Introduction

The intellectual activity named *ʿilm al-kalām* in Arabic is broadly equivalent to the English term philosophical theology.[1] This translation is useful because it presupposes that there can be a coherent combination of philosophy – the use of rational argument to clarify, or justify, truth – and theology in the sense of systematic discourse about the divine.[2] The function of such a theology is to articulate the truths of theism in a language appropriate to a civilisation's intellectual milieu. The credibility of this project was taken for granted during the long medieval period,[3] with its diverse contributions from Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars.

1 The early use of the word *kalām* for a specific method of dialectical dispute (hence the alternative translation dialectical theology) can be distinguished from the subject of theology more broadly conceived. See van Ess, 'Early Development of *Kalām*', p. 113. Traditional answers for how *kalām*, which literally means speech, came to be a term of art include the notion that it refers to an exposition on a given topic or to the centrality of debate about the theological status of the Qur'an – God's divine speech – in the early generations. Abdel Haleem, 'Early *kalām*', pp. 71–72. Alexander Treiger proposes a potential origin for the word meaning both disputation and theology in the context of first/seventh-century Christian-Muslim debates but concludes that this reconstruction is inconclusive. Treiger, 'Origins of *Kalām*', pp. 33–34.

2 Dimitri Gutas has provocatively argued for the incoherence of this pairing within the *kalām* tradition on the grounds that a true philosophy is scientific and cannot have a theological agenda informed by revealed scripture. He proposes the term 'paraphilosophy'. Gutas, 'Avicenna and After', p. 43. I think that the term 'philosophical' in the phrase is properly used for highlighting an approach that takes philosophical argument seriously while remaining within certain boundaries dictated by the requirements of theology. Christian Lange has critiqued the prevailing contemporary approach to the history of classical Islamic theology for its textual focus and privileging of *kalām*. Lange, 'Power, Orthodoxy, and Salvation in Classical Islamic Theology', pp. 136–37. There are certainly merits to this argument, although the current study with its specific constructive theological ambitions is the wrong place to pursue it.

3 The medieval period, or Middle Ages, has sometimes been understood as the nearly thousand-year stretch from *ca* 500 CE, the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, to *ca* 1453 CE, the fall of Constantinople. Stevenson, *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*,

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Nevertheless, theologians from these traditions have long had an ambivalent relationship with philosophical thought, often both drawing from its tools and reviling its 'excesses'.[4] In the *kalām* tradition, while members of the Ashʿarī and Māturīdī Sunnī theological schools were always invested in Aristotelian-Neoplatonic philosophical techniques to some extent, albeit circumscribed to varying degrees, there is a palpable sense in recent centuries that the pendulum has swung towards a distrust of this mode of discursive theology.[5] Even in Sunnī circles that in theory are not opposed to its study, the discipline of *kalām* has stalled, remaining stagnantly fixated either on scholastic arguments developed centuries ago or on the learning and scriptural defence of creed.[6]

The challenges posed by contemporary thought are profound. Developments in the foundations of mathematics and logic impacted the conception of rational activity and led to the emergence of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century. This is paralleled by the phenomenological movement within so-called continental philosophy, which interrogated the significance of tradition in the constitution of any reasoned reflection upon the world.[7] Meanwhile, breakthroughs in physics exemplified by quantum mechanics heralded a re-evaluation of earlier scientific pictures of reality with deep potential philosophical and theological implications.

vol. 1, p. 1777. Although any such periodisation has its limitations, it has the advantage of encompassing in a single phrase the formative and classical development of the Islamic tradition, the Augustinian and scholastic periods of Christian theology and post-Talmudic Rabbinical scholarship. Garth Fowden has argued for the cogency of the first millennium for the emergence of Rabbinical Judaism, Christianity and Islam, along with their canonical scriptures and consolidated creeds. See Fowden, *Before and After Muḥammad*, pp. 55–57. Al-Māturīdī lived at the end of this time span.

4 In Islam, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) is the most famous case in point. Despite the popular conception that he defeated philosophy and entrenched traditionalism, contemporary scholarship demonstrates that he was a significant filter for the emergence of a revised Avicennism. Wisnovsky, 'One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn in Sunnī Theology', p. 65. But as Chapter 1 will show, Muslim philosophy is also an important part of the genealogy of *kalām* in the formative centuries, including that of al-Māturīdī.

5 See Özervarli, 'Attempts to Revitalize *Kalām* in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries', pp. 100–2; Gardet, 'Allāh'.

6 Wielandt, 'Main Trends', p. 710. The Shīʿī tradition has generally remained more interested in dynamic rational thought, particularly through continued engagement with Mulla Sadra (d. 1050/1640). See Rizvi, '"Only the Imam Knows Best"', pp. 487–88.

7 I use the term 'world' to refer to everything except God, as found in the *kalām* tradition. See Dgheim, *Mawsūʿa muṣṭalaḥāt ʿilm al-kalām al-islāmī*, vol. 1, p. 758. Also see the definition of Husserl: 'The World is the totality of objects that can be known through experience, known in orderly theoretical thought on the basis of direct present experience'. Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 10. This idea of 'universal experienceability' is important for some of the philosophical and theological positions that I advance. See pages 64, 130, 188.

These conditions would seem to require a unique and renewed programme of philosophical theology. Yet at least in the first half of the twentieth century, the confidence that one could speak about God and His attributes was largely lost within Western philosophy.[8] A number of reasons can be given for this: the prominence of atheism, especially after the horrors of war; the demand of logical positivism for meaning to be defined by what can be measured empirically; and a post-Kantian preoccupation with the limits of human thought.[9] In many ways, such scepticism reflected the slow loss of confidence in the comprehensive metaphysical systems that undergirded the investigations of earlier thinkers.[10]

In Islamic thought, for over a century there have been calls to develop a *kalām jadīd* (renewed theology), which is fit for the conditions of modernity.[11] Arguably, however, a significant part of this movement has aimed to provide accessible theological writing suitable for wider consumption by a modern literate public.[12] Laudable as such educational efforts may be, they do not deal with the more fundamental question of reconciling the premodern *kalām* tradition in all of its subtlety with the considerable resources of modern theological and philosophical thought, as represented by the mainly European and North American tradition. An attempt to achieve such a synthesis is found in Muhammad Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930). The exceptional nature of that text points to the rarity of such integrative approaches by Muslim thinkers.

While my own project differs in many ways from that of Iqbal, I am convinced that there remains a real need for theological work that returns to the basic questions of epistemology, metaphysics, God's nature and His attributes from the twin lights of a robust *kalām* tradition and modern thought. But my present effort to put forward a contemporary Islamic philosophical

8 Flint and Rea, 'Introduction', pp. 1–2. In this book, I write God for the proper name Allāh and use the grammatically masculine translation and capitalisation of His pronouns. I judge this to be the most effective way to communicate my theological ideas to a broad audience, while retaining a close rendering of scriptural language.

9 See Murray and Rea, 'Philosophy and Christian Theology'; Wolterstorff, 'How Philosophical Theology Became Possible', p. 157.

10 David Trenery provides the following useful definition for the concept of a comprehensive metaphysical system: 'A set of ontological and ethical presuppositions which are taken to encompass and explain the nature of the universe of which our species is a part, and which also provide a framework for human practical reasoning and action.' See Trenery, *Alasdair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck, and the Nature of Tradition*, p. 1.

11 For a recent expression of this idea, see al-Ghursī, *Taḥqīq masāʾil muhimmāt min ʿilm al-tawḥīd wa-l-ṣifāt*, pp. 25–27. Despite his words, al-Ghursī's text remains within the theological categories of the late classical tradition.

12 Aspects of the background to this phenomenon are considered in Kurzman, 'Introduction', pp. 8–10.

theology is placed in a double bind by the reservations within Western philosophy and Islamic theology. I need to argue for the relevance of Islamic theology to the philosophy of religion as well as the acceptance of the tools of contemporary philosophy within *kalām*.

The astonishing recent flourishing of Christian philosophical theology within the Western analytic tradition has opened the door wide for the first of these.[13] As Nicholas Wolterstorff argues, while the earlier mode of analytic philosophy depended on a stance of classical foundationalism – that any belief, to be rationally held, must be justified by reference to indubitable truths[14] – such a perspective is beset with difficulties.[15] In fact, it is difficult to establish the foundationalist theory of justification itself on this basis.[16] The field remains in what Wolterstorff terms a state of 'dialogic pluralism', in which philosophers, whether theists, atheists, or others, are free to treat their starting commitments as rationally held first principles.[17] Recent work in Christian philosophical theology has not just considered questions of God's nature that are largely shared with other theists, but have dealt philosophically with religiously specific doctrines, such as incarnation and atonement.[18] There has also been a return to taking seriously the medieval Christian theological tradition as a philosophically fruitful source for thinking about God.[19] There is no principled argument available to preclude Muslim scholars from joining this conversation on equivalent grounds. That so few have done so must reflect mainly non-philosophical factors.

The point of departure for this book is the exploration of one such kind of enquiry.[20] I take a distinct tradition of *kalām*, the school of thought inaugurated by the Transoxianan theologian Abū Mānṣūr al-Māturīdī

13 The continental tradition, while never embracing atheism as enthusiastically as early-twentieth-century analytic philosophy, seems to remain wary about theology that does not stay within the phenomenologically accessible world of the human being. Flint and Rea, 'Introduction', pp. 2–3.

14 A more technical definition of foundationalism can be provided as follows: an epistemological system in which all non-basic propositions are inferred from basic propositions for the purpose of providing certainty. See Williams, 'Is Aquinas a Foundationalist?' p. 33.

15 Wolterstorff, 'How Philosophical Theology Became Possible', pp. 160, 163.

16 See Hasan and Fumerton, 'Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification'; Oppy, 'Natural Theology', pp. 24–25.

17 Wolterstorff, 'How Philosophical Theology Became Possible', pp. 165–66. See also Ross, *Philosophical Theology*, p. 32.

18 Flint and Rea, 'Introduction', p. 4.

19 Freddoso, 'Introduction', pp. 1–2.

20 The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* distinguishes between enquiry (to ask) and inquiry (to investigate) in British English. Stevenson, *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 1391. I follow Alasdair MacIntyre in using enquiry in a semi-technical sense of systematic reasoned investigation, a usage presumably borrowed from David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

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(d. 333/944),[21] and through a close reading of his epistemological writing argue that, unlike later members of the theological school bearing his name, he should not be understood as a foundationalist. I see him as a non-foundationalist, presaging modern philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Hans-Georg Gadamer and especially Alasdair MacIntyre, whom I use to argue for the significance, or even necessity, of self-consciously constituting one's rational activity within a tradition of thought and to justify my focus on the Māturīdī school for my own theological proposals.

The theological consequences of al-Māturīdī's epistemic position explain why I see his work as so useful for my own project of *kalām jadīd*. I propose that, in meta-epistemological terms, we can draw the distinction between an open model of theology and a closed one. An open theology is characterised by a receptiveness to diverse sources in its theological structure, prioritising meaning above systematic, foundationalist proof. This is exemplified by al-Māturīdī's reception of the prevailing rational discourses of his day and constitutes a methodology that I follow in the present text with respect to contemporary thought.[22] A closed theology excludes concepts that cannot be justified foundationalistically, sacrificing total theological meaning to secure its system. This, I will suggest, is the programme in which classical-era Māturīdīs were engaged and explains why they filtered out some of al-Māturīdī's distinctive concepts and methods – ones that I think are crucial to revisit today.[23] Moreover, the continuance of this aspect of the classical foundationalist approach in modernity can help to explain why the *kalām jadīd* movement has been underwhelming and why constructive philosophical theology has not seemed relevant to many Muslim theologians. Once it is shown that there is room to work from a non-foundationalist epistemology, the door is opened to a conception of the *kalām* tradition that is self-reflective about its own contingency and thus receptive to overt dialogue and development.[24]

This is not the only time that a reader of this book will find my interpretation of al-Māturīdī's position diverging from the received opinion of

21 Transoxiana, in Arabic *mā warāʾ al-nahr* (lit. what lies beyond the river), is the name for a region of Central Asia east of the Oxus River centred on modern-day Uzbekistan. The name al-Māturīdī denotes someone from Māturīd (or Māturīt), a village in or near Samarqand, a major city of the region. See al-Damanhūrī, *Sadd al-thughūr bi-sīrat ʿalam al-hudā*, p. 101. For maps of Samarqand and Transoxiana that indicate the extent of settlement in the fourth/tenth century, see Kennedy, *An Historical Atlas of Islam*, pp. 40–41.

22 This can be compared to Christian constructive theology, such as that proposed by Gordon D. Kaufman. See, for instance, his book *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (1981).

23 I am grateful to Arnold Yasin Mol whose comments have contributed greatly to my expression of this point.

24 See Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, pp. 39–40.

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later figures in his tradition. My approach to a given theological question in the pages that follow is always to return first to the difficult, yet rewarding, words of al-Māturīdī before branching out to consider select later figures and how their ideas may confirm, explain, develop or even conflict with his. The power of al-Māturīdī's fundamental method for theologising about God and its centrality for the present project deserve further comment here. The core theological problem raised within this book is how finite human beings within the world can use language to speak rationally about the transcendent divine. Al-Māturīdī's insight is to argue that God must be discussed through analogy with the creation in certain circumstances, for instance, when affirming substantive attributes such as His knowledge and speech, while applying strict limits to avoid anthropomorphising Him. This procedure preserves the possibility of human language, and therefore revelation, to speak about the divine nature. Yet in other cases, God's utter transcendence is affirmed, such that He is spoken of in contrast to the created order.[25] Crucially, within al-Māturīdī's system the world is always amenable to a rational analysis that provides indications towards God through one of these two kinds of inference. This is what makes a systematic theology possible.

The scholars that followed in al-Māturīdī's wake brought new arguments and, in some places, even adjusted his conclusions, but the boundaries of their enquiries were shaped by his analysis. It is my intention to place this constellation of ideas from the Māturīdī tradition in conversation with contemporary philosophical and theological thought, to see how well it holds up and what further modifications may be required. As MacIntyre has so keenly pointed out, it is only through continued testing and verification against the best that rivals can offer that a tradition of enquiry retains its vibrancy.[26]

Both the historical and philosophical dimensions of the book should be framed in the light of the specific audiences whom I seek to address. In one sense this book is a work of intellectual history. Within the specific theological themes that I cover, I aim to build on existing modern scholarship, such as that of Ulrich Rudolph, Mustafa Cerić and J. Meric Pessagno, to provide advances in the reconstruction of al-Māturīdī's system on its own terms.[27] I also pay attention to related discourses in the subsequent centuries and so contribute, albeit in a necessarily constrained way, to the study of the development of the Māturīdī tradition, especially in the centuries immediately following al-Māturīdī.

25 See the discussion on pages 74–76.

26 See page 53.

27 Rudolph points to his own work as a necessary precondition for this kind of historical project. See Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology*, pp. 17–18.

For ease of expression, I use the term 'Māturīdī tradition' as inclusive of all figures after Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī who receive the particular tradition of fourth/tenth-century Samarqandī Ḥanafī theology of which he is the most famous representative. I recognise, however, that this moniker was only adopted by members of the tradition much later and that well into the classical era scholars typically saw themselves either as Ḥanafīs or belonging to the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa* (people of precedent and the community). When discussing the fourth/tenth century, I make use of terms such as 'Samarqandī Ḥanafī' to avoid glaring anachronism, while reserving 'Ḥanafī-Māturīdī' for the entire sweep of the theological tradition, before al-Māturīdī and after him. The number and range of Arabic Māturīdī texts of which I make use, including unpublished manuscripts, reflect my recognition of the tradition as a formidable intellectual endeavour that deserves rigorous philological study from its primary sources. Furthermore, in interpreting this tradition, I consider as much secondary scholarship as I can in a range of languages.

Although the historical study of Māturīdism is itself a valuable activity, in this book it serves an auxiliary role to the constructive theological project that I have already introduced. Thus, the function of the above investigations in premodern Islamic theological discourse is to excavate and refine ideas for use in contemporary philosophical theology. Here I engage with recent Islamic theological work from the *kalām jadīd* approach where available, philosophical theology (mainly Christian) and philosophy of religion that includes critical and even sceptical voices. Within specific philosophical areas – such as epistemology, ontology and the philosophy of science and mathematics – I reference work that, even though it may not have been written with a theological application in mind, I feel may be profitably drawn into my project. Such interdisciplinary forays cannot hope to be comprehensive and are not necessarily intended as interventions into their respective fields proper, although I hope that they are respectable. Each such topic, or just one approach to it, is regularly the focus of specialised articles and monographs, which often make only incremental gains on the previous literature. I am attempting to take a synoptic view that will allow me to sketch a way to navigate these various discussions. It may be – and experience tells me it is likely – that further focused study of them would lead to shifts in, and refinements of, my theological position.

The book's structure is loosely symmetrical. It starts with a historical perspective towards theological enquiry and epistemology in Chapter 1, justifying locating my work within a tradition and paying attention to the genesis and development of Māturīdism. I also introduce the major cast of historical characters and some of the important themes to be addressed throughout the book. Attention then shifts in Chapter 2 to

the idea of reason in the world and the elements of epistemology and ontology through which enquiry can be directed towards the transcendent divine. Chapter 3 considers rational arguments for God's existence in the field of natural theology, while Chapter 4, the theological heart of the book, discusses the divine nature as timelessly eternal, metaphysically necessary and possessing substantive attributes. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 look at God's omniscience (*ʿilm*) and wisdom (*ḥikma*), His creative action (*takwīn*), and His speech (*kalām*) and the Qur'an. I there apply the foregoing theological principles to attributes that manifest God's interaction with the world. In the case of wisdom and creative action, I pay attention to eternal attributes that are emphasised by the Māturīdī tradition.

This structure also reflects in some respects the logical order of *kalām* manuals, none more so than al-Māturīdī's *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*. He too begins with reflections upon theological tradition and epistemology, before turning to the world, arguments for God, and His nature and attributes. The latter half of al-Māturīdī's text deals with anthrocentric themes, such as prophecy, fate, faith and human action.[28] In my case, although there is a turning back towards the creation in my study of God's attributes, analysis of the human being falls outside the scope of my investigation. Despite the perpetual significance of questions of theological anthropology and the common practice within contemporary philosophy of religion to discuss them alongside the divine attributes that I cover, I have decided it is best to leave them for later treatment. I am also aware of the implications that this project has for constructive ethics, especially as this book arose from reflections begun in my previous work *The Qur'an and the Just Society*. As premodern Muslim scholars writing in the fields of *kalām* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* were aware, Islamic ethics derives its meaning and justification from its theological grounding. Hence, the renewal of theology is a precondition for ethics. Such questions cross back over into the territory of hermeneutics that was a major part of my prior book, but they emerge here only tangentially. My focus is on the elaboration of a contemporary Māturīdī theology, and that is task enough for a single monograph.

A few notes for the reader are in order. I reference the Arabic text of the Qur'an according to the Cairo edition and use the translation of M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, unless the portion quoted is very short or the context requires a different interpretation. Honorifics for the Prophet Muḥammad and other revered figures within the Islamic tradition should be taken as implicit. This book is best read linearly from beginning to end, perhaps with occasional

28 There are some similarities with the arrangement of Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*. See McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's* Summa theologiae, p. 68.

jumping around to follow up on cross-references (written as 'see page . . .', rather than 'p.' for citations). But those mainly interested in contemporary philosophical theology may want to focus on the latter parts of each chapter and section where these discussions are usually located (historians of *kalām* may want to do the opposite). The arguments in each chapter are designed to build on those that have come before (often the philosophical discussions in Chapter 2), and while I try to recap, I avoid unnecessary repetition. If a reader finds a theological argument in Chapters 3–7 unclear, it may be helpful to turn to my first introduction of the key concepts. Be aware, too, that I do not always understand the terms of *kalām* according to their classical usages within the Māturīdī tradition, and the main text, notes and glossary provide specific explanations when this is the case. One of my arguments in this book is that *kalām* in the hands of al-Māturīdī and the early school of Samarqand is not identical to that later popularised under the name Māturīdī. My own constructive work will often, though not always, favour the approach of the former, while benefitting from the latter, and then arrive at a new distinct theological position after taking modern thought into account.