

Ash'arite Traditionist-Theologians and Reading Ambiguous Hadiths on Divine Attributes

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Abstract

Modern Salafi narrative always depicts the Ash'arites as a group of rationalists with insufficient mastery of hadith sciences. It is claimed that lack of knowledge in hadith sciences is the reason behind their misguided interpretations of religious texts on divine attributes. This study aims to examine this notion by tracing Ash'arite tendencies among hadith authorities and exposing their approach to anthropomorphic expressions in hadiths. It gathered data from sources that deal with *ahādīth al-ṣifāt* (prophetic traditions regarding divine attributes), providing a qualitative analysis of the data. This article argues that hadith experts espoused Ash'arism since its emergence in the tenth CE/fourth AH century forming a group referred to as Ash'arite traditionist-theologians (*muḥaddith-mutakallim*). Originating from Iraq and Khorasan, the school gradually expanded to various cities in the Islamic world before it reached the golden era during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. When dealing with anthropomorphic expressions in hadiths, Ash'arite traditionist-theologians appeal to the *tawqīf* principle to eschew extreme literalism. They proved that the application of *tafwīd* and *ta'wīl* in reading those texts does not contradict the way of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* (righteous predecessors).

Keywords: Salafi, Ash'ari, divine attributes, *tawīl*, *tafwīd*, anthropomorphism, ambiguous hadiths.

Introduction

For the last two centuries, the Salafi movement (*al-da'wā al-salafiyya*) has impacted Muslim debates on various subjects. Since its advent in the nineteenth century, proponents of the movement relied on what they allege to be the beliefs and practices of the Salaf (predecessors or early generations of Islam) and *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* (people of hadith) to revisit various theological and jurisprudential issues.

Salafists believe that anthropomorphic expressions in the sacred texts must be taken as literal. Their apparent meanings must be affirmed as divine attributes without explaining its qualities (Shawkānī 1989, 19; Qannawjī 1984, 42-47; Ibn 'Uthaymīn 1994, 35-36). In

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their view, not only should ambiguous texts not be interpreted, but interpreting them is a sign of heresy and misguidance (Nahouza 2018). Therefore, Salafists hold a negative view of Ash'arism, the Sunni school of theology held by most Islamic societies today, stating that the Ash'arites have deviated from orthodoxy for employing both *tāwīl* and *tafwīd* to scriptural texts on divine attributes. *Tāwīl* is a non-literal interpretation of texts by offering figurative meanings, whereas *tafwīd* is to abstain from offering any interpretations, including literal meanings, assuming that no one knows the real meaning of the text except God. According to Salafists, both *tafwīd* and *tāwīl* are rationalist approaches that require negation of the truth revealed in the Quran and Sunna (the Prophetic tradition); and the Ash'arites used them to "make it seem that they preserve the texts while actually disregarding their content" (Ḥawālī 1986, 87).

Additionally, the Salafī narrative often depicts proponents of Ash'arism as speculative theologians (*mutakallimūn*) who adopted a purely rationalist approach to theology at the expense of religious texts, particularly hadiths. They further assert that Ash'arite's deficiency in hadiths and *sunna*-related sciences has led them to misrepresent the theological positions of the Salaf and *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* (Maḥmūd 1995, 792; Ḥāy 2007, 213). This conception has prevented Salafists from acknowledging that some, if not many, hadith scholars are in fact Ash'arites. Any historical evidence that suggests otherwise is always interpreted in a way that dismisses its apparent conclusion. As an illustration, despite ample evidence for Ibn al-Ḥajar's affinity towards Ash'arism, certain Salafī clerics have claimed that he actually aligned with the Salafists in opposition to Ash'arite theology (Ḥawālī 1986, 25-27). Others acknowledge the fact but offer an apologetic explanation suggesting that Ibn al-Ḥajar was led astray by external influences (Kandū 1416 AH, 140).

The following analysis aims to scrutinize the aforementioned assumption. It seeks to shed light on Ash'arite inclinations among the hadith scholars by examining their approach to anthropomorphic expressions found in certain traditions, commonly referred to as *ahādīth al-ṣifāt* (hadiths regarding divine attributes). The term "Ash'arite traditionist-theologian" (*muḥaddith-mutakallim*) will be employed to denote any hadith scholar who adopts the Ash'arite approach in handling such texts.

This study collected data from various compilations of hadiths regarding *ṣifāt* (divine attributes) and conducted a qualitative analysis. Despite the topic being relatively old and well-known, the importance of this group appears to have received limited scholarly attention. In his comprehensive study of the history of Islamic thought, Montgomery Watt (1985, 81) made reference to the presence of a "non-speculative line" within the Ash'arites of Nishapur. He specifically identified al-Bayhaqī as the most notable proponent of this line. Alexander Melchert (1997, 69-70) briefly highlighted the semi-rationalistic inclination observed among Shāfī'ite traditionalists in Iraq and Khorasan in his comprehensive study on the development of Sunni jurisprudential schools. It provides a solid foundation for Livnat Holtzman's

(2019) account of anthropomorphism in Islamic history. However, to date, no specific studies have been conducted to fully illuminate this subject.

In contrast to the Salafi viewpoint, this article will argue that Ash'arism has garnered significant support from influential figures of *ahl al-ḥadīth* (the people of hadith) since its early inception. This has led to the emergence of a distinct group of hadith scholars whose stance on divine attributes differs from that of the Hanbalites and ultra-traditionalists. The group, referred to as "Ash'arite traditionist-theologians," employed a sophisticated methodology primarily deployed by jurists and theologians to produce coherent and unproblematic conclusions regarding theological matters. In the discourse of divine attributes, they adhere strictly to the *tawqīf* principle, which dictates that the affirmation of divine attributes must be exclusively based on explicit statements found in specific sources of authority, namely the Quran, authentic hadiths, or scholarly consensus. They reject any doubtful text, whether in terms of its authenticity or meaning, as a valid basis for establishing divine attributes. Consequently, such texts are either rejected or interpreted in a figurative sense. On top of that, they argue that this approach is in line with the methodology of the early scholars of Islam.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section will elucidate the acceptance of Ash'arism among hadith authorities in Iraq and Khorasan prior to its dissemination to other regions of the Islamic world. It will identify several hadith scholars who exhibited a leaning towards Ash'arism. The second part will delve into the methodology employed by Ash'arite traditionist-theologians when grappling with anthropomorphic attributes of God found in hadiths. It will explore how they utilize the *tawqīf* principle to carefully examine and interpret the meaning of these attributes. The third part will uncover how the stance of Ash'arite traditionist-theologians on *ahādīth al-sifāt* aligns with the methodology of the early scholars (*salaf*). In turn, they propose an alternative explanation for the Salaf's assertion that the problematic texts must be accepted as they are.

It would be appropriate to provide an explanation of certain specialized terms used in this study. "Traditionalist" or *ahl al-ḥadīth* is a term used to describe a group of scholars who prioritize textual sources in the fields of theology and jurisprudence. This category encompasses jurists who align with the traditionalist movement and oppose rationalism in their approach (Makdisi 1979, 4). However, a traditionist (*muḥaddith*) is an individual who studies and transmits traditions (hadiths) irrespective of their theological inclination (Melchert 2001, 386). While the majority of early traditionists held a negative view of scholastic theology (*ilm al-kalām*), a shift occurred in the fourth/tenth century when some of them began to show an inclination towards engaging in theological discussions. This group, referred to as traditionist-theologians in this study, emerged as a result. Subsequent biographical dictionaries frequently identify specific scholars as traditionist-theologians. For instance, Ibn Kathīr (2004, 1:251) stated that Zāhir bin Aḥmad al-Sarakhsī (d. 999 CE/389 AH) was a Shāfi'i jurist, Quranic expert, traditionist, and theologian (*al-muḥaddith al-mutakallim*) as well.

Who Are Ash'arite Traditionist Theologians?

Ash'arism is a theological school attributed to its founder and eponym Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl al-Ash'arī. He was born in Basra, Iraq, in 874 CE/260 AH, and according to the most reliable sources, he passed away in Baghdad in 936 CE/324 AH. After al-Ash'arī's father, a Sunni scholar, passed away during his childhood, his mother married Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 916 CE/303 AH), a prominent Mu'tazilite scholar. It was under the guidance of al-Jubbā'ī that al-Ash'arī received his education and developed his theological inclinations. He emerged as one of the prominent proponents of Mu'tazilism and authored numerous theological works during this period. However, it did not take long for al-Ash'arī to undergo a significant shift in his intellectual trajectory. At the age of forty, he made a public announcement retracting his previous stance and embraced the *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* camp. From that point forward, he dedicated the remainder of his scholarly life to defending traditionalism. This defense was grounded in a semi-rationalistic approach that sought to strike a balanced combination between reason (*al-'aql*) and revelation (*al-naql*). Throughout his life, until his final days, al-Ash'arī consistently employed *nazar* (analytical reasoning) and advocated for the use of *'ilm al-kalām* (scholastic theology), despite facing staunch opposition from the Hanbalites and ultra-traditionalists (Watt 1973, 311; Qadhi 2016, 445).

Many studies on the life and contributions of al-Ash'arī portray him primarily as a pure theologian with unquestionable expertise in rational or theoretical discourse. This perception, however, falls short in fully capturing his thoughts and personality. Historical evidence indicates that al-Ash'arī possessed a profound mastery of hadith as well. During his formative period, he attended hadith sessions conducted by renowned authorities in Basra such as Sahl ibn Nūh, Muḥammad al-Muqrī (d. possibly 942 CE/330 AH), 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dabbī (d. 892 CE/279 AH), Abū Khalīfa al-Jumaḥī (d. 917 CE/305 AH), and Zakariyyā al-Sājī (d. 920 CE/307 AH). His works, particularly the extensive Quranic commentary, are abundant with hadith narrations that include complete chains of transmission (Ibn 'Asākir 2018, 692; al-Subkī 1999, 258). Furthermore, al-Ash'arī authored several works in defense of the reliability of the Sunnah in both jurisprudence and theological discussions. These include works such as *Mujālasāt fī khabar al-wāḥid wa-ithbāt al-qiyās* (discussing the reliability of single-narrator hadiths and analogy), *Mutashābih al-Qur'ān* (refuting Mu'tazilite criticism of ambiguous verses in al-Quran), and *Naqd* (refutation) of Ibn al-Rāwandī, who challenged the concept of *mutawātir* (mass-reported hadiths) (Ibn 'Asākir 2018, 287-88).

In his final years, al-Ash'arī relocated to Baghdad. However, he faced challenges in garnering a significant following, largely due to the dominance of the Hanbalites in the city. A significant turning point occurred when al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013 CE/403 AH), a prominent second-generation Ash'arite scholar, made a notable appearance in inter-school debate forums. He then used his massive knowledge and influence to spread Asharism to other cities in Iraq and beyond. Nonetheless, it was the students

of al-Ash'arī hailing from Khorasan who effectively disseminated his teachings in their respective hometowns, thereby laying the groundwork for the establishment of the first Ash'arite community in the region. According to al-Dhahabī (1985a, 115), Khorasan during that period was renowned as "the abode of traditions" (*dār al-āthār*). The traditionalists of Khorasan were predominantly followers of the Shāfi'ite school of jurisprudence, which led to the school being recognized in the region as "the school of hadith" (*madhhab al-ḥadīth*) (Shahrāzūrī 1992, 1-225). Notably, unlike their counterparts in Iraq, the traditionalists from Khorasan had a lesser inclination towards hostility and were more open to compromises (Melchert 1997, 100).

During the early phase of Ash'arism's history, the supporters of the school included not only theologians and jurists but also traditionists. Numerous hadith scholars in significant cities of Khorasan demonstrated a clear preference for the rationalistic approach. For example, in Gorgan its chief traditionist Abū Bakr al-Ismā'īlī (d. 982 CE/371 AH) produced hadith compilations replete with semi-rationalistic explanations. His mastery in hadith studies is so remarkable that his name is frequently mentioned alongside titans such as al-Bukhārī (Dhahabī 1985b, 16:294). According to Ibn 'Asākir (2018, 375), al-Ismā'īlī is one of al-Ash'ari's contemporaries who benefited from his theological works. In his now-apparently lost *al-Mustakhraj 'ala Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, he argued for his position on the anthropomorphic content in hadiths employing the rationalistic approach. Ibn al-Ḥajar extensively referenced the interpretations provided by al-Ismā'īlī in his work *Fath al-Bārī* to elucidate the meanings of challenging terms found in hadiths concerning divine attributes such as the leg and shin (see Brown 2007, 109-112). Following Abū Bakr al-Ismā'īlī's passing, Ash'arism continued to be upheld within his family for subsequent generations.

The same holds true of Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 998 CE/388 AH) in the city of Bost (now known as Lashkargah in Afghanistan). He gained fame as a renowned *muhaddith*-polymath who studied various Islamic sciences under the guidance of prominent authorities, including Abū Bakr al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī (d. 976 CE/365 AH), who directly learned theology from al-Ash'arī. In his commentary on Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan* and al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Khaṭṭābī openly rejects the literal interpretations made by certain traditionists regarding hadiths that mention divine attributes. As noted by Tokatly (2001, 58), al-Khaṭṭābī demonstrates a keen awareness of the issue of anthropomorphism due to many traditions containing anthropomorphic content made their way into al-Bukhārī's *ṣaḥīḥ* compilation. Leveraging his profound expertise in hadith and Arabic lexicography, al-Khaṭṭābī proposed alternative interpretations to avoid anthropomorphism. Not only does he permit interpretation (*tāwīl*), but al-Khaṭṭābī goes even further by asserting that certain hadiths regarding divine attributes should be understood figuratively by consensus. This includes hadiths that mention God's "loin (*ḥiqw*)," "garment (*izār*)," and that He "walks and runs" (Shahrāzūrī 1992, 469-470).

Undoubtedly, the city of Nishapur stood out as the most significant center of Ash'arism (Watt 1985, 79). As stated by al-Dhahabī (1985a, 72), Nishapur was regarded as the epitome of orthodoxy, being recognized as the city of Sunnah and esteemed chains of narration (*isnād*). During al-Ash'arī's lifetime, numerous distinguished traditionalists from Nishapur traveled to Basra to study directly under his guidance. Among them was Abū Sahl al-Ṣu'lūkī (m. 980 CE/369 AH), a highly esteemed jurist-*muhaddith*. After gaining knowledge from al-Ash'arī, he returned to Nishapur and dedicated thirty years of his life to teaching hadith and jurisprudence. Abū Sahl al-Ṣu'lūkī was widely recognized as the prominent master of all hadith scholars in the city. Under his influence, Ash'arism was accepted as an orthodox doctrine among traditionists in Nishapur and became the representative embodiment of Sunnism. In his correspondence with vizier al-Kundurī, al-Bayhaqī explicitly affirmed that al-Ash'arī was the staunch defender of genuine orthodoxy in the face of heretical sects and ideologies (Ibn al-Subkī 1999, 284-286). A parallel sentiment was expressed by his contemporary, Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072 CE/465 AH), who emphasized that the Ash'arī creed accurately represents the creed of the people of hadith (Ibn 'Asākir 2018, 257).

It seems that the traditionalists of Nishapur made serious efforts to promote Ash'arism in the city. For instance, they extended an invitation to one of the eminent theologians of Ash'arism, Abū Bakr ibn Fūrak (d. 1015 CE/406 AH), to establish himself in Nishapur and teach at a seminary (*madrassa*) made specifically for him (Ibn al-Subkī 1999, 2:425). Although Ibn Fūrak is widely recognized as a theologian, it is worth noting that he initially began his scholarly journey as a traditionist. He produced his body of work in several prominent hadith centers across Persia and Iraq. Until his final days, Ibn Fūrak remained committed to hadith transmission activities. Through his regular sessions of hadith auditions, he played a crucial role in nurturing the development of future Ash'arite traditionist-theologians in Nishapur, including notable figures like Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥākīm (d. 1014 CE/405 AH), Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066 CE/458 AH), and the Sufi-traditionist Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072 CE/465 AH).

During the Seljuq Empire, Ash'arites emerged as a formidable influence, thanks to the support and patronage of Nizām al-Mulk (d. 1092 CE/485 AH). The vizier purposefully established a network of prestigious educational institutions, famously known as the Nizamiyya Schools (*al-Madrassa al-Nizāmiyya*), in key cities. These institutions were dedicated to propagating Shāfi'ite-Ash'arism. The institutions proved to be remarkably successful in producing influential scholars not only within the Seljuq Empire but also beyond its borders. Following his peaceful takeover of Damascus from the Ismā'īlī representative, Nūr al-Dīn al-Zankī (d. 1174 CE/569 AH) invited Qutb al-Dīn al-Naysābūrī (d. 1183 CE/578 AH), a scholar from the Nizamiyya institution, to illuminate the city with his vast knowledge and eliminate any lingering Shiite influence (Dhahabī 2003, 12:620; Ibn al-Mu'allim 2019, 1:486-7). Additionally,

al-Zankī established Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Nūriyya, the world's first institution dedicated to the study of hadith. To lead this institution, he appointed the Ash'arite traditionist-theologian, Abū l-Qāsim ibn 'Asākir (d. 1176 CE/571 AH), as its first hadith grand master (*syeykh al-ḥadīth*).

Ibn 'Asākir is widely recognized as one of the most brilliant hadith masters in history. Born in Damascus in 1159 CE/499 AH, he received his early education in the city before he embarked on an extensive journey to various cities in pursuit of hadith knowledge. During his travels, he visited Nishapur, where he diligently transcribed the works of al-Bayhaqī and later returned with them to his hometown (Dhahabī 1985b, 18:168). During his tenure as a teacher at Dār al-Ḥadīth, Ibn 'Asākir organized a series of hadith dictation sessions focused on reciting carefully chosen hadiths that discussed divine attributes and provided arguments for "refutation of anthropomorphism" (*naḥy al-tashbīh*).

Among his notable contributions to Ash'arism, Ibn 'Asākir authored an apologetic work titled *Tabyīn kadhib al-muftarī fī mā nasab ilā Abī l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī* (Exposing the fabricator's falsehood in what he attributed to Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī). This work aimed to defend the eponym of the Ash'arite school against unfounded accusations propagated by certain ultra-traditionalists. According to Makdisi (1962, 57), the book can be seen as an unsuccessful endeavor to garner acceptance for Ash'arism among the traditionists of the Shaff'ite school of jurisprudence. However, historical evidence suggests a different narrative. It indicates that Ibn 'Asākir's influence led to the widespread acceptance of al-Ash'arī's two-fold solution, namely *tafwīḍ* and *tawwīl*, among succeeding hadith scholars. This acceptance can be observed in the works where the principles of *tafwīḍ* and *tawwīl* prevailed, including those of Abū Shāma (d. 1267 CE/665 AH), al-Nawawī (d. 1277 CE/676 AH), Ibn Jamā'a (d. 1333 CE/733 AH), Ibn Jahbal (d. 1333 CE/733 AH), al-Subkī (d. 1355 CE/756 AH), and al-'Alā'ī (d. 1359 CE/761 AH).

In Egypt, Ash'arism flourished and held a prominent position, thanks to the support of the renowned Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī. From his era onward, a new generation of Ash'arite traditionist-theologians emerged, advocating for semi-rationalistic approaches in theological discourse regarding divine attributes. Among these scholars is Abū l-Ḥasan al-Maqdisī (d. 1214 CE/611 AH), a brilliant disciple of al-Ḥāfiẓ Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī. Al-Maqdisī authored numerous works in which he employed the Ash'arite framework to interpret the meanings of hadiths related to divine attributes (Ibn al-Mu'allim 2019, 2:321). He was then followed by his immediate successors such as 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Mundhirī (d. 1258 CE/656 AH) and Rashīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār (d. 1264 CE/662 AH). Both of these scholars were prominent hadith masters who taught hadith sciences to Taqī al-Dīn ibn Daqīq al-'Īd (d. 1302 CE/702 AH), the religious reviver (*mujaddid*) of the fourteenth CE/eighth AH century. Continuing the tradition of his predecessors, Ibn Daqīq al-'Īd (2013, 3) asserted that when it comes to ambiguous texts concerning divine attributes, it is essential to approach them with

unwavering faith. He stated, "If an interpretation aligns with the principles of Arabic lexicography and the linguistic norms of the Arabs, we need not reject it or consider it heretical. However, if an interpretation strays far from these principles, we cannot accept it. In such cases, it is necessary to revert to the fundamental stance of believing in God while disassociating Him from any resemblance to His creation."

Over the course of centuries, Ash'arism has established itself as the predominant theological framework among numerous traditionist-theologians in Egypt. They employed the Ash'arite methodology to interpret hadiths on divine attributes, using either *tafwīd* or *tawīl*, and avoiding a literalistic reading. The group includes distinguished scholars in hadith studies such as Ibn al-Mulaqqin (d. 1401 CE/ 804 AH), al-'Irāqī (d. 1404 CE/806 AH), al-Haythamī (d. 1404 CE/807 AH), and the arch-*muhaddith* Ibn al-Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 1448 CE/852 AH). The association of the latter with Ash'arite theology has caused uneasiness among modern Salafists. Numerous works have been written with the specific intention of highlighting Ibn al-Ḥajar's purported theological errors. An example is the work titled *al-Tanbīh 'alā mukhālafāt al-'aqādiyya fī fath al-bārī* (An admonition to theological deviations contained in *Fath al-Bārī*).

Ash'arism made its way into the Islamic West through the disciples of Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī. One of them is Abū Dhar al-Harawī (d. 1043 CE/434 AH), a renowned *muhaddith* in Mecca, who taught Ash'arite theology to students of hadith hailing from Morocco and Andalusia (Dhahabī 1985b, 17:557). In 1035 CE/426 AH, Abū l-Walīd al-Bājī (d. 1081 CE/474 AH), a highly influential Ash'arite traditionist-theologian, departed from Andalusia and embarked on a journey to the Hijaz and Iraq in pursuit of knowledge. During his studies, he received instruction in hadith from al-Harawī, Islamic law and jurisprudence from Abū Ishāq al-Šhīrāzī, and theology from al-Muṭṭawa'ī and al-Simnānī. All of these teachers were students of al-Bāqillānī, with the exception of al-Muṭṭawa'ī, who acquired Ash'arite theology from Ibn Fūrak. Upon his return to Andalusia, al-Bājī played a pivotal role in spreading Ash'arism throughout Islamic Spain (Thiele 2016, 10). His significant influence laid the groundwork for the rise of additional Ash'arite traditionist-theologians in the region, including figures like Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1148 CE/543 AH), al-Māzarī (d. 1141 CE/536 AH), al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ (d. 1149 CE/544 AH), and Abū l-'Abbās al-Qurṭubī (d. 1258 CE/565 AH). Their works exemplified a flawless application of the Ash'arite methodology in elucidating the elusive meanings of hadiths pertaining to divine attributes.

The *Tawqīf* Principle and Figurative Reading

The abolition of the widely despised inquisition known as *Miḥna Khalq al-Qur'ān* by Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861 CE/247 AH) in 852 CE/237 AH signified the conclusion of Mu'tazilite influence within the Abbasid administration. Following nearly two decades of oppression, the traditionalists ultimately emerged as the prevailing faction. They now held

the authority to define the correct path in religious beliefs and practices for the Islamic community (Hoover 2016, 5). The post-*Miḥna* period has often been characterized as a reactionary age (Ramli 2016, 3). During this new era, certain traditionalists displayed a tendency towards extreme literalism, rejecting any forms of rationality, including the interpretation of religious texts concerning divine attributes. An example of the manifestation of excessive literalism can be observed in Ḥarb al-Kirmānī's (d. 893 CE/280 AH) *Kitāb al-Sunna* (the Book of Sunna). In this work, he presents what he asserts to be the teachings of Sunna authorities from different regions. He believed that God's essence is limited, although only He knows the extent of that limit. Furthermore, he claimed that God moves (*yataḥarrak*), created Adam with His hands in His image (*bi yadih 'ala šūratih*), wrote the Torah with His hands, and gave the Torah to Prophet Moses from His hand to Moses's hand (*min yadih ilā yadih*) (al-Kirmānī 2014, 50).

Despite al-Kirmānī's assertions, it is evident that his book does not reflect the views of all traditionists. In fact, there were those among them who openly disagreed with his exposition. Abū Muḥammad al-Rāmahurmuzī, a Persian traditionist and the author of the first manual of *'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, criticized al-Kirmānī's book for its misrepresentation of orthodoxy. He (2016, 313) sees it as a prime example of the negligent approach displayed by certain traditionists who opine on subjects without the requisite expertise. Al-Khaṭṭābī, in his work *Ma'ālim al-sunan*, expresses a similar condemnation of the imprudent approach of certain traditionists. He (1932, 331) criticizes an anonymous traditionist who is "highly regarded for his expertise in hadith and *rijāl* (evaluation of the reliability of hadith transmitters)", but made a significant error by asserting that God "moves and stays if He wants." Al-Khaṭṭābī argues that motion (*ḥaraka*) is indicative of creation, and thus, it is inappropriate to be attributed to God. According to al-Khaṭṭābī, if the aforementioned scholar had adhered to the path of the *Salaf* by abstaining from discussing subjects beyond his expertise, he would have been safeguarded from making such a mistake.

One manifestation of an anti-*naẓar* attitude is an excessive reliance on hadith, which can result in the utilization of unreliable hadiths in theological discussions (Ibn Qutayba 1985, 40; Ṭabarī 2015, 55). This tendency can be observed in certain hadith compilations created by some Hanbalites and ultra-traditionalists such as Abū Ismā'īl al-Harawī's (d. 1089 CE/481 AH) *al-Fārūq fī al-ṣifāt* and Abū 'Alī al-Ahwāzī's (d. 1055 CE/446 AH) *al-Bayān fī sharḥ 'uqūd al-īmān*. Both authors are notorious for their animosity towards al-Ash'arī and his followers. In reference to their compilations, al-Dhahabī (1985b 18:15 and 509; 1999, 1:506) declared that they included fabricated and false (*bāṭil*) hadiths, without adequate explanations. Given that the utilization of weak and fabricated hadiths in theological discussions is unanimously prohibited (Ibn Qudāma 1994, 45; Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ 2002, 103), such an attitude is utterly unacceptable.

In this context, al-Ash'arī can be recognized as a reformist who sought to revive genuine scholarly practices in theological discussions. He placed great emphasis

on the principle of *tawqīf*, which states that discussions about divine names and attributes must be grounded in explicit statements from the Quran, authentic Sunna, or scholarly consensus (Ibn Fūrak 2022,100). Only these three infallible sources are deemed qualified to serve as the foundation for attributing specific names or attributes to God. Speculative reason and personal opinions, including those attributed to early scholars, as well as unreliable hadiths, are not regarded as valid evidence or proofs in theological discussions. In his book *al-Luma 'fi al-radd 'alā ahl al-zaygh wa-l-bida'*, al-Ash'arī (2021, 114) asserts that it is forbidden to attribute names to God that have not been designated by Him, His messenger, or the consensus of scholars.

It is noteworthy that the *tawqīf* principle is widely accepted among the majority of Sunni scholars (Bekri 2014, 109). The Andalusian Traditionist al-Qāḍī Ibn al-'Arabī (2015, 1:199) even claimed scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*) on the matter. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the *tawqīf* principle has become the primary approach employed by Ash'arite traditionist-theologians when engaging with religious texts concerning divine attributes. Adhering to this principle, Ash'arite traditionist-theologians vehemently reject several concepts commonly upheld by the Hanbalites and ultra-traditionalists such as the divine touch (*mumāssa*), limitation (*ḥadd*), and that God resides in a specific direction (*jīha*) and space (*makān*). Ibn Jamā'a (2015, 136-137) argues that attributing such beliefs to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and the early scholars (*salaf*) is a false representation stemming from ignorance.

Furthermore, the *tawqīf* principle serves as the foundation for categorizing proofs into certain (*qaṭ'ī*) and probable (*ẓannī*). Elaborating on al-Ash'arī's perspective, Ibn Fūrak (2022, 99) explains that when encountering anthropomorphic attributes in certain sources (such as the Quran, authentic Sunna, and consensus), they should be affirmed as divine attributes without specifying their modality or drawing any comparisons between God and His creation. According to al-Ash'arī, the texts must be accepted and affirmed in their literal form (*sam'an*), while their meanings should be comprehended and understood rationally (*'aqlan*). In other words, expressions found in the Quran and *mutawātir* (frequently transmitted) hadiths, such as God's *wajh* (face), *'ayn* (eyes), and *yad* (hand), should be acknowledged as divine attributes without delving into the specifics of their nature (*bilā kayf*). Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that these expressions should not be interpreted as attributing physical body parts and limbs to God, as it is firmly established through rational reasoning that the divine essence is singular and indivisible. The same principle applies to understandings of God's *istiwā'* (literally: settlement) on the *'Arsh* (Throne) and His *muzīl* (literally: descent) to the lower heaven. These actions are affirmed as divine actions without implying that God is confined to a specific location or undergoes physical movement. This approach came to be known as *tafwīd*.

On the other hand, when it comes to similar content found in *āḥād* (single-report) hadiths, a different approach is taken. According to al-Ash'arī, the existence of God's

attributes mentioned in *āḥād* hadiths is uncertain. This uncertainty arises because even if a hadith meets all the criteria for authenticity, it still provides only a probability rather than certainty (Ibn Fūrak 2022, 99; Holtzman 2019, 240). Furthermore, the expressions found in *āḥād* hadiths do not necessarily represent the exact wording of the Prophet, as many transmitters allow for the permissibility of conveying the meaning of a report (*al-riwāya bi-l-mā'nā*) rather than a verbatim reproduction. Due to the fact that not all hadith transmitters were religious experts (*faqīh*), errors and peculiar phrasings were prone to occur in the process of narrations (Khattābī 1988, 2345). In light of this concern and in accordance with the *tawqīf* principle, the anthropomorphic elements found in *āḥād* hadiths should not be acknowledged as divine attributes. Instead, they should be interpreted in a manner that does not imply the establishment of divine attributes. As an example, the concept of God's laughter (*ḍahk*) can be understood as an expression of His mercy, and His finger (*iṣba'*) can be seen as a representation of His power. This interpretive approach is famously known as *tāwīl*.

It appears that the categorization of sources alone did not offer a lasting solution. Subsequently, some later Ash'arites opted for a figurative interpretation of all ambiguous texts, including those considered certain and indubitable sources, in order to avoid anthropomorphism. This approach likely emerged as a direct response to the Hanbali uprising in certain regions of the Levant and Egypt during the Ayyubid era. In his commentary on *Musnad al-Shāfi'*, Abū l-Sa'ādā ibn al-Athīr (d. 1210 CE/606 AH), an influential Ash'arite traditionist-theologian from Mosul, advocated for the combined acceptance of both *tafwīd* and *tāwīl*. However, he commends those who engage in interpretation as "the believers who possess profound knowledge (*muḥaqqiqūn*) and seek to earn the pleasure of God." Ibn al-Athīr (2008, 2:137) strongly criticized the interpretation of *istiwā'* as God sitting (*qu'ūd*) and settling (*istiqrār*) on the Throne (*'Arsh*), the way a body sits on another body. He considered this belief to be a heresy that would lead its adherents to the torment of hellfire.

While acknowledging the permissibility of *tāwīl*, the Ash'ari traditionist-theologians emphasized the need for caution when employing this interpretive approach. As per Ibn 'Asākir (2018, 676), the original stance of the Ash'arites regarding religious texts on divine attributes is to endorse and affirm every attribute mentioned in the Quranic *muḥkam* (clearly understood) verses and authentic hadiths, while simultaneously asserting that God is free from any imperfections or deficiencies. Interpretation (*tāwīl*) is deemed necessary primarily to address and clarify any confusion that may arise as a result of the influence of heretical beliefs. According to Ibn 'Asākir, the Ash'arites can be likened to a skilled doctor who prescribes the appropriate medicine to each patient with precision and care. Similarly, they can be compared to a proficient swimmer who enters treacherous waters only when necessary and equipped with the skills to navigate safely.

On the *Salaf* Position

The term "Salaf," derived from the Arabic word meaning "predecessors" or "early generations," refers to the Islamic scholars who lived during the first three generations of Islam. This encompasses the generation of the Sahaba (direct companions of Prophet Muhammad), the followers of the Sahaba (*tābi 'īn*), and the followers of the *tābi 'īn* (*tābi ' al-tābi 'īn*). It is widely acknowledged that polemics or debates specifically focused on divine attributes did not exist during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (Maqṣūdī n.d., 2:356). The earliest reports on this matter can be traced back to religious authorities in the eighth century CE/second century AH, who advocated for leaving the ambiguous texts regarding divine attributes without detailed explanation or interpretation. According to reports, prominent scholars such as al-Awzā'ī, Mālik, Sufyān al-Thawrī, and al-Layth ibn Sa'd were asked about the anthropomorphic expressions found in hadiths. Their response was to leave those hadiths in their original form without delving into detailed explanations or interpretations. They advised to accept them as they are, without speculating about the specific manner or modality (*kaḥfiyya*) of those expressions (Bayhaqī 1988, 93). It is reported that Sufyān ibn 'Uyayna also expressed his view on the matter, stating: "Regarding all the attributes that God has mentioned for Himself in His holy book, their interpretation is to recite them and remain silent about their specific meanings (*tafsīruḥ tilāwatuḥ wa-l-sukūt 'alayh*)" (Bayhaqī 1988, 93).

According to the Hanbalites and ultra-traditionalists, these reports serve as conclusive evidence that the early scholars explicitly forbade interpretation (Ibn Qudāma (1994). The Ash'arite traditionist-theologians, on the other hand, hold a different perspective. According to al-Khaṭṭābī (1988, 3:1908), these statements were made in a specific historical context where theological confusion had not yet emerged. During the Salaf era, there were no deviant sects that propagated misleading opinions on divine attributes. However, the situation underwent a significant shift when theological polemics emerged and divided the Islamic community into two factions. The first faction disregarded the hadiths regarding divine attributes, accusing their transmitters of fabricating them in the name of the Prophet. Meanwhile, the second faction affirmed the apparent meanings of these hadiths, which could potentially lead to the concept of corporeality (*tajsīm*). In such a situation, the scholars are obliged to clarify the intended meanings of these hadiths in order to safeguard the integrity of the true Islamic creed.

According to Ibn Fūrak (2003, 5), there exists an alternative interpretation regarding the prohibition mentioned by the Salaf. He argues that this prohibition should not be understood as a blanket prohibition, but rather as being directed at two specific conditions or circumstances. The first aspect of the prohibition is intended for individuals who lack sufficient knowledge and expertise to navigate complex semantic issues. It serves as a protective measure to prevent them from falling into misguided or erroneous positions. However, it is important to note that scholars who possess a strong foundation of

knowledge (*al-rāsikhūn fi-l-`ilm*) are exempt from this prohibition in any case. Ibn Fūrak provides historical evidence to support his opinion, citing the example of al-Awzā'ī, a renowned scholar from the Levant. Al-Awzā'ī explicitly interpreted the concept of God's descent (*nuzūl*) as an expression of divine action (*fi'l min al-qf'āl*) originating from God's power. The second aspect of the prohibition is specifically related to highly problematic hadiths where the meaning cannot be definitively ascertained. It serves to emphasize that delving into the interpretation of these texts is not an obligatory task. Similarly, interpretation is permissible when a clear and well-founded understanding of a hadith can be attained through a proper examination.

In summary, the Ash'arite traditionist-theologians reject the notion that the Salaf adhered to a strictly literalistic reading of texts, let alone propagated anthropomorphic beliefs. When the early scholars refrained from offering explicit interpretations, they were actually adopting a non-interventionist stance and, at the same time, firmly rejected anthropomorphism. Indeed, the silence of the early scholars should not be interpreted as an endorsement of literalistic understandings or affirmations of anthropomorphism. As highlighted by Ibn Jamā'a (2005, 120), anyone who claims to adhere to the creed of the Salaf while simultaneously affirming anthropomorphism or interpreting anthropomorphic expressions in scriptural texts according to their literal meanings, despite the fact that Allah is far removed from human attributes, is essentially deviating from the path of the Salaf and making false claims.

Conclusion

This article aims to broaden our comprehension of Ash'arism and its historical context from a lesser-known perspective. It refutes the notion that the Ash'arites are solely speculative theologians lacking expertise in hadith sciences. Instead, this study highlights that as early as the tenth century CE/fourth century AH, Ash'arism garnered considerable support from scholars who played a crucial role in preserving the hadith tradition. The reception of Ash'arism can be largely attributed to the prevalence of extreme literalism exhibited by some traditionalists in their discussions on divine attributes, which frequently led to tendencies of anthropomorphism (Abū Hilāl 2022, 68). The study demonstrates that Ash'arite traditionist-theologians, when confronted with ambiguous texts concerning divine attributes, consistently strived to avoid two undesirable positions: a literalistic interpretation that may lead to anthropomorphism, and a complete rejection of authentic hadith. As a result, they maintain the stance that appropriate interpretation is sometimes essential, and it does not in any way negate the existence of divine attributes. This principle has been emphasized since the inception of the Ash'arite movement and continues to be relevant in modern times.

In 1984 CE/ 1404 AH, Salafists made the first publication of Abū Ismā'īl al-Harawī's *al-Arba'īn fi dalā'il al-tawḥīd* (Forty hadiths on the proof of God's unity). As mentioned earlier, al-Harawī was a staunch Hanbali scholar who held strong

criticisms of the Ash'arites. The book consists of forty hadiths that assert, among other things, the following: God is situated in heaven upon His throne, He places His feet on *Kursī*, He is associated with a specific direction (*jīha*), and He possesses attributes such as a face and two hands. Shortly after its release, the book sparked intense debates in Egypt. In his critique, the Ash'arite traditionist-theologian 'Abd Allāh al-Ghumārī (2007, 12-16) asserted that despite al-Harawī's proficiency in hadith, he had succumbed to anthropomorphism due to his inadequate command of Arabic lexicography and the rules of inference (*istidlāl*). He subsequently presented three fundamental principles to be adhered to in every discourse on divine attributes. First and foremost, it is impermissible to ascribe an attribute to God unless it is explicitly mentioned in the statements of valid (*maqūl 'bih*) sources, namely the Quran and authenticated hadiths. It should not involve metaphors, ambiguous interpretations, or subjective perceptions of the transmitter. Secondly, it is important to recognize that not all figurative interpretations (*tāwīl*) should be regarded as heretical. Instead, it is reasonable to consider interpretations that align closely with the apparent meaning of the text. Thirdly, when confronted with a text that allows for multiple meanings, it is advisable to prioritize the interpretation that aligns more closely with the concept of *tanzīh* (God's transcendence). Similar to other Ash'arites, al-Ghumārī emphasized that affirming the literal interpretation of hadiths pertaining to divine attributes reflects an anthropomorphic stance and does not accurately represent the position of the Salaf (early Muslim generations) at all.

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