



THE SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE RELATION OF REASON TO REVELATION IN AL-MĀTURĪDĪ'S KITĀB AL-TAWHĪD

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Abstract. *The article analyses the theory of knowledge set out in Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī's Kitāb al-Tawḥīd and the account of the relation between reason and transmitted authority that follows from it. It is argued that epistemology is not an introductory section of the work but its foundation: the treatise opens with the impermissibility of accepting religion by imitation and the obligation of rational inference, and every subsequent doctrine is argued on that basis. Three sources of knowledge are distinguished - sense perception, reliable report and rational reflection - and imitation is excluded from them on the ground that it would validate mutually contradictory positions at once. On the question of the obligation to know God, al-Māturīdī takes an intermediate position between the Mu'tazilīs and the Ash'arīs: reason establishes the obligation, while the particular rulings of the law are established by revelation. The article further argues that the distinction between tafsīr and ta'wīl, drawn in the introduction to Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān, is the methodological counterpart of this epistemology, and traces the form these doctrines assumed in the later Māturīdī literature.*

Keywords: *al-Māturīdī, Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, kalām, sources of knowledge, reason and revelation, taqlīd, istidlāl, tafsīr and ta'wīl, Ḥanafī-Māturīdī creed, Abū al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī.*

INTRODUCTION

Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī al-Samarqandī (d. 333/944) is the eponym of the second Sunnī school of kalām (Madelung, 1991:847). For most of the history of the discipline, however, his principal theological work was unavailable. Kitāb al-Tawḥīd survives in a single manuscript in Cambridge University Library, and its existence was announced to the scholarly world only in the 1950s (Schacht, 1953:23-42). Until then the school was known chiefly through the creeds

and commentaries of its later representatives, and its founder was a name attached to positions he had not been read to hold (Rudolph, 2015:1-5).

The consequences of that gap are still visible. Descriptions of Māturīdism commonly summarise it in a phrase - a balance between reason and revelation - which is accurate but says very little. A balance can be struck in many places, and the formula leaves open precisely the question that matters: on which questions is reason competent, to what degree, and by what warrant (Cerić, 1995:11-14).

The present article attempts to answer that question from the text itself. Its thesis is that al-Māturīdī's theory of knowledge is not a preliminary to his theology but its foundation, and that the position he takes on reason and revelation is determined in advance by the way he classifies the sources of knowledge and excludes imitation from among them (al-Māturīdī, 2003:3-5). The aims are four: to establish the classification of the sources of knowledge in *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*; to examine the rejection of *taqlīd* and the obligation of rational inference; to determine the position taken on the obligation to know God and on the rational perception of good and evil; and to trace the form these doctrines assumed in the later Māturīdī literature, above all in the creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:13-22).

The primary sources are of three kinds. The first is *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* in the critical edition of Topaloğlu and Aruçi (al-Māturīdī, 2003), with the manuscript itself (Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 3651) and the earlier edition of Kholeif consulted for comparison. The second is al-Māturīdī's Qur'ān commentary, *Tāwīlāt ahl al-sunna*, whose introduction contains his methodological statements (al-Māturīdī, 1994:I/3). The third consists of the later Māturīdī texts: Abū al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī's *Tabṣīrat al-adilla*, which systematised the school's doctrine (al-Nasafī, n.d.:I/8), and the short creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142) with al-Taftāzānī's commentary (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:13). Among modern studies, Rudolph's monograph on the formation of the school at Samarqand is the principal reference (Rudolph, 2015:125-140); Cerić's study of al-Māturīdī's theology, which characterises it as a synthetic theology, and Pessagno's article on intellect and religious assent are also drawn upon (Cerić, 1995:11-14; Pessagno, 1979:18-27). The treatment of the divine attributes in the same corpus has recently been re-examined by al-Dibo (2018:163-178), whose findings are drawn upon where the epistemology bears upon that question.

The method is textual and comparative. Technical terms are given in Arabic and their English renderings are explained, since the argument turns on distinctions that are easily lost in translation. Where a doctrine is attributed to al-Māturīdī on the basis of a later formulation rather than of his own text, this is stated. One limitation should be acknowledged at the outset. Kitāb al-Tawḥīd is a difficult text: it is preserved in a single copy, its organisation is loose, and its author's habit of stating opposing views at length before answering them makes it easy to mistake a reported position for his own (Rudolph, 2015:201-205). The readings offered below are therefore framed conservatively, and where the later tradition supplies a tidier formulation than the original, the difference is noted rather than smoothed over.

MAIN PART

Al-Māturīdī was trained in the Ḥanafī milieu of Samarqand, at the school known as Dār al-Juzjāniyya, and the chain of his teachers reaches back to the direct students of Abū Ḥanīfa (Rudolph, 2015:125-140). His theology cannot be separated from that legal background. The manner in which he argues a creedal position - stating the claim, assembling evidence, considering objections, and only then pronouncing - is the manner of a jurist, and it distinguishes his work from the more deductive style of the philosophical theologians (Rudolph, 2015:130; Cerić, 1995:48).

The intellectual environment was polemical in a specific sense. Transoxiana in the fourth/tenth century was a meeting point of Muslim theological currents and of older religious traditions: Mu'tazilīs, dualists of various kinds, Manichaeans, Christians, and the sceptics whom the kalām tradition called sophists. Kitāb al-Tawḥīd addresses all of them, and the attention it gives to their arguments is one reason for its value as a historical source: some positions are known to us chiefly because al-Māturīdī reported them in order to answer them (al-Māturīdī, 2003:140-170; Madelung, 1991:847).

This setting explains the work's unusual structure. It does not follow the familiar creedal order of faith, divine attributes, prophecy and eschatology. It is organised as a sequence of problems, beginning with the possibility of knowledge itself, proceeding to the createdness of the world, the existence and unity of the Maker, His attributes, prophecy, divine decree, and faith (al-Māturīdī, 2003:3). The order is argumentative rather than catechetical, and it is for this reason that the epistemological chapters come first (Rudolph, 2015:210).

A further feature of the environment should be mentioned, because it bears on the shape of the epistemology. The Mu‘tazilī school was well established in the region, and al-Māturīdī’s engagement with it is the most sustained in the book. He is not writing against an absent opponent: the positions he examines were held by identifiable contemporaries, and one of his lost works was devoted to answering al-Ka‘bī, the leading Mu‘tazilī of Balkh (Rudolph, 2015:135; Madelung, 1991:848). The proximity matters, because it explains why he adopts so much of the Mu‘tazilī respect for argument while rejecting the conclusions they drew from it.

The opening chapter of Kitāb al-Tawḥīd is devoted to the impermissibility of accepting religion by imitation (taqlīd) and to the necessity of rational inference (istidlāl). The placement is deliberate and it is the first substantive claim of the book (al-Māturīdī, 2003:3). The argument is compact. Adherents of mutually contradictory doctrines all justify their beliefs by imitation of their predecessors. If imitation were a valid ground of belief, contradictory doctrines would all be true at once, which is impossible. Therefore imitation cannot be what distinguishes a true doctrine from a false one. Since every person of sound mind is addressed by the claims of religion, and since the only instrument by which competing claims can be assessed is reflection upon evidence, reflection is obligatory (al-Māturīdī, 2003:4; Pessagno, 1979:20).

Two features of this argument deserve notice. First, it does not rest on a scriptural premise; it is drawn from the nature of disagreement itself, and would be available to someone not yet persuaded of any revelation. This is necessary, since the argument is meant to establish the method by which revelation is to be recognised (Cerić, 1995:85). Second, it is directed at a practice rather than at a doctrine. Al-Māturīdī does not say that the beliefs of the imitator are false; he says that imitation is not what makes them true, and that the imitator therefore has no means of knowing whether what he holds is true (al-Māturīdī, 2003:4). The later tradition softened this into a question about the status of the imitator’s faith, and the standard answer became that his faith is valid while he is at fault for neglecting inference (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:189). That formulation is not in Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, which is concerned with method rather than with the status of persons, but it is a reasonable extension of the position, and it had the practical merit of not excluding the ordinary believer from the community of faith.

It is worth asking why the argument against imitation takes the form it does. Al-Māturīdī might have argued that imitation is forbidden because scripture commands

reflection, and verses to that effect were readily available to him (al-Māturīdī, 1994:I/3). He does not take that route, and the omission is deliberate: an argument from scripture would presuppose that scripture has been recognised as authoritative, which is exactly what the imitator has not done on any ground he can defend. The argument must therefore be one that can be made before any text is accepted, and this requirement shapes the whole opening of the work (Rudolph, 2015:212).

The target of the argument also deserves comment. It is not the ordinary believer who follows the religion of his parents without reflection; it is the claim that such following constitutes knowledge. Al-Māturīdī is making an epistemological point, not issuing a verdict on persons (Pessagno, 1979:22). The distinction was preserved in the later tradition, which continued to affirm that the imitator believes while denying that he knows, and the stability of that formulation over several centuries suggests that it answered a real need (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:189).

Having excluded imitation, al-Māturīdī sets out the sources from which knowledge genuinely derives. They are three: al-‘iyān (العيان), direct sense perception; al-akhbār (الأخبار), reliable report; and al-naẓar (النَّظَر), rational reflection (al-Māturīdī, 2003:7-9).

Each has its own domain. Sense perception yields knowledge of what is present and observable. Report yields knowledge of what lies beyond the observer’s own experience - the existence of distant places, of past events, and, in the case of prophetic report, of matters that sense and reason could never reach unaided. Reflection orders the deliverances of the other two and draws from them what is not given directly in either (al-Māturīdī, 2003:8). Each also has its conditions. Sense perception yields knowledge only when the organs are sound, which is why the later formulation specifies sound senses. Report yields knowledge only when the reporter is reliable, and the assessment of reliability is itself a task for reflection. Reflection operates only upon material supplied by the other two; it does not generate its objects. The three are therefore not independent rivals but a single system in which each supports and limits the others (al-Nasafī, n.d.:I/8).

The classification was preserved almost unchanged in the later literature. Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī opens his creed - the most widely taught Māturīdī text in the madrasa curriculum - with precisely this doctrine (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:16):

وَأَسْبَابُ الْعِلْمِ لِلْخَلْقِ ثَلَاثَةٌ: الْحَوَاسُّ السَّلِيمَةُ، وَالْحَبْرُ الصَّادِقُ، وَالْعَقْلُ

«*Wa-asbābu al- 'ilmi li-l-khalqi thalāthatun: al-ḥawāssu al-salīmatu, wa-l-khabaru al-ṣādiq, wa-l- 'aql*» - "The causes of knowledge for created beings are three: the sound senses, truthful report, and reason"

The same creed begins with a statement that is best read as the premise of the whole system (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:13):

حَقَائِقُ الْأَشْيَاءِ ثَابِتَةٌ وَالْعِلْمُ بِهَا مُتَحَقِّقٌ

«*Ḥaqā'iqu al-ashyā'i thābitatun wa-l- 'ilmu bihā mutaḥaqqiq*» - "The realities of things are established, and knowledge of them is attainable"

The clause is directed against those who deny that knowledge is possible, and it occupies in the creed the position that the refutation of the sceptics occupies in Kitāb al-Tawḥīd (al-Māturīdī, 2003:5; al-Taftāzānī, 1982:14). The order is not accidental: if knowledge is impossible, no theology can be stated at all, and so the possibility of knowledge must be secured before anything else is attempted.

Al-Māturīdī's own treatment of the sceptical position is more extended than the creed's single clause. He observes that those who deny the reliability of the senses in fact rely upon them in every action they perform, and that a denial which cannot be lived is not a doctrine but a form of words (al-Māturīdī, 2003:6). The argument is not original to him - versions of it circulate widely in the kalām literature - but his use of it at the opening of the work shows how he conceived the order of the discipline (Rudolph, 2015:215).

The treatment of report requires a further remark, since it carries more weight in this system than in most. Report is not a secondary source for al-Māturīdī but the only access to a whole class of truths: the particulars of the unseen, the content of the law, the events of the past (al-Māturīdī, 2003:9). It is therefore essential that its reliability be assessable, and the assessment is assigned to reflection. One examines the reporter, the chain, the possibility of collusion, and the consistency of the report with what is otherwise known (al-Nasafī, n.d.:I/18). Reflection thus validates report without replacing it, and report extends knowledge beyond what reflection could reach. The circularity that might be feared here is avoided because the two operate on different objects: reflection evaluates the act of reporting, not the content reported (Pessagno, 1979:24).

Prophetic report occupies a special position within this class. Its authority is not established by its content, which cannot be checked against anything else, but by the

evidence that the reporter is a prophet; and that evidence is accessible to reflection (al-Māturīdī, 2003:188). The structure is the same as in the general case, and this is why al-Māturīdī can treat prophecy as a question for argument rather than as a premise (Cerić, 1995:201).

A question that the classification leaves open is how the three sources are to be ranked when they appear to conflict. Al-Māturīdī does not treat the problem systematically, but his practice indicates an answer. Where a report of doubtful transmission conflicts with what reflection establishes with certainty, the report is reinterpreted rather than the conclusion abandoned; where reflection yields only a probable result and the report is firmly transmitted, the report prevails (al-Māturīdī, 2003:68). The rule is not stated in that form in the text, and the later tradition formulated it more sharply than he did, but it is implicit in the way he handles particular cases, especially in the chapters on the divine attributes (al-Dibo, 2018:166).

The classification of sources does not by itself settle the question of what reason may determine in religion. That question was framed in the kalām tradition as the problem of the obligation to know God (wujūb al-maʿrifa): is a person obliged to know his Creator before revelation reaches him, and if so, by what (al-Māturīdī, 2003:135)?

The Muʿtazilīs answered that the obligation is established by reason. A person who reflects on the world can infer that it is originated and has a Maker, and this inference binds him whether or not a prophet has reached him. The Ashʿarīs answered that obligation is established only by the address of the law: before revelation there is no obligation, because obligation is the act of a lawgiver (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:150). Al-Māturīdī takes the first part of the Muʿtazilī answer and refuses the second. He holds that the obligation to know God is established by reason: the evidence of the world is sufficient, and a person who neglects it is not excused (al-Māturīdī, 2003:136). But he does not conclude that reason can determine the content of religious duty. Which acts are obligatory and which forbidden, how God is to be worshipped, what the law requires in particular cases - none of this can be settled by reflection, and all of it is established by revelation (Cerić, 1995:120).

The position is accordingly intermediate, and it is intermediate by design rather than by compromise. Reason is competent to establish that there is a Maker and that His communication must be attended to; it is not competent to supply the content of that

communication. Reason, in this scheme, opens the door to revelation and does not take its place (Rudolph, 2015:285; Pessagno, 1979:26).

The same structure governs the question of the rational perception of good and evil (*al-ḥusn wa-l-qubḥ*). The Māturīdīs grant that reason perceives the goodness of some acts and the badness of others: that justice is good and injustice bad is not learned from revelation. But perception is not obligation. That an act is perceived as good does not by itself make it a duty, nor does the perception of badness by itself bring punishment; the assignment of reward and punishment belongs to the law. Reason perceives; revelation obliges (al-Nasafī, n.d.:II/8; al-Taftāzānī, 1982:152).

Al-Māturīdī also argues for the necessity of prophecy from the limits of reason, and the argument is worth stating because it closes the system. If reason were sufficient of itself, rational people would not disagree as deeply as they do about what is good and what is required. The fact of disagreement among competent reasoners shows that an external criterion is needed (al-Māturīdī, 2003:182). This argument recurs in the later Māturīdī literature whenever the necessity of prophecy is at issue, and it illustrates how the epistemology continues to govern doctrines that are not themselves epistemological (al-Nasafī, n.d.:I/466).

The position on the obligation to know God has a consequence that the sources state with some reluctance: the person whom no prophet has reached is not thereby excused from knowing his Creator, since the evidence of the world is available to him. The Ash‘arī position, by contrast, excuses him, since obligation requires an address and no address has reached him (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:150). The disagreement is narrow in formulation and wide in consequence, and it is one of the few places where the two Sunnī schools arrive at practically different judgements rather than at different descriptions of the same judgement (Cerić, 1995:124).

The argument from disagreement deserves one further comment, since it is sometimes misread as a concession that reason is unreliable. It is not. The claim is not that reasoners are incapable but that reason, operating on the evidence of the world alone, underdetermines the content of religious duty: several conclusions remain compatible with the evidence, and nothing within reason itself selects among them. A criterion external to reason is therefore required, and revelation supplies it (Pessagno, 1979:27). On this reading the argument is a claim about the scope of a faculty rather than about

its competence, which is consistent with the high estimate of reason elsewhere in the work (Rudolph, 2015:287).

The epistemology of Kitāb al-Tawhīd has a counterpart in al-Māturīdī's exegetical method, and the two should be read together. In the introduction to Tāwīlāt al-Qur'ān he distinguishes sharply between exegesis and interpretation (al-Māturīdī, 1994:I/3):

التفسير للصحابة والتأويل للفقهاء

«*al-Tafsīru li-l-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tāwīlu li-l-fuqahā'*» - "Exegesis belongs to the Companions, interpretation to the jurists"

The ground of the distinction is epistemic, and it follows directly from the classification of the sources of knowledge. Exegesis in the strict sense rests on report: the Companions witnessed the circumstances of revelation and can testify to what a verse refers. Their statements therefore carry certainty, and to assert exegesis without such warrant is to testify to what one has not witnessed. Interpretation rests on reflection: it selects among the possible senses a verse will bear, and its results are probable rather than certain (al-Māturīdī, 1994:I/3-4; Rudolph, 2015:160).

The practical consequences run in two directions at once. The distinction restrains interpretation, since no interpreter may claim for his reading the authority that belongs to testimony. It also protects interpretation, since disagreement among interpreters is to be expected where the matter is probable by its nature, and a differing interpretation is not for that reason an error to be condemned. Both consequences follow from the same principle: a claim may be asserted only with the degree of certainty its source supports (Cerić, 1995:156). Read in this light, the distinction between tafsīr and tāwīl is not a point of exegetical technique but the application to scripture of the epistemology set out in Kitāb al-Tawhīd. Report yields certainty; reflection yields probability; and the business of the interpreter is to keep the two apart (al-Māturīdī, 2003:9).

One objection to the whole scheme should be considered, since it was raised within the tradition itself. If reflection is obligatory for everyone of sound mind, and if most believers in fact hold their faith on authority, does it follow that most believers are in sin? The Māturīdī answer distinguishes the obligation from its discharge. What is required of every believer is not the formal argumentation of the theologians but the elementary reflection of which anyone is capable: that the world did not make itself, that order implies an orderer. Technical argument is required only of those who face

technical objections (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:189; al-Nasafī, n.d.:I/22). The answer is not free of difficulty, but it preserves both the principle and the standing of the ordinary believer, and it explains why the school could insist on the obligation of inference without excluding anyone from the community.

A final point about the exegetical distinction concerns its relation to legal method. The jurists of the Ḥanafī school had long distinguished between what a text states and what is inferred from it, and had attached different degrees of authority to the two. Al-Māturīdī's division between exegesis and interpretation reproduces that structure in the field of Qur'ānic commentary, and his choice of the word *fuqahā'* for those who practise interpretation is unlikely to be accidental (al-Māturīdī, 1994:I/3; Rudolph, 2015:132). The epistemology, the exegetical method and the legal theory of the school thus form a single pattern, in which the warrant of a claim is always traced to its source and never exceeds it.

Al-Māturīdī's teaching did not spread rapidly in his own time, and the reasons are instructive. The style of *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* is demanding and was never intended for a wide readership; and its author did not set out to found a school bearing his name. He understood himself to be stating the creedal foundations of the Ḥanafī tradition, not establishing a new one. The school's name and its systematic form belong to the generations after him, and principally to the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Madelung, 1991:847-848; Rudolph, 2015:1-5).

Abū al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī is the decisive figure in that development. In *Tabṣīrat al-adilla* he reorganised al-Māturīdī's arguments, supplied the transitions the original lacked, and set the doctrine out in a form that could be taught (al-Nasafī, n.d.:I/8). Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī then compressed the whole into a few pages, and al-Taftāzānī's commentary on that compression became the standard textbook of the tradition (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:13-22).

For the student of al-Māturīdī's own thought this sequence poses a methodological difficulty that deserves emphasis. Two layers must be distinguished: the founder's text and the school's later presentation of it. There is no contradiction between them, but the emphases differ. Al-Māturīdī displays the process of argument; the later texts state its results. A reader who approaches the founder through the creeds will find a tidier and more schematic thinker than the one the manuscript presents (Rudolph, 2015:205; Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 3651).

Modern scholarship has converged on the judgement that the epistemology is the core of the system. Rudolph treats the theory of knowledge as the point from which al-Māturīdī's positions on the attributes and on the divine decree are to be understood (Rudolph, 2015:125-140); Cerić describes the resulting theology as synthetic, in that fidelity to the transmitted text and rational argument are combined within a single structure rather than alternated according to the question (Cerić, 1995:11-14). Pessagno's earlier study drew attention to the same feature from the side of religious assent, arguing that for al-Māturīdī assent is a rational act and not merely a disposition of the will (Pessagno, 1979:18-27).

The later history of the distinction between *tafsīr* and *tāwīl* is itself instructive. It was taken up well beyond Māturīdī circles and became a commonplace of the exegetical literature, often cited in al-Māturīdī's name. What was transmitted, however, was the formula rather than its epistemological justification; the distinction came to function as a classification of genres rather than as a rule about the warrant of claims (Rudolph, 2015:162). Something similar happened to the classification of the sources of knowledge, which survives in the creeds as a list to be memorised, detached from the arguments that produced it (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:16).

The transmission of the school into Transoxiana's madrasa system completed the process. By the sixth/twelfth century the creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī was being taught as a first text in theology across the region, and the three sources of knowledge were among the first things a student learned (Madelung, 1991:848). Whatever the losses involved in compression, the result was that an epistemological doctrine formulated in a difficult polemical treatise became part of the elementary education of several centuries of scholars, which is not a common fate for a theory of knowledge.

Three observations follow from the foregoing. The first concerns the much-repeated formula of a balance between reason and revelation. The formula is not wrong, but it is imprecise in a way that matters. What al-Māturīdī proposes is not a balance in the sense of an equal division of authority; it is a division of labour. Reason has one task, revelation another, and the tasks do not overlap. Reason establishes that there is a Maker and that His communication is to be heeded; revelation supplies what is communicated (al-Māturīdī, 2003:136; Cerić, 1995:120). A balance can be struck anywhere along a continuum; a division of labour cannot, and it is the second that the texts describe.

The second observation concerns the function of the epistemology within the system. It is not a prolegomenon that could be detached without loss. The rejection of imitation determines the form of every subsequent argument, since a doctrine that may not be accepted on authority must be argued; the classification of sources determines what sorts of argument are admissible; and the distinction between the certain and the probable determines how firmly each conclusion may be asserted (al-Māturīdī, 2003:9; Rudolph, 2015:210). Remove the epistemology and the rest of the structure loses its warrant.

The third observation is comparative. Both Sunnī schools sought a position between the Mu‘tazilī elevation of reason and a traditionalism that would dispense with argument altogether, and both found one. They did not find the same one. The Ash‘arī solution locates all obligation in the address of the law and assigns to reason the role of defending what the law has established. The Māturīdī solution assigns to reason an independent competence within a bounded domain (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:150; Pessagno, 1979:26). The difference is small in its formulation and considerable in its implications, and it is visible in the treatment of questions as remote from epistemology as the status of the person whom no prophet has reached, and indeed in the dispute over the attribute of takwīn (al-Dibo, 2018:168).

A word is also due on the limits of what has been established here. The reconstruction offered above relies on the organisation of doctrines that the later tradition supplies, and the manuscript itself is less orderly than any summary of it can be (Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 3651; Rudolph, 2015:201). The claim defended is correspondingly modest: that the texts support this reading and that the reading makes the system intelligible as a whole. A fuller demonstration would require a passage-by-passage comparison of the epistemological sections of Kitāb al-Tawḥīd with the parallel sections of Tabṣīrat al-adilla, which remains to be undertaken (al-Nasafī, n.d.:I/8).

It remains to note what is distinctive in this epistemology when it is set beside the wider kalām tradition. The threefold classification of sources is not peculiar to al-Māturīdī; versions of it are found in Mu‘tazilī and Ash‘arī works alike (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:16). What is distinctive is the use made of it. In other systems the classification is a preliminary that is left behind once the substantive doctrines begin. In Kitāb al-Tawḥīd it remains in force throughout: each doctrine is argued from a specified source, and the

degree of certainty claimed for it is adjusted to the source from which it is drawn (al-Māturīdī, 2003:9; Cerić, 1995:160). That consistency, more than any single doctrine, is what justifies describing the epistemology as the foundation of the system rather than its introduction.

One may also ask what the system excludes. It excludes, first, the appeal to inspiration or private illumination as a source of doctrine, since such an appeal cannot be assessed by any of the three sources and is therefore not knowledge in the sense defined. It excludes, second, the derivation of ritual and legal obligation from rational reflection alone, which is the Mu‘tazilī overreach. It excludes, third, the refusal of argument in the name of fidelity to transmission, since the acceptance of transmission itself requires an argument (al-Māturīdī, 2003:4-9; al-Nasafī, n.d.:I/18). These three exclusions mark out the position as precisely as any positive statement of it, and they explain why the school was attacked from opposite directions in its own time (Madelung, 1991:848).

CONCLUSION

Kitāb al-Tawhīd is not a catalogue of creedal positions but a systematic work that begins by establishing the grounds on which any creedal position may be held. The opening chapters on the impermissibility of imitation and the obligation of inference are not preliminaries; they state the method by which everything that follows is to be argued (al-Māturīdī, 2003:3-5).

Al-Māturīdī distinguishes three sources of knowledge - sense perception, reliable report and rational reflection - and excludes imitation from among them on the ground that it would validate contradictory doctrines simultaneously (al-Māturīdī, 2003:7-9). The classification passed almost unchanged into the later literature and is stated in the opening lines of the creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī (al-Taftāzānī, 1982:16). On the relation of reason to revelation he occupies an intermediate position: the obligation to know God is established by reason, while the content of religious duty is established by revelation (al-Māturīdī, 2003:136; Cerić, 1995:120). The same division governs the question of good and evil, where reason perceives and the law obliges (al-Nasafī, n.d.:II/8).

The distinction between tafsīr and tāwīl is the methodological counterpart of this epistemology, applying to the interpretation of scripture the rule that a claim may be

asserted only with the certainty its source supports (al-Māturīdī, 1994:I/3). A promising line of further research would be a comparative study of the epistemological passages of Kitāb al-Tawḥīd and Tabṣīrat al-adilla, with a view to establishing which of the school's standard arguments belong to the founder and which were supplied by his systematiser (Rudolph, 2015:140).

Two further questions suggest themselves and are left for other studies. The first concerns the relation between al-Māturīdī's epistemology and Ḥanafī legal theory, where the classification of transmitted reports and the conditions of their acceptance were being worked out in the same period and in the same milieu; the parallels are close enough to suggest influence in one direction or the other (Rudolph, 2015:132). The second concerns the manuscript itself: as a unicum of uncertain provenance it has attracted doubts about the integrity of its text, and a study of its epistemological chapters against the citations of al-Māturīdī in later Māturīdī works would help to establish how far the transmitted text can be relied upon in detail (Schacht, 1953:23-42; Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 3651).

In closing it may be observed that the questions treated here are not of antiquarian interest only. The status of imitation, the assessment of reports, and the division of competence between argument and transmitted authority are live issues wherever a religious tradition is taught, and the terms in which al-Māturīdī posed them have the merit of being precise. Whether his solutions are accepted or not, the demand he makes - that every claim be traced to a source and asserted only with the certainty that source supports - remains a reasonable standard to hold a theological argument to (Pessagno, 1979:27).

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