

**THEOLOGICAL DEBATES ON ASH‘ARIYYA TENETS;
An analysis of the *Fath al-Magid*
by Nawawi al-Bantani (1814-1897)**

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abstrak

Ada beberapa perbedaan mendasar dalam mendefinisikan teologi islam sejak masa Muhammad SAW. Beberapa diantaranya lahir dan muncul dari aspek politik, dan beberapa dari aspek lain. Dua paham teologi yang paling terkemuka adalah Ash‘ariyya yang bersumber dari golongan Sunni muslim, dan Mu‘tazilah dari Syi‘ah. Salah satu ulama produktif abad 19 Syeikh Nawawi Bantani menulis buku salah satunya adalah Fath al-Majid. Dalam buku teologi biasanya penulis mendeskripsikan dirinya ke dalam salah satu aliran. Namun sebaliknya, Nawawi yang meskipun dirinya mengakui sebagai Asy‘ariyyah, tetapi dalam beberapa pembahasan dia membela Mu‘tazilah. Pada satu sisi ia membela Asy‘ariyyah dalam masalah zat Tuhan dan atributnya yang tidak terpisah. Mengenai Qur‘an apakah diciptakan atau tidak, ia mengambil kedua pendapat Asy‘ariyyah dan Mu‘tazilah, seperti ulama Sunni lainnya, Nawawi dengan Fath al-Majid nya mencoba untuk memodifikasi aliran teologi Asy‘ariyyah.

Kata kunci: *Teologi, Islam, asy‘ariyyah, Nawawi al-Bantani*

Abstract

There are some differences in defining Islamic theology since the era of prophet Muhammad. Some of them emerged from political aspects, and some of them are not. The two prominent ideologies in Islamic theology are Ash‘ariyya derived from Sunni, and Mu‘tazilla from Syi‘a. One of significant scholars in 19 century, Nawawi al-bantani, wrote many books in wide Islamic studies, one of them is Fath al-Magid in theology. Many scholars wrote and designated themselves to a particular group. In

contrary, although Nawawi al-Bantani confessed himself as Sunni scholar, yet in some of his writing including Fath al-Magid, he opposed Ash'ariyya and defended Mu'tazila. To some extent, this manner will come up into a unique scholarship tradition for some scholars, indeed, this research aimed to investigate this behavior in final words this paper concluded that Nawawi distanced himself from Ash'ari when he stated that God's essence and His attributes are inseparable and thereby preserve the oneness of God. He adopted both Ash'ari's concept, that the Qur'an is not created (ghayr makhluq and it is qadim) and Mu'tazila's concept, that the Qur'an is created (makhluq and it is hadith). According to Nawawi, the Qur'an is created when it refers to the text and the sound, but uncreated when it refers to the underlying meaning of each verse, even if this contradicts the concept of free will that Nawawi adopted. For his last explanation, pertaining to the concept of prophecy, ru'ya and shafa'a, Nawawi provided a very general explanation, neglecting to elaborate on some important issues relating to the concept of prophecy. it is obvious that Fath al-Magid, with its different interpretation of Ash'ari's work, meant it was similar to other Sunni theological works that aimed to modify Ash'ari's original doctrine.

Keywords: *Theology, Islam, Ash'ariyya, Nawawi al-Bantani*

A. Subject Matter and Significance of the Study

The theological issue in Islam has been prominent in the sphere of Islamic scholarship from the first age of Islam to the present day, because it is key to defining Islam as a monotheistic religion. Islamic theology has developed over the centuries from events such as political conflicts,¹ and the rise of a new revolutionary spirit among Muslim scholars that led to a novel understanding of theology. The systematic concept of theology in Islam was initiated by the Qadariyya movement, led by several eminent scholars, including Ma'bad al-Guhani (d. 699), Ghaylan

al-Dimashqi (d. 743) and Hasan al-Basri (d. 728). They introduced the notion of the liberated mind in the realm of human action (free will) as being separate from God's will, thereby rejecting the concept of predestination.²

These eight centuries were marked by the emergence of the Mu'tazila movement founded by Wasil b. 'Ata' (700-748) who emphasised the notion of free will and took the opposite position to the Gabariyya who advocated predestination and preordained decrees from God.³ It is fairly evident that Wasil and his theological movement became a major theological group due to their authority as the official doctrine during Abbasid's caliphate. Government support therefore made a favorable contribution to the process of disseminating Mu'tazila's beliefs. It was not until the period of Ibn Hanbal⁴ (780-855) that theological conflict arose in society. In fact, he instigated the denial of Mu'tazila's doctrine and endorsed the traditional concept that in turn, gained popularity among Muslims. This traditional doctrine was later developed by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 935) who founded Ash'ariyya as a new theological group opposed to Mu'tazila's creed.

Ash'ariyya clearly supports the traditional doctrine introduced by the prophet Muhammad and adopted by the first generation of Muslims. Al-Ash'ari was a Mu'tazila devotee until the age of forty. He then developed his own doctrine after a remarkable dream of meeting the prophet Muhammad who urged him to save Muslims from a theological misconception.⁵ Thereupon, Ash'ari devoted the rest of his life to spreading his new concept of theology. This was developed by many of his disciples from different periods, for example, Ibn Mugahid (d.980/981), Abu al-Hasan al-Bahili (d.980), Ibn al-Tayyib Ibn Muhammad al-Baqilani (d. 1013), 'Abd al-Malik al-Guwayni (1028-1085), Abu al-Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri (986-1074), al-Ghaznawi (999-1030) and many others.⁶ Accordingly, with growing support from many quarters, Ash'ariyya became an eminent school of theology up to the time of Nawawi al-Bantani who was a renowned scholar in the 19th century. Like other Ash'ariyya scholars, Nawawi interpreted Ash'ari's doctrine in a different way and revealed contradictions in several elements.

Therefore, the main points of his interpretation are well explored in many of his books on theology.

Noted as a prominent scholar from Java who studied in Mecca from the age of 15, Muhammad Nawawi Abu ‘Abd al-Mu‘ti b. ‘Umar b. ‘Arabi b. ‘Ali al-Gawi al-Bantani (1814-1897) or better-known as Imam Nawawi al-Bantani, is a renowned scholar in many aspects of Islam including theology. He embraced the Ash‘ari school of theology that, to a certain degree, opposed Mu‘tazila’s doctrine. One of his notable works on theology is *Fath al-Magid*, which aimed to explain the theological book entitled *al-Durr al-Farid*, written by his teacher Shaykh Ahmad Nahrawi. Indeed, the purpose of this book was undeniably to promote the Ash‘ari creed.

Unlike Nawawi’s other theological books which only covered basic elements of theological tenets, *Fath al-Magid* was written in a different manner and presented significant discourses among theologians relevant to Nawawi’s position. Moreover, having assumed the mantle of explaining his teacher’s work, *Fath al-Magid* examined Ash‘ari theology and the general basis of its belief system. This includes the 20 divine attributes of God, belief in the prophecy of Muhammad, the concept of *shafa‘a* (intercession), *ru‘ya* (the physical appearance of God) and the 6 pillars of faith. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the general basis of Nawawi’s thought in *Fath al-Magid* was the same as Ash‘ari’s, he provided a distinct approach in defining each concept. He also presented different facets of Ash‘ari’s doctrine and used them as one of the methodologies in forming his own creed, that in many instances resulted in different interpretations.

In this way, Nawawi did not agree with Ash‘ari or other groups in several cases. However, he preferred to maintain an independent position, although he claimed to be a devotee of Ash‘ariyya. Therefore, it is clear that Nawawi upheld Ash‘ari’s doctrine in specific cases, yet in others he supported Mu‘tazila or other groups, albeit by implication only. Based on the above, it is interesting to analyse Nawawi’s theological position in *Fath al-Magid* in which he debates Ash‘ari’s creed.

B. The Rise of Sunni Theology: the Ash‘ariyya Case

As explained above, Sunni is known as an Islamic religious faction in all senses of the word (in law, theology, etc), that has a

different interpretation of Islam from the other denominations such as the Shi'a. Indeed, in theological matters, the emergence of Sunni arose in an attempt to revive the original Islamic notions exhorted by the prophet Muhammad. This movement is sometimes called the orthodox *kalam*.

Ash'ari was originally a faithful follower and talented theologian of Mu'tazila before he finally found the right path to understanding God according to the spiritual experience that changed him. First, he reported that the prophet Muhammad appeared to him three times in a dream and described judgment day, when the only group that would be accepted as true Islam is *ahlu al-hadith* or *al-sunna*.⁷ The second reason for Ash'ari's change of heart came after a debate with his master al-Gubba'i, regarding what would happen to three different people (a Muslim, an infidel and a child) after death. Unfortunately al-Gubba'i could not give a satisfactory answer to Ash'ari. After that, Ash'ari remained alone in his house for some time to reformulate his thoughts, then he proclaimed he would now live according to a new creed of theology called al-Ash'ariya in defence of *Sunna*.⁸

What is clear from this unexpected conversion based on his spiritual experiences is his analysis of the deeper meaning of revelations and the true power of God in everything, rather than a rational explanation of the world. Thus, Ash'ari came to the conclusion that revelation is superior to reason in many ways and he therefore decided to maintain that position. Some of his thoughts can be categorised into four main areas with some similarity to Ibn Hanbal's perspective and with the objective of refuting Mu'tazila's concept. The first argument was over the *Qur'an*, believed to have been created. Ash'ari claimed the opposite, saying that the *Qur'an* was not created. Conversely, Ash'ari professed the *Qur'an* to be the very word of God, because in the sense of God speaking, it reveals His attributes. Ash'ari believed this is different from His essence (*dat*), therefore the *Qur'an* was not created. A second, anthropomorphic explanation was accepted because it said so in the *Qur'an*. God's words about the 'hand' and human organs, giving them symbolic meanings in the *Qur'an*, should be interpreted to mean God's ability and attributes are in no way comparable to Man's, therefore those abilities should not be questioned on

technical matters (*kayfa*). The third category dealt with eschatological issues such as *ru'ya* (God's physical appearance) and *shafa'a* (intercession). Ash'ari insisted on interpreting several verses pertaining to both issues literally, rather than metaphorically. The fourth category was the concept of Man's free will that became a prominent subject of theological debate for a long time. While Mu'tazila believed in the independence of human action from God's direction, Ash'ari put forward a concept similar to his theory of 'acquisition' (*kasab-iktisab*), that something can be created by God but acquired by mankind. This concept was founded on two tenets of traditional thought, the first derived from Mu'tazila whose concept was in turn derived from Qadariyya and the second, derived from Ibn Hanbal who was known as a determinist.⁹

After Ash'ari, there were many scholars from his school of theology who deserve acknowledgement of their valuable contributions to the development of the school from the first generation to a later era. It is said that the first of Ash'ariyya's defenders was Muhammad b. Tayyib b. Muhammad Abu Bakr al-Baqilani, simply known as al-Baqilani (d. 1013) who studied theology under Ash'ari's own students, Ibn Mugahid and al-Bahili.¹⁰ Records show al-Baqilani also adopted Ash'ari's concept but interpreted it in different words. There is scant information about al-Baqilani's point of view apart from justifying the miracle of the *Qur'an* (*mu'giza*) and all the ideas he described as incomprehensible issues for humanity. These concepts are explained in his book of theology entitled *Kitab al-Tamhid*.¹¹

Following the al-Baqilani period, Sunni theology developed into a more systematic theology. Several distinguished scholars emerged to study it from the 11th century onwards. The first scholar was Abu al-Ma'ali 'Abd al-Malik al-Guwayni (1028-1085) who lived during the Seljuk dynasty who ruled Baghdad from 1055 after they took control from the Buwayhid dynasty.

In the field of theology, al-Guwayni held a different position from Ash'ari as far as metaphorical interpretation is concerned, but agreed with his opinion on al-Baqilani. Al-Guwayni insisted on metaphorical interpretation because the literal meaning of 'hand' for subjecting to 'God's hand' should be taken to have an abstract meaning like power. Al-Guwayni preferred an abstract (*ta'wil*)¹²

definition and refused to take account of anthropomorphic interpretation with a definite meaning. In one of his prominent works on theology, *al-Irshad Ila Qawati' al-Adilla Fi Usul al-Itiqad*, al-Guwayni clearly describes the subtle orientation of Ash'ariyya's general notions by looking in depth at several issues such as the use of reason, some of God's attributes and the position of humanity as God's possessions. In addition, it is known that al-Guwayni was moving closer to Mu'tazila's doctrine in some ways, but he completely rejected Mu'tazila's concept on those particular issues.

After al-Guwayni, a scholar called al-Ghazali became famous for his remarkable intellectual achievements in his lifetime. For centuries, al-Ghazali was best-known for his philosophical, legal and theological concepts that have lasted until the present day. Al-Ghazali whose complete name is Abu Hamid Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Tusi al-Shafi'i al-Ghazali, was born in 1058 near Khurasan in Iran. He wrote many works including books on theology considered complex and rather difficult to understand, but he was the first Muslim scholar to introduce systematic philosophy into theological debate.¹³ Although he never professed himself to be Ash'ariyya, it is likely that he defended Ash'ariyya's ideas and his prominent work *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* included a chapter on theology.

Although al-Ghazali's doctrinal interpretation was mainly influenced by philosophy and modern methodology, his understanding is similar to that of Sunni scholars who came before him. He often listed four postulations to explain *kalam* in Islam, initiated by the two distinct elements of God's essence (*dat*) and attributes (*al-Sifat*). Ghazali's second explanation concerns the power of God on human actions; on this issue he insisted that God is superior to human beings.¹⁴

C. General Thoughts from Nawawi al-Bantani's Theology

Apart from the medieval scholars who defended Ash'ari's theology, there were also Ash'ari defenders in the 19th century. They include al-Baguri (d.1860) who founded Ash'ari and Shafi'i schools. He taught many students including Ali Pasha, who ruled Egypt from 1849 to 1854 and reformed the scientific tradition that

led to the development of a new methodology for Islamic learning by Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (d.1873). During this golden age, a large number of people were keen to learn Islam in the new way, including Nawawi al-Bantani, even though he had a different theological creed from Ash'ari.

Nawawi is not just known as a theologian (*al-mutakallim*) but also as a scholar who mastered other fields of Islamic study. Here however, I want to present Nawawi's overall theological perspective, the one mostly derived from his teacher Sayyid Ahmad al-Nahrawi, whose book was referred to in *Fath al-Magid*. Nawawi's thoughts on theology include some general concepts. The first is the status of reason and revelation. As I explained earlier, for Ash'ari, revelation was superior to reason (*'aql*). Nevertheless, Nawawi believed that *al-'aql* played an important role for human beings in defining their status and obligations as it also required them to understand God's attributes. The *Qur'an* as a set of rules comprises many undecipherable verses that need to be interpreted so that human beings can understand God's words. Consequently, *al-'aql* has an important contribution to make. Nawawi defines *al-'aql* as mankind's main power; '*al-'aql huwa quwwa li al-nafs al-natiqa, wa huwa ala laha fi al-fi'l bi-munazalat al-sikkin bi-nisbat al-qati*' (reason is mankind's power and it functions as a tool to enable them to do something, like a knife whose function is to cut).¹⁵

Apart from *al-'aql*, Nawawi also considered revelations to be as significant as *al-'aql* and for this argument he referred to the exegetical explanation of sura *al-Shura*: 51 and 52. At the end of the 51st verse and the beginning of the 52nd, Nawawi defines the word '*innahu 'aliyyun hakim*' (He is the most high and the most wise) and '*awhayna ilayka ruhan min amrina wa ma kunta tadri ma al-kitab wa la al-iman*' (and thus did we reveal an inspired book to you by our command, you did not know what the book was, nor what the faith was) as God's to give any revelation to anybody that He wanted and within those revelations there is information that people cannot comprehend even by using reason. Therefore, Nawawi said Muslims should believe in God's commands regardless of their ability to understand them.

The second concept concerns *al-iman* (faith), divided into *iman bi-al-tasdiq* (trusting) and *iman bi-al-‘amal* (deed). According to Nawawi, the first classification is the essence of faith itself, because it derives from the absolute belief in God’s existence, His messengers and commands. Therefore, this category of *iman* must not be degraded, otherwise it would generate uncertainty that leads to the invalidity of *iman*. The second type of *iman* is the manifestation of the previous type of *iman* through many deeds which have been commanded. Thus, for Nawawi this type of *iman* could either enhance the status of *iman* to a certain extent by doing God’s commands, or degrade the status of *iman* by neglecting those commands. In addition, the manifestation of *iman* can take place in many ways, not only in those covered by the basic six elements of faith. Nawawi called them *al-shu‘ab al-iman* (parts of belief).¹⁶

The final main tenet of Nawawi’s theology deals with the issue of human predestination. In this context, Nawawi did not merely adopt Qadariyya or Gabariyya’s concept in expounding the meaning of predestination, but he referred to the concept on exegetical method in verse al-Hijr: 21. Nawawi thus recognises two different types of predestination, one that cannot be modified (*maqdurat Ghayr Mutanahiya*) based on the interpretation of ‘*wa in min shay’in llla ‘indana khaza’inuh*’ and another that can be modified (*maqdurat mutanahiya*) under certain circumstances. All of these are derived from human reason based on the verse ‘*wa ma nunazziluhu bi qadar ma‘lum*’. This thought was known as the *miqdar* concept.¹⁷

Nawawi’s basic thoughts on theology as described above, are founded on Ash‘ariyya’s principal theology. However, Nawawi gives a nuanced explanation in his detailed explanation and this reveals a somewhat different view to Ash‘ariyya. Like earlier disciples of Ash‘ari, who have different arguments, Nawawi modified his thoughts and challenged Ash‘ari when he elaborated on some of his thoughts. This sometimes resulted in different conclusions from Ash‘ari on many theological issues and these differences were revealed in *Fath al-Magid*, one of his first theological books and the main focus of this research.

D. Contents of *Fath al-Magid*

In the previous chapter I show that Nawawi's theological thought was based primarily on Ash'ariyya's mainstream doctrine. Nawawi's works in this field are numerous. In them, he explains the basic principles of Islamic theology from the Sunni point of view, on different theological concepts. According to my earlier explanation of Nawawi's works on theology from many different sources, it is clear that all seven titles focus on the fundamental issue of *iman* and its parts. These can be divided into several elements, such as the 20 attributes, the concept of prophecy and human predestination. Furthermore, these concepts were taken from other works.

However, *Fath al-Magid*, which is a commentary on Nawawi's teacher's book entitled *al-Durr al-Farid*, was written in a different format, yet it deals with a wide and detailed explanation of Nawawi's thoughts. This book shows a different conceptual background from Ash'ari's and sometimes a strong objection to non-Sunni theology on certain issues.

The book that Nawawi commented on *Fath al-Magid*, *al-Durr al-Farid*, comprises several theological concepts on different themes. In his initial explanation, Nawawi states his intention to clarify Nahrawi's texts.¹⁸ The contents of his book can be divided into several sections, as follows:

1. The fundamental concept of *tawhid* (oneness) that must be accepted by every Muslim as the prerequisite to be called a Muslim and it is obligatory to know the existence of God through the *Qur'anic* verses.
2. Following on from the *tawhid* concept, there are 20 attributes ascribed as a main part of the oneness concept and those attributes can be classified into four categories. The first is *nafsiyya* (attributes of the essence) consisting of *al-wujud* (existence). The second is *salbiyya* (negative attributes) comprising five attributes, namely *al-qidam* (eternity), *al-baqa'* (everlastingness), *al-qiyam bi-al-nafs* (self-subsistence), *mukhalafa li-al-hawadith* (dissimilarity from the created) and *al-wahdaniyya* (oneness). The third is *ma'ani* (attributes consisting of ideas), consisting of *al-qudra* (power), *al-irada* (will), *al-'ilm* (knowledge), *al-*

hayat (life), *al-sam'* (hearing), *al-basr* (sight) and *al-kalam* (speech). The last is *ma'nawiyya* (attributes pertaining to form the reality of the existence of the *ma'ani* attributes), which comprises *qadiran* (God is powerful), *muridan* (God is willing), *'aliman* (God is knowing), *hayyan* (God is living), *sami'an* (God is hearing), *basiran* (God is seeing) and *mutakaliman* (God is speaking).¹⁹

3. The concept of *ru'ya* or God's physical appearance on resurrection day, when all Muslims will be able to see God's face. On this particular issue, Nawawi uses various reasons taken from the *Qur'an* and *hadith*. Accordingly, although he has a different explanation from his teacher Nahrawi, they both come to the same conclusion.
4. The concept of prophecy which includes several obligations such as the acceptance of prophecy in Islam and to believe it as a part of *iman*; the acceptance of the prophet Muhammad as the last messenger; the acknowledgement of several attributes ascribed to the prophet Muhammad and the concept of *shafa'a* (intercession) on resurrection day.

Furthermore, by reviewing the issues above, the main subject matter of *Fath al-Magid*, the differences between them and the content of Nawawi's other books on theology are clear. In *Fath al-Magid*, Nawawi provided a more subtle explanation of each issue by exploring the connections, for example, in the discussion of God's 20 attributes. Another difference is the inclusion of various schools of theology that make a particular discussion more lively, when for instance, Nawawi presents two different arguments between Sunni and Mu'tazila, commenting on the concept of *ru'ya*, then following with his own insight.²⁰ As a comprehensive study, *Fath al-Magid* provides extensive coverage of the most fundamental issues in theology, particularly for mainstream Sunni doctrine.

E. The Twenty Attributes of God (Allah) and His Essence (*Dat*)

On the essential issue of God's attributes, both Nahrawi and Nawawi agreed that it is a fundamental requirement for every Muslim to recognise them.²¹ However, as far as the number of those attributes is concerned, Nawawi does not follow Ash'ari's

system that only contains 13 attributes.²² Instead, he follows the systems of al-Baqilani, al-Guwayni and al-Sanusi²³ who added 7 additional attributes (the *ma'nawiyya* attributes). Nawawi identified these attributes in *Qur'anic* verses and from the prophet Muhammad's tradition. However, in relation to God's essence (*dat*) and His attributes, Nawawi viewed them as two distinct elements. According to Nawawi, the essence of God stands alone as being uncreated and His attributes are complementary to rather than inseparable from His essence.²⁴ This distinction was based on the theory of *al-'adl fi ithbati Allah al-wahid* (a legal aspect on the unity of God and His existence), derived from the statement '*la ilaha illa Allah*' (there is no true God except Allah).²⁵ The application of this concept is intended to safeguard the absolute unity of God's essence as a part of the *tawhid* concept. Therefore, Nawawi's explanation of this issue implied his agreement with Mu'tazila on the integration of God's attributes with His essence. However, he does not agree with the negation of God's attribute (*nafy al-sifat*), adopted by Mu'tazila.

In addition, the 11th century scholar Shahrastani, stated that the reason Mu'tazila integrated God's attributes with His essence was based on an interpretation of the *tawhid* concept. However, in suggesting His attributes are separate from His essence, this automatically implies the acceptance of two separate entities, which in turn implies polytheism.²⁶ On the other hand, a contemporary scholar of theology Ahmad Mahmud Subhi, argued that God has some attributes that are different from His essence. This essence, therefore, cannot be addressed to any of His creations in the universe. As a consequence, he insisted that God's essence should not be contaminated by other attributes as they would degrade the essence of *tawhid* and lead to *Shirk* (deification in polytheism). Within his description Subhi established a clear separation between God's essence and His attributes.²⁷

Nawawi classified God's attributes into 4 groups derived from 20 attributes. The first is *sifat al-nafsiyya* (the attribute of the essence) which contains the attribute *wugudiyya* (existence). This attribute is consubstantial with God's essence. The second group is *al-sifat al-salbiyya* (the negative attributes) which contains five attributes. The next group is *al-sifat al-ma'ani* (attributes consisting

of ideas); within this category there are 7 attributes that are not identical to the essence but are not separated from it. The final group is *al-sifat al-ma'nawiyya* (attributes that can bring the *ma'ani* attributes into being). The group contains 7 attributes called the forming attributes because they are simply the manifestation of the *ma'ani* attributes in reality. For instance *qadiran* means that God is powerful and possesses power.

F. *Ru'ya* (Witnessing God's Physical Appearance)

Ru'ya, which literally means "sight", is used in theology to mean the concept of beatific vision. This concept was developed by Ash'ari along with the concept of anthropomorphism, taking the literal context of God's physical body from the *Qur'anic* verses. For example, Ash'ari interprets verses (75:22 and 75:23), '*some faces on that day will be bright. Looking to their Lord*', literally because the word '*looking*' has no figurative meaning, therefore Ash'ari insisted this concept was applied to *Qur'anic* verses.²⁸

Compared with the above passage from Ash'ari, Mu'tazila demonstrates a different view, denying the existence of any human qualities in God because God's essence according to Mu'tazila cannot be understood. Therefore, many *Qur'anic* verses are treated metaphorically by Mu'tazila, for example, God's face means His essence and God's eye means His knowledge.²⁹ It can therefore be argued that Mu'tazila refuted the concept of *ru'ya*.

For Nawawi, because *ru'ya* is a central issue in *Fath al-Magid*, it can be read as permissible (*ga'iz*) for Muslims to see their God. Had the physical *ru'ya* been prohibited or denied literal interpretation, then the prophet Musa would not have asked God to appear, as stated in the *Qur'an* (7:143).³⁰ Commenting on verses (75:22 and 23), Nawawi proposed a literal interpretation of those verses, interpreting the argument by referring back to the prophet Muhammad's saying, '*you will see your Lord as you can see badr (the night moon)*'.³¹ However, the possibility of seeing God's physical body is complicated by the restriction on Muslims to draw an accurate image (*bi la kayfa*) of God Himself, because His physical body is His essence and it is prohibited to copy God's essence.³²

In support of his affirmation of Ash‘ari’s doctrine, Nawawi compared the Sunni concept of *ru‘ya* with Mu‘tazila’s and rejected the Mu‘tazila view. In a later explanation, Nawawi discussed Mu‘tazila’s assertion that contains two basic analyses.³³ The first referred to reason (*dalil al-‘aqliyya*) where God, who is postulated in His concept of attributes, does not require place or form, so *ru‘ya*, according to them is inadmissible (*mustahil*). The second referred to the *Qur’anic* verses (*dalil al-naqliyya*), in the verse, ‘vision comprehends him not, and He comprehends (all) vision’ (6:103).

Commenting on the above argument from Mu‘tazila, Nawawi employs the Sunni concept, saying that *ru‘ya* has a different context from God’s attribute, because it does not imply the necessity for God to acquire place or form. For the next denial of the second Mu‘tazila concept, Nawawi argues that the verse (6:103) only implied the impossibility of Muslims witnessing God while living in the world and for *kafir*. Additionally, on resurrection day, *ru‘ya* will enable the precious achievement for Muslims to see their Lord.³⁴

From this explanation of *ru‘ya* it seems obvious that Nawawi follows the majority Sunni’s scholar in perceiving the concept of *ru‘ya*, although he does not specifically refer to Ash‘ari, and indeed when he explains the unconceivable (*bi la kayfa*) concept. However, apart from that, it can be said that Nawawi has a same opinion as Sunni majority, and not to mention Ash‘ari.

G. The Concept of Prophecy

One of the most essential elements of Islam relates to the concept of *iman* (belief in God), the concept of prophecy that has to be accepted by every Muslim. In dealing with this issue Nawawi expanded upon Nahrawi’s text in which he stated that God possessed the prophets and messengers.³⁵

According to Nawawi and in accordance with Nahrawi’s text, every Muslim is obliged to comprehend (*tafsil*) every prophet and messenger mentioned in the *Qur’an* as many as 25 prophets.³⁶ Nawawi also mentions alternative numbers of prophets quoted in other sources, some of which claim there were 25,000 or that as many as 124,000 prophets have been sent to Earth at different times

to various parts of the world. Nawawi claimed a total of 25,000 prophets is the most reliable number because it comes from valid sources.³⁷ In spite of the uncertainty surrounding the number of prophets and messengers, Nawawi suggested that every Muslim has to believe in prophets in a general way (*igmal*), in other words, that Muslims are under no obligation to accept prophets or messengers other than the 25 he referred to, unless evidence is available from valid sources (in the *Qur'an* or *hadith* with authentic narration).

There do not appear to be any major discourses on the issue explained above, due to the fact the majority of Muslim theologians accept the situation. Accordingly, in this section Nawawi does not discuss any disagreements among scholars. However, Nawawi's explanation of this particular issue does ignore an essential element that, in turn, could be a significant discussion, that is, a comprehensive understanding of the difference between a prophet and a messenger. Indeed, in his text, Nawawi uses the words prophets (*al-anbiya'*) and messengers (*al-rusul*) when he refers to an estimate of both without going into the difference between the two.

Nevertheless, in general *Qur'anic* prophetology, the terms prophet (*al-nabi*) and messenger (*al-rasul*) have the same meaning, that they were sent by God to humankind.³⁸ However, there is a question concerning the role and function of each in society and some *Qur'anic* texts infer a different meaning for each term, as stated in the following *Qur'anic* verses:

'We gave Moses the Book and followed him up with a succession of messengers: We gave Jesus the son of Mary clear (signs) and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit. Is it that whenever there comes to you a messenger with what you yourselves desire not, you are puffed up with pride? Some you called impostors, and others you slay!' (2:87)

'Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent prophets with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; but the people of the Book' (2:213)

"And this is in the Books of the earliest (Revelation). The Books of Abraham and Moses." (87:18-19)

Each of the three verses above refers to books given by God to prophets, whose aim was to guide people therefore they cannot be called messengers (*al-rusul*). The three verses define a prophet as someone who has been given a holy book (a biblical prophet) and through these verses the *Qur'an* gives them the authority to guide their people using these holy books. On the other hand, we can refer to other verses for a different meaning of messenger:

'To every people (was sent) a messenger: When their messenger comes (before them), the matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged.' (10:47)

'We gave Moses the Book and followed him up with a succession of messengers' (2:87)

'Our Lord! Send amongst them a messenger of their own, who shall rehearse Thy signs to them and instruct them in scripture and wisdom, and sanctify them: For Thou art the Exalted in Might, the Wise.' (2:129)

'Allah did confer a great favour on the believers when He sent among them a messenger from among themselves, rehearsing unto them the signs of Allah, sanctifying them, and instructing them in scripture and wisdom, while, before that, they had been in manifest error.' (3:164)

Indeed, the verses above indicate that messengers are different from prophets in that they are not given a holy book. Instead, their role is to guide people from their community to the right path according to a sacred book revealed to earlier prophets, as stated in the above verse (2:87). They also suggest that messengers are sent to their own people who had rejected God's message and they should therefore guide them from the wrong to the right path, as inferred in verse (3:164).

The definition of both prophet and messenger can be given to a single person, for example, in the case of the prophet Muhammad. Before the *higra* era when he lived in Mecca, the prophet Muhammad was called a messenger (*al-rasul*) due to his role of guiding people who violate God's rules but at that time he had not been given a holy book, only partial revelation of it. In his Medina period, the prophet Muhammad can be called a prophet (*al-nabi*) because he had been given the *Qur'an* as a holy book.³⁹ This

is shown in the verse: '*Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the **messenger** of Allah, and the seal of the prophets: And Allah has full knowledge of all things.*' (33:40)

Nawawi's text does not quote his sources in support of his claim that the actual number of prophets numbered as many as 25,000. Nawawi does not offer an explanation of the estimated number, he just specifies that he derives the number from a well-known and credible source. However, the bold claim Nawawi makes, is that apart from the 25 prophets, there were other prophets sent by God. To support his argument, he cited the *Qur'anic* verse:

'and certainly we sent messengers before you; there are some of them that we have mentioned to you and there are others whom we have not mentioned to you.' (40:78)

Of the many prophets sent by God to guide mankind in the world, the prophet Muhammad had an important role because he was destined to be the final seal of the prophets, confirming God's messages and Islam as a religion. A *Qur'anic* verse states:

*'Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the **messenger** of Allah, and the seal of the prophets ...'* (33:40)

Apart from his role as the last prophet, the nature of the prophet Muhammad's humanity was the same as other human beings, as stated in the verse '*Say: 'I am but a man like yourselves''* (18:110). Nevertheless, the concepts of humanity and attribute inherent in his prophetic nature exalted him to the status of a special human being. Indeed, this attribute became a general theme in the field of theology over time.

In the context of *Fath al-Magid*, both Nahrawi and Nawawi made the prophet Muhammad's attribute a central discussion of their theological doctrine. In his text, Nahrawi adhered to the most common number of the prophet Muhammad's attributes, divided into four parts, namely: *al-sidq* (honesty), *al-amana* (trust), *tabligh* (communication) and *fatana* (cleverness and intelligence). In addition, Nahrawi also mentions the truth of the prophet Muhammad as the last prophet, who brought the *Qur'an* as God's messages therefore it is an obligation for Muslims to believe in his prophecy and miracles (*mu'giza*).⁴⁰

Compared with Nahrawi's text on the concept of Muhammad's prophecy, Nawawi's explanation of it was more focused on the four attributes. Those attributes, according to Nawawi, could be considered his miracles due to their peculiarity and distinction from the features of other human beings. Nawawi also used this assumption when referring to other cases relating to other prophets. From his explanation of the prophet Muhammad's miracles, we can assume that his definition of a miracle is something given by God that comes from His power (*qudra*).⁴¹ From this definition, the attributes of *sidq*, *amana*, *tabligh* and *fatana* can be seen as God's miracles rather than ordinary human characteristics. The following describes these attributes:

1. *Sidq*: *Sidq* means upright, so no item of noteworthy information received from the prophet Muhammad could be considered deceptive. The meaning of *sidq* in this context can also be described as being honest in order to deliver God's messages as they are written in the book of decrees (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*).
2. *Amana*: This attribute refers to being reliable and truthful in every deed. According to Nawawi, *amana* indicates that the prophet Muhammad was protected by God from committing any immoral acts or transgressions from God's laws, so that with this attribute he is infallible (*ma'sum*).
3. *Tabligh*: This attribute means the prophet Muhammad's complete deliverance of God's messages. These messages are all written in the *Qur'an*.
4. *Fatana*: *Fatana* means that the prophet Muhammad is clever and intelligent, because if he was not intelligent, he would not have been able to convince people or defend his revelations. Therefore, it is not possible for him to be considered someone lacking intelligence, although the prophet Muhammad was obviously illiterate.

H. Conclusions

In chapter one, I explained that the emergence of theological debate in Islam was the result of two factors namely, political conditions and a number of different theological interpretations. The first factor, political conditions, led many people to form

different political factions, that in turn led to the formation of different theological doctrines. The second factor was the influence of Greek philosophy on Muslim scholars soon after the demise of the prophet Muhammad and this influence led many scholars to develop different theological views. Consequently, over time, many theological groups, for example, Qadariyya and Gabariyya, emerged with different interpretations of several issues.

Later on, these two major groups evolved into more systematic theological factions. It was Mu'tazila who enhanced Qadariyya's tenet that human beings are naturally free to choose their own destiny, while Ash'ariyya was founded in response to Mu'tazila, modifying Gabariyya's creed that implied human beings are not free to choose. In addition to Mu'tazila's doctrine, Ash'ariyya's creed developed along the same lines as mainstream Sunni theology and was adopted by people who adhered to that particular Islamic group. Nevertheless, throughout the ages, many scholars have, in turn, modified Ash'ari's original creed in different ways. The same thing happened with Nawawi's understanding of Ash'ari's concept, particularly in his theological book entitled *Fath al-Magid*.

In the 19th century, Nawawi was a renowned scholar whose works covered many fields of Islamic studies, including theology. Acquiring his Islamic knowledge from various scholars, Nawawi became a remarkable scholar who used the gloss writing style to teach Islamic knowledge in a simple way. With this writing style, Nawawi became one of those scholars who made a significant contribution towards the development of the Islamic tradition of scholarship.

In an explanation of his theological position in *Fath al-Magid*, Nawawi reinterpreted Nahrawi's text by employing a variety of sources and theoretical bases to draw his own conclusions from Ash'ari's creed. From his overall explanation, we can conclude that Nawawi held different opinions from Ash'ari on various issues, indeed he sometimes completely rejected Ash'ari's views. These differences are apparent in almost every subject discussed in *Fath al-Magid*, apart from two issues, namely *ru'ya* and *shafa'a*.

Nawawi distanced himself from Ash'ari when he stated that God's essence and His attributes are inseparable and thereby preserve the oneness of God. This point of view is similar to the one held by Mu'tazila and Maturidi of Samarkand. Furthermore, in detailed explanations of God's attributes, there are clear differences between Nawawi and Ash'ari on two significant issues, namely: In the explanation of *kasb* and *iktisab* in the attribute of *wahdaniyya* and in the explanation of God's speech in the *al-'ilm* attribute.

In his explanation of *kasb* and *iktisab*, Nawawi used two different approaches, derived from Maturidi of Samarkand and Mu'tazila. In doing so, Nawawi employed the concept of *miqdar ghayr mutanahiya*, which he took from three different sources: Maturidi of Samarkand's concept, the *Qur'anic* verses and the philosophical interpretation supporting the concept of free will in human actions. However, in a later debate, Nawawi interpreted the *Qur'anic* verse (37:96) using the Mu'tazila concept denying human predestination. Nonetheless, he accepted Ash'ari's basic concepts of *kasb* and *iktisab*.

In the second notable issue, whether the *Qur'an* is created or not created, Nawawi used a number of sources to develop his own doctrine. He adopted both Ash'ari's concept, that the *Qur'an* is not created (*ghayr makhluq* and it is *qadim*) and Mu'tazila's concept, that the *Qur'an* is created (*makhluq* and it is *hadith*). According to Nawawi, the *Qur'an* is created when it refers to the text and the sound, but uncreated when it refers to the underlying meaning of each verse, even if this contradicts the concept of free will that Nawawi adopted. For his last explanation, pertaining to the concept of prophecy, *ru'ya* and *shafa'a*, Nawawi provided a very general explanation, neglecting to elaborate on some important issues relating to the concept of prophecy.

Looking at Nawawi's overall conclusion in *Fath al-Magid*, it is clear he adopted an independent position rather than rigid adherence to a particular group. Nawawi's eclectic attitude in responding to Ash'ari's theological creed can be identified at the very beginning of his explanation of his theoretical framework. Nevertheless, despite Nawawi's independence of thought in constructing his theological doctrine, he did not completely refute Ash'ari's concept and he still maintained an adherence to Sunni

theology. Therefore, *Fath al-Magid* played a significant role as a theological book, in shaping Nawawi's theological doctrine. Nawawi proposed many theories in this book that appeared in the works he wrote after *Fath al-Magid*. Indeed the concepts also appeared in *Tafsir al-Munir*.

Finally, it is obvious that *Fath al-Magid*, with its different interpretation of Ash'ari's work, meant it was similar to other Sunni theological works that aimed to modify Ash'ari's original doctrine. The initial intention of enhancing the systematic understanding of Ash'ari's theology actually began during the time of the first generation of Ash'ari's successors, for example, in al-Baqilani's work entitled, *Kitab al-Tamhid*, in al-Guwayni's *al-Irshad Ila Qawati' al-Adilla Fi Usul al-I'tiqad* and in al-Razi's *Muhassal al-Afkar*. In the same way as these books, the content of *Fath al-Magid*, which was written in the 19th century, shows the clear intention to seek a better solution for every theological discourse. The underlying messages also imply the necessity for Muslims to understand the function of reason (*'aql*) and revelation in comprehending theological issues. In addition, as the prominent book is used in the *pesantren*, *Fath al-Magid* has also enlightened theological scholarship in Indonesia and by its methodological approach, has stimulated many scholars to develop their own understanding of Ash'ari's creed and its relevance to the present day.

Endnotes:

¹Fakhry, Majid. 1997. *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism*. Boston: Oneworld. p.13.

² Kamal, Muhammad. 2003. 'Mu'tazilah: The Rise of Islamic Rationalism', in *Australian Rationalist*. No.62, p.37.

³Walker, Benjamin. 1998. *The Foundation of Islam: Making of a World Faith*. London: Peter Owen Ltd. p.339.

⁴ Ibn Hanbal is believed to be the founder of an Islamic legal school (*Hanbali*). He is also renowned as a Sunni theologian. See further Jackson, Roy. 2006. *Fifty Key Figures in Islam*. New York: Routledge. p.44.

⁵al-Ash'ari, Abu al-Hasan. 1953. 'Istihsan al-Khawad Fi 'Ilm al-Kalam', in McCarthy, R.J.. *Theology of al-Ash'ari*. Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique. p.95.

⁶Nasution, Harun. 1986. *Teologi Islam, Aliran-Aliran Sejarah Analisa Perbandingan*. Jakarta: UI-Press. pp.72-75.

⁷*Ibid.* p.84.

⁸ Nagel, Tilman. 2000. *The History of Islamic Theology, From Muhammad to The Present*. Princeton: Markus Wiener. p.149.

⁹ Watt, William Montgomery. 2008. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*. Piscataway: Transaction. p.85-86.

¹⁰ Adang, Camilla. 1996. *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*. Leiden: E.J Brill. p.51.

¹¹ Thomas, David. 2008. *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology*. Leiden: Brill. p.120.

¹² Watt, William Montgomery. 2008. *Islamic Philosophy*...., p.112.

¹³ H.M Zurkani, Jahja. 1996. *Teologi al-Ghazali*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar. p.97.

¹⁴ al-Ghazali, Abu H{amid b. Muh{ammad b. Muh{ammad. 2003. *Ih{ya' al-'Ulum al-Din*. Cairo: Dar al-Salam. p.130.

¹⁵ Nawawi b. 'Umar al-Gawi, al-Shaykh Muhammad. 1894. *Nasa'ih al-'Ibad Fi Bayan alfaḍl Munabbihat 'Ala al-Isti'dad Li Yawm al-Mi'ad*. Mecca: Matbu'at al-Mayriya al-Ka'ina. p.43.

¹⁶ Nawawi b. 'Umar, al-Shaykh Muhammad. 1927. *Qami' al-Tughyan 'Ala Manduma Shu'ab al-Iman* Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi. p.2.

¹⁷ This concept only appears in his exegetical book *Tafsir al-Munir*. However, the notion of this concept is implicit in his theological book *Fath al-Magid*, when he deals with God's attribute *al-wahdaniyya* (oneness). See Al-Gawi, Muhammad Nawawi. 1936. *Al-Tafsir al-Munir Li Mu'alim al-Tanzil, Marah Labid Li Kashfi Ma'na Qur'an Magid*. al-Guz' al-Awwal. Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi. p.442.; and Al-Shafi'i, Shaykh Muhammad Nawawi b. 'Umar al-Gawi. 1926. *Fath al-Magid Fi Sharh al-Durr al-Farid*. Cairo: Mustafa al-H{alabi. p.17.

¹⁸ Nawawi b. 'Umar al-Gawi al-Shafi'i, Shaykh Muhammad. 1926. *Fath al-Magid Fi Sharh al-Durr al-Farid*. Cairo: Mustafa al-H{alabi. p.2.

¹⁹*Ibid.* p.37.

²⁰*Ibid.* p.40.

²¹ Nawawi b. 'Umar al-Gawi al-Shafi'i, Shaykh Muhammad .1926. *Fath al-Magid*..., p.5.

²² Ngah, Mohd. Nor Bin. 1983. *Kitab Jawi: Islamic Thought of The Malay Muslim Scholars*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. p.10.

²³ Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Sanusi (1429-1490) was a theologian who composed a theological creed. His book entitled *al-Umm al-Barahin* is his work on theology. See Bosworth C.E. et al. (eds). 1997. *The Encyclopedia of Islam* Vol. IX. Leiden: Brill. p.20.

²⁴ Nawawi b. 'Umar al-Gawi al-Shafi'i, Shaykh Muhammad.1926. *Fath al-Magid*..., p.5.

²⁵ Asnawi .2006. *Pemahaman Syaikh Nawawi Tentang Ayat Qadar dan Ayat Jabar dalam Tafsirnya Marah Labid*. Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Depag RI. p.100.

²⁶ al-Shahrastani, Abi al-Fath Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim b. Abi Bakr Ahmad. 1996. *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*. Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa. p.60.

²⁷ Subhi, Ahmad Mahmud. 1986. *Fi 'Ilm al-Kalam, Dirasa Falsafiyya Li Ara'i al-Firaq al-Islamiyya Fi Usul al-Din*, al-Guz' al-Awwal. Iskandariyya: Thaqafa al-Gami'a. p.119.

²⁸ al-Ash'ari, Abu Hasan. 1977. *Al-Ibana Fi Usul al-Diyana*. Al-Qahira: Dar al-Ansar. p.39.

²⁹ Subhi, Ahmad Mahmud. 1986. *Fi 'Ilm al-Kalam*....., p.125.

³⁰ Nawawi b. 'Umar al-Gawi al-Shafi'i, Shaykh Muhammad. 1926. *Fath al-Magid*...., p.39.

³¹ Narrated by Bukhari and other Muslims. Although some scholars consider this *hadith* to be weak (*da'if*), it has been used by the Sunni majority to support the concept of *ru'ya*. Taken from: http://www.bookstree.com/books/2/k2/k_p2_p162.htm accessed on 6/5/2011.

³² This prohibition is derived from the prophet Muhammad's *hadith* stating that humans are not allowed to contemplate the essence of God, but he recommended they contemplate His creation. The *hadith* is derived from Ibn 'Abbas. Taken from http://www.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?bk_no=499&pid=128164&hid=875 accessed on 6/5/2011.

³³ Nawawi b. 'Umar al-Gawi al-Shafi'i, Shaykh Muhammad. 1926. *Fath al-Magid*...., p.41.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.40.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p.45.

³⁶ The prophets are: Adam, Idris, Nuh (Noah), Hud, Salih, Lut, Ibrahim (Abraham), Isma'il, Ishaq (Isaac), Ya'qub, Yusuf (Joseph), Shu'ayb, Harun, Musa (Moses), Dawud (David), Sulayman (Solomon), Ayyub, Du al-Kifl, Yunus, Ilyas, Ilyasa, Zakariyya, Yahya, 'Isa (Jesus) and Muhammad.

³⁷ Nawawi b. 'Umar al-Gawi al-Shafi'i, Shaykh Muhammad. 1926. *Fath al-Magid*...., p.45.

³⁸ Tottoli, Roberto. 2002. *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*. Richmond: Curzon Press. p.71.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p.75-76.

⁴⁰ In common with other prophets who performed miracles, the prophet Muhammad did, for example, his journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension to Heaven, stated in the *Qur'an* (17:1).

⁴¹ This definition also concurred with al-Taftazani's definition of miracle, defined as something that nullifies the customary way of things (*khariq lil-'ada*), the purpose of which is to demonstrate the truthfulness of the one making the claim to be a messenger of Allah. See al-Taftazani Sa'd al-Din. 1950. *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam, on the Creed of Najm al-Din al-Nasafi* (translated by Earl Edgar Elder). New York: Columbia University Press. p.21.

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