

## SOME NOTES ON EXTREMISM AND MODERATION IN ISLAMIC THEOLOGY

Binyamin Abrahamov

*Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan*

The present paper, which represents part of my research into traditionalism and rationalism in Islamic theology now in preparation, aims at

- 1) examining the attitude of Muslim traditionalist theologians toward Muslim rationalist theologians, namely the *mutakallimūn*;
- 2) showing that extremism on this issue was not only characteristic of the Hanbalites; and
- 3) showing that scholars of other schools of law were even more extreme than the Hanbalites.

Already Ibn Taymiyya who, contrary to many other Muslim theologians, knew well the views of his predecessors, made the following statement concerning the issue of God's attributes: "The affirmation of attributes does not particularize the Hanbalites, and extremism (*ġulwaw*) [in this issue] which occurs in them occurs also in others. Moreover, whoever investigates the people's systems will find in each group extremists (*ġulāt*) concerning negation and affirmation which he will not find in the Hanbalites" (Ibn Taymiyya, *Naqd* 139). We shall try to prove that "in each group" there were extremists also in the matter of attitudes toward rationalists, and that these attitudes range from total rejection and excommunication to permission to discuss with them. Another conclusion, which has already been drawn by G. Makdisi and K. Reinhart, is the fact that scholars have not always been committed to the teachings of their schools (Makdisi 1981: 240; Reinhart 1995: 24, 27, 34, 195, n. 13).

As an example of extremism concerning the attitude toward rationalists, I would like to introduce the Šāfi'ite traditionalist theologian Abū l-Qāsim Hibat Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Maṣūr ar-Rāzī aṭ-Ṭabarī al-Lālakā'ī (d. 418/1027) (al-Ḥaṭīb, *Ta'riḥ* XIV, 70f, para. 7418), who was a contemporary of the famous mu'tazilite scholar 'Abdalġabbār (d. 415/1024). According to al-Lālakā'ī, in the year 408/1017, the caliph al-Qādir bi-Allāh (381/991- 423/1031) called on the mu'tazilite Ḥanafite jurists to repent of their mu'tazilism, which they withdrew. Accordingly, the caliph then forbade them to discuss, teach or dispute the issues of mu'tazilism, šī'ism and all notions which oppose Islam and the Sunna. The author adds to this story that Maḥmūd of Ġazna, who acknowledged the nominal sovereignty of al-Qādir and adopted the caliph's severe attitude toward the sectarians, persecuted the Mu'tazilites, Rāfiḍites, Ismā'īlis, Ġahmites, the Qarāmīta, and the anthropomorphists (*al-muṣabbīha*). This approach became a norm (*sunna*) in Islam (al-Lālakā'ī, *Šarḥ uṣūl*: II, 723, para. 1333). Thus, al-Lālakā'ī refers to al-Qādir's decree and to Maḥmūd's

persecution as a way to be followed. It is possible that this norm formulated al-Lālakā'ī's severe attitude toward the innovators (here this term refers to the rationalists), which can be divided into two parts:

- a) The prohibition against disputing with (*munāzara*) the innovators, speaking with them or listening to their innovative views<sup>1</sup>. "Do not sit with those who adhere to the doctrine of free will (*ahl al-qadar*) and do not dispute with them" says one tradition, and according to another, one should not dispute with the people of controversy (*aṣḥāb al-huṣūmāt*) (al-Lālakā'ī, *Šarḥ uṣūl* 118, 129; Ibn al-Ğawzī, *Talbīs* 12f).
- b) The view that maintains that innovators cannot repent of their innovations, whereas sinners can repent of their sins. "The Devil loves innovation more than he loves sin, for one can repent of sins, but cannot repent of innovation."<sup>2</sup>

Among the innovators, the Qadarites occupy an important place. The harsh attitude toward them stems directly from the prohibition against treating the issue of predestination. "Do not speak of anything relating to *qadar*, for it is God's secret, so do not disclose God's secret" (*Šarḥ uṣūl* II, 629). The Qadarites are regarded as God's adversaries, as the Zoroastrians of this community (*mağūs bādīhi l-umma*) and as those who would bring destruction to their community (*ibid.* 639–646). al-Lālakā'ī points out some prohibitions regarding innovators, particularly the Qadarites: one should not pray behind them, marry them, eat of their slaughtered animals or accept their testimonies (*ibid.* 730–736). Some of the traditionalists also blamed those who held heretical views<sup>3</sup> of unbelief.

Among the Šāfi'ite scholars who expressed hostile attitudes toward the innovators, especially the rationalists, we find the traditionist and lexicographer 'Alī b. 'Umar ad-Dāraquṭnī (d. 385/995)<sup>4</sup>, Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1065)<sup>5</sup>, Abū l-Qāsim Ismā'īl b. Muḥammad at-Taymī (d. 535/1140) (*Ḥuğġa* I,

<sup>1</sup> This is the contents of a title of a long chapter in al-Lālakā'ī's *Šarḥ uṣūl* (I, 114–150).

<sup>2</sup> al-Lālakā'ī, *Šarḥ uṣūl* I, 132; Ibn al-Ğawzī, *Talbīs* 13; al-Qurṭubī, *Bidā'* 198. According to Ibn Baṭṭa, *Šarḥ* 40, "God does not permit the innovator to repent."

<sup>3</sup> Such as likening God to man (*taṣbīh. ibid.* 528–533), not making a decision concerning the question whether the Qur'ān is created or uncreated (*ibid.* I, 323), and the belief that the act of reciting the Qur'ān is created (*ibid.* 349).

<sup>4</sup> He said that it is better to meet God (on the day of Judgment) with grave sins such as fornication, theft and drinking wine than to meet Him with the views of the Mu'tazilite 'Amr b. 'Ubayd and his followers. (*Aḥbār* 12f)

<sup>5</sup> In his *Ftiqād* (191–193) appears a chapter on the prohibition against sitting in the company of the people of innovation, who are mainly identified as the Mu'tazilites. Some of the traditions quoted point out a tendency to excommunicate the Mu'tazilites from the legitimate community.

306–310) and Ḡalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (*Ṣawn* I, 52)<sup>6</sup>. This attitude is characteristic of scholars from all schools of law. As examples, for the Ḥanbalites, see Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī al-Barbahārī (*Ṣarḥ as-sunna* 38, 44, 49), for the Mālikites, see al-Qurṭubī and for the Ḥanafites, see Ibn Abī l-ʿIzz (d. 792/1389) (*ʿAqīda* I, 233–247). When as-Suyūṭī defames the *kalām* in his *Ṣawn*, he uses the writings of scholars from various schools, Ḥanbalites (al-Harawī), Šāfiʿites (al-Muḥāsibī), Mālikites (Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī) and Ibn Ḡarīr at-Ṭabarī who established his own school of law. Thus, extremism does not characterize a particular school, but rather exists, in one way or another, in each school. Also, extremism in one issue does not entail extremism in other issues. An interesting example of the attitude toward the innovators occurs in the writings of the famous Ḥanbalite theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).

From one of his epistles, entitled “The people of the Sunna do not charge any Muslim with unbelief because of a sin or an innovation, and do not prevent prayer behind him”, one can learn of Ibn Taymiyya’s leniency, in contrast to other theologians from various schools of law (*Rasāʾil* II, 5.241). To support his statement, Ibn Taymiyya bases himself on several arguments, beginning with Qurʾān 2.285, according to which the believers ask God His forgiveness, and the *ḥadīṭ* attests that God forgives them. On the basis of the Prophet’s order, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and others fought against the Ḥārīḡites, but did not accuse them of unbelief. Now, if those people, whose transgressions were proved through the plain text and the Consensus, were not accused of unbelief (notwithstanding the Prophet’s order to fight against them), the more so concerning sects who differed from each other in their views. It is forbidden for any sect to accuse another of unbelief even if the other openly expresses innovative ideas (*ibid.*).

Concerning prayer behind sinners and innovators, although it is preferable to pray behind a pious man, Ibn Taymiyya allows prayer behind the former if there is no other way. Moreover, one who avoids prayer because the imam is an innovator, opposes an innovation through an innovation (*radda bidʿa bi-bidʿa*). Also, according to Ibn Taymiyya, there is no need to pray again, if the imam is a sinner or an innovator (*ibid.* 244f).

To sum up, in spite of Ibn Taymiyya’s being one of the staunchest defenders of traditionalism, he allows disputation with innovators and he does so himself in his various writings; also, he does not accuse them of unbelief, and thus expresses a tolerant attitude toward them. This approach stands contrary to that of other Ḥanbalites who forbade praying behind an innovator. Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223), for example, states that according to the Sunna of the Prophet, one should avoid innovators, not examine their writings and not listen to their conversation. It

<sup>6</sup> He banned discussion of *Kalām* issues, for it brings about controversies and innovations in religion.

is forbidden to greet an innovator, to pray behind him, to visit him when he is ill, or to attend his funeral (Daiber 1981: 111f; Ibn Baṭṭa, *Šarḥ* 31).

Apart from the diversity of opinions in one and the same school of law, demonstrating that in issues of theology scholars were not restricted to an identical group of creeds, it is appropriate to examine another phenomenon which indicates that scholars were not always committed to the teachings of their schools, whether juridical or theological<sup>7</sup>. I mean the transfer of ideas from one school of thought to another, which seems to me a sign of moderation.

Again let us take Ibn Taymiyya, this time as an example of one who took a notion from his adversaries and adopted it in the framework of his own writings. According to the Muʿtazilites, man can know through the intellect general ethical values, for these have intrinsic properties, and the Revelation supplies him with the details of these values (Frank 1971). According to Ibn Taymiyya, through necessary natural knowledge, man knows that God is above, and distinct from, His creation. This is general knowledge which the Revelation explains and details (*Naqd* 38f, 52). Ibn Taymiyya's eminent disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyya (d. 751/1350) comes very close to the Muʿtazilites when he states that actions are good or evil by virtue of themselves, but reward or punishment is deserved only through God's orders or prohibitions (*Madāriġ* I, 127). al-Bayhaqī accepted the Muʿtazilite distinction between essential attributes and factual attributes emphasizing, however, that God always deserves the factual ones, but not from eternity (*ʿItiqād* 52).

There were scholars whose criticism of the *kalām* did not prevent them from accepting some of its theories and arguments. The interpreter of *al-ʿaqīda at-tahāwiyya*, the Ḥanafite scholar Ibn Abī l-ʿIzz, accepted the theory of *kasb* (*ʿAqīda* II, 639, 650-652) and the argument from hypothetical mutual prevention (*dalīl at-tamānuʿ*) (*ibid.* I, 39f).

Among the rival *mutakallimūn* themselves, we see the phenomenon of the transition of notions from one school of thought to another. Some Ašʿarite theologians (al-Baġdādī, al-Ġuwaynī, al-Āmidī) used figurative interpretation (*taʿwīl*) when explaining anthropomorphic expressions in the Qurʾān and not the *bi-lā kayfa* formula, which the Ašʿarite usually employed in such cases (Abrahamov 1996: 7). On the other hand, the Zaydite Mānakdīm (Aḥmad b. Abī Hāšim al-Ḥusaynī d. 426/1034) accepts the formula of *bi-lā kayfa* as a solution to understanding the meaning of the Path (*aṣ-ṣirāt*), as opposed to the figurative interpretation held by ʿAbdalġabbār (*al-Uṣūl al-ḥamsa* 737). The zāhirite theologian and jurist Ibn Ḥazm accepts some Muʿtazilite conceptions; he recognizes the priority of reason over revelation on certain issues such as God's existence, unity and eternity. Reason, in his view, helps

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<sup>7</sup> Concerning jurisprudence, the above statement is valid till the 16th century. I would like to thank Prof. W. B. Hallaq for this comment.

man to understand the meanings of value terms, but not their full contents, and also to know some general facts concerning human psychology (Hourani 1985). Contrary to his school's doctrine of the literal interpretation of the Qur'an, Ibn Ḥazm even adopts sometimes the figurative interpretations of anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur'an and the Tradition (*Fiṣal* II, 167; Goldziher 1971: 152).

In fine, I have tried to examine two phenomena: the attitude toward the rationalists, and the transfer of ideas. In both, it seems that there was no restriction on expressing ideas, even if, in some cases, they contradicted the overriding ideological trend of a particular school. And extremism or moderation was not the characteristic of one certain school.

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