> *Nothing except benevolence emerges from the benevolent*. The Muʿtazilites claim the execution of the promised for whoever dies without repentance (from their grave sin). One of them, who followed this belief, died, and witnessed the reality. Someone saw him in a dream, and asked: 'How did God treat you?' He said: 'I found the reality easier than what I used to believe.' Then he reported how he was graced, and that the threat was not executed.[52]

50. Ibid.
51. Ibid. Ch.234, 2:591.
52. Ibid. Ch.124, 2:529.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

The eventual triumph of mercy towards our pessimist and sinful scholar was nothing but the divine principle, as God obliged Herself to mercy. As we know, even the supposed archenemies of God could not escape from divine mercy for Ibn ʿArabī, let alone a sinful believer. Here lies the unjustified limitation the Muʿtazilite theory of theodicy put on divine mercy. Ibn ʿArabī laid his own rule of triumphant love employing the language of the Muʿtazilite principle, only to subvert it:

> *When I promise them (reward), or threaten them (with punishment), I act counter to My threat, and complete My promise!*[53]

CONCLUSIONS

It is not an easy task to determine Ibn ʿArabī's textual sources, or the specific Muʿtazilite movements that he had in mind. The well-known Basran master Abū Hāshim is the most probable candidate for being Ibn ʿArabī's reference on the issue of the divine attributes. On the other hand, he is clearly citing an idiosyncratic idea that the Baghdadian Muʿtazilite master al-Kaʿbī introduced on divine will. We also observe that Ibn ʿArabī initially associated Muʿtazilism with his own defence of divine unknowability – an assumption that he later abandoned. This revision, in addition to Abū Hāshim and al-Kaʿbī's elusive appearances in the *Meccan Openings* in different theological contexts, pulls us back to the Muʿtazilite Sufi of southern Andalus, al-Qabrafīqī. Ibn ʿArabī narrates to us that he convinced al-Qabrafīqī and his followers to abandon their Muʿtazilite doctrines. Yet this was a process whereby al-Qabrafīqī and Ibn ʿArabī visited each other and presumably engaged in debates whereby the young Ibn ʿArabī could have developed his familiarity with Muʿtazilism. Was al-Qabrafīqī following al-Kaʿbī's Baghdadian School? Al-Qabrafīqī was denying the emulation of divine attributes, defending the principle of 'promise and the threat', and arguing that it is

53. Ibid. Ch.124, 2:525.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

human agents who create their own actions. Al-Kaʿbī similarly rejected the applicability of the divine attributes, and was known to have written a book titled *On the Threat of Punishment for the Grave Sinners* [*Fī Waʿīd al-Fussāq*], on which al-Māturīdī wrote a refutation.[54] Other passages where Ibn ʿArabī discusses Muʿtazilite arguments also fit well into al-Kaʿbī's teachings rather than those of the Basrans. An evidence comes from the details Ibn ʿArabī presents on the Muʿtazilite approach to the vision of God. Ibn ʿArabī here mentions that the Muʿtazilites interpret the vision of God as His knowledge.[55] Indeed, al-Kaʿbī followed the interpretation that Ibn ʿArabī described. This was a controversy among the Muʿtazilites, insofar as some argued that God's knowing and seeing are irreducible, and hence, different. Not just al-Kaʿbī but also Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī and the Baghdadian Muʿtazilites in general, as described by Mānkdīm (d.1034), al-Jishumī (d.1101), and Ibn al-Malāḥimī (d.1141), rather considered the attributes of hearing and seeing only as God's knowledge.[56] On the other hand, Basran Muʿtazilites such as Abū Hāshim are known to interpret the vision of God as His perfection, which differs from Ibn ʿArabī's depiction.

In other words, it is difficult to derive conclusive evidence, and there is no reason to assume a single source on Ibn ʿArabī's knowledge of Muʿtazilism. Yet the convergences with the Baghdadian Muʿtazilites are particularly exciting to observe insofar as al-Kaʿbī's name was associated with the 9th-century theological current, the *Ṣūfiyyat al-Muʿtazila*. This was an ascetic urban movement in Iraq within the Baghdadian Muʿtazilite tradition of Bishr ibn al-Muʿtamir (d.825):

> [The *Ṣūfiyyat al-Muʿtazila*] rejected not only the state in the sense of a central government, but also the 'world' – that is, commerce or any sort of profitable activity. … At first, the Sufis were probably merely following their *waraʿ*, their fear of dealing with impure and dubious things. The state, *al-sulṭān*, was counted among the

54. R. El Omari, *The Theology of Abū l-Qāsim al-Balkhī* (Brill, Leiden, 2016), 18.

55. Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, Ch.293, 2:742.

56. El Omari, *Theology of Abū l-Qāsim*, 38.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

> *shubuhāt*, suspect things. The Sufis did not accept a salary from the government; they did not serve it as soldiers; they even abstained from consuming food from the princes' lands and from frequenting baths built with government money on a usurped piece of land.[57]

The movement not only denied worldly authorities, but also practised extreme caution and abstinence because of their fear of sin. When criticising the Muʿtazilite principle of the promise and the threat that al-Qabrafīqī followed, Ibn ʿArabī was pointing exactly to such a pessimist, fearful dimension. The parallel is certainly inconclusive, yet attractive. With the disappearance of the *Ṣūfiyyat al-Muʿtazila* movement, simultaneous adoption of Muʿtazilite and Sufi identities had also disappeared, only until the appearance of al-Qabrafīqī far away in Andalus, knocking on Ibn ʿArabī's door with his followers.

The six theological themes covered in this paper correspond to fundamental teachings of pre-modern Muʿtazilism. Ibn ʿArabī's corpus addresses all of these issues with explicit reference to, and familiarity with, Muʿtazilism. His readings of Muʿtazilism are admittedly generic, yet sophisticated and appreciative. In comparative contexts with the Ashʿarites, Ibn ʿArabī depicts the Muʿtazilite arguments logically and even scripturally more robustly. They embodied a compelling and respected group: Ibn ʿArabī did not hesitate to indicate his debt to the Muʿtazilites in terms of his theory of fixed entities [*al-aʿyān al-thābita*].[58] In most cases, Muʿtazilites enter the scene in order to help Ibn ʿArabī explore dimensions of his own mystical theology. Still, as this preliminary study suggests, his engagements with Muʿtazilism provide us with important insights on the transmission and reception of theological ideas within the Islamicate world, Sufis in particular. His approach to Muʿtazilism was not only informed, but also sympathetic

57. J. Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2006), 149.

58. W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 1989), 83.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017

rather than dismissive. Muʿtazilites were among the people of divine unity who celebrated God in their own rationalist way according to Ibn ʿArabī. Theological pluralism not only mirrored divine expansiveness, but also made its mark on Ibn ʿArabī's own engagement with Muʿtazilism.

Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. 62, 2017