Ṣifāt al-Dhāt in Al-Ashʿarī's Doctrine of God

and

Possible Christian Parallels

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Introduction

It scarcely needs to be stated that Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl Al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935) is one of the three or four most influential and orthodox thinkers in the history of Islam since the generation of the Prophet and Companions.[1] Ignaz Goldziher refers to him as "this greatest theological authority in orthodox Islam."[2] His doctrine (which he saw simply as a systematic statement of the teachings of the Qur'ān and the Sunna as understood by the earliest Muslim community) gradually overcame rival doctrines like Muʿtazilism until, by the end of the 5th/11th century, Ashʿarite doctrine became recognized as the official orthodoxy of Sunnī Islam. His teaching is generally seen as the embodiment of Islamic orthodoxy – so much so that modern English-language writers on Islam frequently use the term "orthodox" as though it were synonymous with "Ashʿarite."

On the other hand, much of the content of his teaching is relatively unknown to many ordinary Muslims today. Daniel Gimaret has rightly pointed out:

> Of all of the Muslim theologians of the classical era, al-Ashʿarī (d. 935) was, beyond any doubt, the most important. Nevertheless, paradoxically, his doctrine remained very poorly known.[3], [4]

Of course Gimaret's own books[5] have contributed greatly to making the content of al-Ashʿarī's doctrine better-known (particularly to the French-speaking world). But it is still true that much work remains to be done.

One of the central issues at stake in al-Ashʿarī's teaching, and in his refutation of

[1] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and al-Imām al-Shāfiʿī also come to mind.
[2] Ignaz Goldziher, Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law, Andras and Ruth Hamori, transl. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981 [1910]), p. 104.
[3] Daniel Gimaret, La doctrine d'al-Ashʿarī (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1990), cover. «De tous les théologiens musulmans d'époque classique, al-Ashʿarī (m. 935) a été, sans nul doute, le plus important. Or, paradoxalement, sa doctrine restait encore très mal connue. »
[4] All translations from French, German, and Arabic works in this paper are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
[5] Ibid., and also his Les noms divins en Islam (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1988), and his edition of Ibn Fūrak's Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Hasan al-Ashʿarī (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1987), among other publications of Gimaret.

Muʿtazilism, was the question of the divine *ṣifāt* (often translated "attributes"[6]) which are derived from God's "beautiful names" in the Qur'ān, and the relation of these *ṣifāt* to God's essence. If God is Powerful, Knowing and Living, does this mean God has power, knowledge and life? Has God acquired these *ṣifāt* in time, or has God eternally been characterized by them? And if God's power, knowledge and life are eternal, then is God synonymous with that power, knowledge and life, or are they something other than God's essence?

The 6th/12th-century historian of religious doctrines Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī wrote a pithy summary of al-Ashʿarī's answer to these questions, as follows:

> Abū al-Ḥasan [al-Ashʿarī] said: The Creator (exalted is He) is Knowing by virtue of [His] knowledge, Powerful by virtue of [His] power, Living by virtue of [His] life[7]… These *ṣifāt* are eternal, subsisting in His essence (exalted is He) (*qā'ima bi-dhātihī*). One should not say that they are He, nor other than He, nor not He, nor not other than He.[8]

Since the Middle Ages, these ideas (formulated in various ways) have been understood to be the orthodox Islamic statement of who God eternally is. Particularly significant has been the formula that God's *ṣifāt* are "not His essence, nor are they other than He" (*lā dhātuhū wa-lā ghayruhū*), and the idea that they are "eternal realities[9] subsisting in His essence" (*maʿānī azaliyya qā'ima bi-dhātihī*). The pages which follow below in this paper will examine in depth al-Ashʿarī's own words on these questions, and what he meant by those words, and the exegetical reasons in the Qur'ān and Sunna that led him to these conclusions.

Any reader who is familiar with the writings of Christian thinkers from the pre-Islamic

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[6] Cf. discussion below on how best to understand the technical meaning of *ṣifa*.

[7] Al-Shahrastānī's list does not stop at knowledge, power and life. He rightly says that al-Ashʿarī spoke specifically of seven such "*ṣifāt* of God's essence" – knowledge, power, life, word, will, hearing and sight – and that al-Ashʿarī's view on God's permanence (*baqā'*), as a possible eighth *ṣifa* of essence, was ambiguous. Nonetheless al-Ashʿarī's discussion often focuses on the three *ṣifāt* of knowledge, power and life (e.g. chapter 1 of *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, as will be seen below), and then mentions God's word, will, hearing and sight almost as an afterthought.

[8] Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-Nihal, William Cureton, ed. (London: Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts, 1842-1846), vol. 1, p. 68, line 8ff.

[9] Cf. discussion below on how best to understand al-Ashʿarī's technical use of the term *maʿānī*. For now, the translation "realities" should be taken as provisional.

patristic period and from the medieval scholastic period will readily see remarkable parallels between al-Ashʿarī's doctrine on this point and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Al-Ashʿarī's technical use of the terms *ṣifa* and *dhāt* (essence) bears remarkable resemblance to the Cappadocian tradition's distinction between hypostasis (ὑπόστᾰσις) and ousia (οὐσία). Indeed, as I will show below, a variety of medieval writers – Muslim, Christian and Jewish alike – noticed this resemblance and commented on it. This is not to say that there is no difference between the Muslim doctrine of *ṣifāt* and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (though some medieval Muslim writers suggested precisely that), nor that either doctrine can be understood entirely in terms of the other. What this paper seeks to do primarily is to examine in detail what al-Ashʿarī taught about *ṣifāt* and why. Only after this effort to understand al-Ashʿarī's thought in terms of its own, internal, Islamic logic – rooted in the Qurʾān and the Sunna – will it be appropriate to consider the possible relationship of that doctrine to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Defining Terms

Al-Ashʿarī uses a number of technical Arabic terms in discussing these issues. Before attempting to translate his writings into English, one must first consider what he means by these terms. The terms *dhāt*, *nafs*, *ṣifa*, and *maʿnā* are particularly crucial to understanding his thought.

Dhāt and *Nafs*

The first two of these terms are fairly straightforward. The term *dhāt*, as used in Islamic theological writing, is usually translated "essence." This is indeed the sense in which al-Ashʿarī usually uses the term. It should be noted, however, that unlike "essence" the Arabic word *dhāt* does not have the verb "to be" in its etymology, and it can mean simply "self" or "same." Al-Ashʿarī does sometimes use the word *dhāt* to mean simply "self," but usually he uses it with the more technical sense of "essence."

The word *nafs* also means "self" or "same." Al-Ashʿarī sometimes uses *nafs* virtually interchangeably with *dhāt*, as a term for God's "self." The word *nafs* can also mean "soul," of course, but al-Ashʿarī does not use it in that sense in the texts which this paper will consider. In the material below which I quote from al-Ashʿarī's writings, I will normally translate *dhāt* as "essence," and *nafs* as "self."

Sifa

It is not so simple to choose an adequate English equivalent for what al-Ashʿarī means by the term *ṣifa*. *Ṣifa* is often translated in secondary literature as "attribute." It is not unreasonable to use the term "attribute" to refer to God's knowledge, power, will, etc., especially in the sense in which the Muʿtazila used the term *ṣifa*. Nonetheless, al-Ashʿarī (as will be shown below) intended something quite different from the Muʿtazila in his use of the word. In the writings of al-Ashʿarī the term *ṣifa* took on more substantive metaphysical weight than is normally understood by the English word "attribute." And in the context of the issues which are in focus in this paper, I believe that the term "attribute" may be downright misleading because of the very different history of technical usage of the term "attribute" in Latin Christian theological writing.

Richard Frank has insightfully explained this problem:

> The term *ṣifa* or "attribute," as it is normally and often quite exactly rendered, is of so common occurrence in the sources and is so manifestly natural an expression to most contexts in which it occurs that the peculiarly islamic character of the term, and the concept may easily escape notice as one's attention is more forcibly drawn to other idiosyncracies of the texts. One tends to forget that Greek and Latin have no equivalent term that holds a corresponding position of central importance and prominence in the Patristic and Scholastic traditions.[10]

Gimaret, in his book La doctrine d'al-Ashʿarī,[11] demonstrates that Ashʿarite use of the term *ṣifa* intends a very different meaning from Muʿtazilite use of the same term. For the

[10] Richard Frank, Beings and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Muʿtazila in the Classical Period (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), p. 8.
[11] Daniel Gimaret, Doctrine, pp. 235-237 et passim.

Muʿtazila, he says, *ṣifa* = *qawl* (word); it is merely a verbal way of predicating something about God or describing God. For Ashʿarites, he says, *ṣifa* = *maʿnā* =. "an entity residing in the divine essence."[12] Gimaret continues:

> When a Sunnite (i.e. Ashʿarite) theologian speaks of the *ṣifāt Allāh*… the nouns (*qudra, ʿilm, ḥayāt*)… are not mere words for him; they represent real entities – *maʿānī* joined with the divine essence, existing like that essence, eternal like that essence… For A(shʿarī) only positive realities, existent things, may be truly called *ṣifāt Allāh*.[13]

So for Gimaret "entity" or "reality" or "existent thing" might be more accurate translations of *ṣifa* in al-Ashʿarī's writings, even if "attribute" might be accurate in Muʿtazilite writings. However, neither Gimaret nor al-Ashʿarī intends *ṣifa* to mean "separate being," as one might misinterpret a translation like "entity."

One other point should be mentioned as background to understanding the meaning of *ṣifa* in Islamic theological writing. Fairly early in Islamic history Muslim thinkers noted a distinction between the "*ṣifāt* of [God's] essence" (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*) and the "*ṣifāt* of act" (*ṣifāt al-fiʿl*). The same distinction appears also in Christian and Jewish theological writing in semitic languages.

The "*ṣifāt* of essence" are those *ṣifāt* which may be eternally predicated of God, without reference to the temporally created order. The "*ṣifāt* of act" are those *ṣifāt* which may be predicated of God only in reference to God's interaction with creatures. For example God can be properly called "Forgiving" (*ghafūr*) only in relation to some created person who has sinned and needs forgiveness. God's forgiveness is manifest only in time, in relation to creation. So forgiveness is a "*ṣifa* of act." By contrast, God has eternally been "Knowing." Even apart from the creation God knew God's own self, and God foreknew what would be created. Knowledge is

[12] Ibid., pp. 236, 243. «une entité résidant dans l'essence divine»
[13] «Quand un théologien sunnite [i.e. Ashʿarite] parle des *ṣifāt Allāh*… les substantifs (*qudra, ʿilm, ḥayāt*)… ne sont pas pour lui de simple mots, ils représentent des entités réelles, des *maʿānī* conjointes à l'essence divine, existantes comme elle, éternelles comme elle… Pour A[shʿarī] ne sont véritablement *ṣifāt Allāh* que des réalités positives, des existants.»

therefore a "*ṣifa* of essence," in that it has eternally existed in God's essence.

Al-Ashʿarī often uses the unspecified term *ṣifāt* as shorthand for *ṣifāt* of essence. When he speaks of God's *ṣifāt* without specifying which he means, he is virtually always referring specifically to the *ṣifāt* of essence. He repeatedly mentions a list of seven *ṣifāt* of essence: knowledge, power, life, word, will, sight and hearing. When Gimaret says that for al-Ashʿarī the *ṣifāt* are "real entities," "positive realities," "existent things,"[14] Gimaret is also referring specifically to the *ṣifāt* of essence, not to the *ṣifāt* of act.

Joseph Van Ess, in his book Theologie und Gesellschaft, makes an interesting observation about this distinction between *ṣifāt* of essence and of act. He comments that the distinction appeared in Islamic theology and Arab Christian theology during the same time-period. He adds:

> The distinction was important to the Christians because, in contrast to Greek-Western theology, they also considered the hypostases as attributes and in this way could separate these from the remaining divine attributes. [15]

I do not think that it would be accurate to imply that eastern Christians disagreed on this point with their Greek- and Latin-speaking coreligionists (certainly they were not *aware* of any disagreement on it), or that they thought that hypostases were synonymous with what the English theological term "attribute" denotes. Van Ess means simply that Arab Christians thought that the *aqānīm* (hypostases) could rightly be called *ṣifāt*. This only underlines my point that the word "attribute," as understood in Latin Christian theology, does not adequately convey the metaphysical significance intended by the Arabic word *ṣifa*, especially as used by al-Ashʿarī.

To conclude, we have reviewed options for translating *ṣifāt* which include "attributes," "entities," "realities," "existent things," and "hypostases." I think that the word "attributes" does

[14] Ibid. See above. des entités réelles, des réalités positives, des existants

[15] Joseph Van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-1997), vol. IV, p. 437. "Den Christen war die Unterscheidung wichtig, weil sie – im Gegensatz zur griechisch-westlichen Theologie – auch die Hypostasen als Attribute betrachteten und jene auf diese Weise von den übrigen Eigenschaften trennen konnten."

not adequately reflect what al-Ashʿarī intends, and that it could be actually misleading in the context of this paper. "Entities," "realities" and "existent things" risk being misunderstood as implying multiple eternal beings, which al-Ashʿarī would reject as polytheism. And "hypostases" improperly imposes a Christian category onto al-Ashʿarī's thought. Thus I think it best to leave the word *ṣifa* untranslated as a technical term, and to trust that its meaning will be clear enough from the foregoing discussion and from the context of its use in al-Ashʿarī's writing (see below).

Maʿnā

The word *maʿnā*, which al-Ashʿarī uses in asserting that the *ṣifāt* are *maʿānī*, is a notoriously slippery term in Islamic theological writing. Its basic meaning is "meaning," i.e. the referent to which a word refers, but it is used as a technical term in various senses. It can refer to the "underlying reality" or "actual meaning" which underlies a "form." M. Horten proposed translating it as "geistige Realität [spiritual/intellectual/metaphysical reality – perhaps *ḥaqīqa rūḥāniyya*]."[16] J.W. Sweetman defined it as "the reality of a thing, or its entity."[17] Watt proposed that in some places in Islamic theological writing it "might be rendered 'hypostatic quality'."[18]

Richard Frank has written two articles treating this subject in depth. In 1967[19] he argued (contra Wolfson) that *maʿnā* must be understood (especially in Muʿtazilite writings) as referring to an "intrinsic, determinant cause of some real aspect of the being of the subject... a distinct and separate cause of the thing's being-so."[20] I understand him to mean by this that a *maʿnā* is, for example, that causal reality intrinsic in a knower and which causes the knower to be knowing.

[16] M. Horten, "Was bedeutet *Maʿnā* als philosophischer Terminus," ZDMG, 64: 392-396 (1910), cited in H.A Wolfson, "The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity," in The Philosophy of the Kalām (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 115 n. 10.
[17] J. Windrow Sweetman, Islam and Christian Theology (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945-1967), pt I, vol 2, p. 232.
[18] W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought (Edinburgh: the University Press, 1973), p. 287.
[19] Richard M. Frank, "*Al-Maʿnā:* Some Reflections on the Technical Meanings of the Term in the Kalām and Its Use in the Physics of Muʿammar," in Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 87, pp. 248ff., 1967.
[20] Ibid., p. 252.

But writing more recently (32 years later),[21] Frank argues the following:

> *Maʿnā*, which most commonly occurs in the sense of meaning or intention, is frequently employed by the Ashʿarites and Muʿtazilites alike in the sense of 'something' that one has in mind or refers to explicitly or implicitly... It occurs very frequently in the expression '*maʿnā zāidun ʿalā al-ḍāt*' (something distinct from the subject described)... It is thus that '*maʿnā*' is frequently employed as a term for entitative attributes... The basic sense or connotation of '*maʿnā*' here... is that of referent or, if you will, of a 'something' understood as the referent of one of the terms, whether explicit or implicit, of the proposition in question.[22]

Here Frank comes closer to Wolfson's view that *maʿnā* should be translated as "thing."[23]

In light of the foregoing, it seems best in the context of al-Ashʿarī's writings to translate *maʿnā* as either "underlying reality" or "thing" or "something." In order to avoid retaining another untranslated technical term like *ṣifa*, while still wishing to retain some of the ambiguity inherent in the term, and in order to reflect the ordinary sense of "meaning" (*maʿnā*) as the underlying reality which is the referent of a word, I will translate *maʿnā* as "underlying reality." When the reader sees "underlying reality" in the pages which follow below, this can be readily understood as translating *maʿnā*, with reference to the discussion above. Of course al-Ashʿarī does sometimes also use the word *maʿnā* in a nontechnical sense to mean simply "meaning." In places where he does so, I have translated accordingly.

Historical Context

The other background material which must be reviewed before looking at al-Ashʿarī's teaching in his own words is the historical context in which he wrote. This is essential to understanding the significance of what he wrote. One of our best historical sources for the

[21] Richard Frank, "The Ashʿarite Ontology: I Primary Entities," in Arabic Sciences and Philosophy, vol. 9, pp. 163-231 (Cambridge University Press, 1999). I am indebted to Tariq Jaffer for bringing to my attention both of Frank's articles on this subject.
[22] Ibid., pp. 182, 182 n. 46, 214.
[23] H.A. Wolfson, "The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity," in The Philosophy of the Kalām (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 115-116.

doctrines of various Muslim thinkers who preceded al-Ashʿarī is his own book *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*,[24] which is an encyclopedic review of the various sects and teachers present in the Islamic community up to and including his time.

Al-Ashʿarī's doctrine must be seen as a conservative reaction against the sect of the Muʿtazila, who eventually came to be regarded as heretical. Scholars occasionally refer to the Muʿtazila as "liberals," because of the relatively high importance which they attached to reason (in relation to revelation) and because of their metaphorical interpretation of verses in the Qur'ān whose literal interpretation seemed to them to be contrary to reason (e.g. God's having "hands," "taking His seat upon a throne," "descending nightly to the lowest heaven," "weighing our deeds in a scale," etc.). They also insisted that the Qur'ān was created in time, despite a substantial body of ḥadīth (attributed to the Companions) which suggested that it was not. However the Muʿtazila were scarcely "liberal" in the way in which they used the apparatus of the state to persecute those who disagreed with their views. It was they who were responsible for the *Miḥna*, the so-called "Inquisition" of the first half of the 3rd/9th century under the caliph al-Ma'mūn, in which they imprisoned and executed opponents.

Despite the support of the caliphal state, the Muʿtazila did not succeed in carrying popular opinion with them. They were courageously opposed by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), whose rallying-cry was "back to the Qur'ān and the Sunna!" He became a popular hero after his imprisonment under the *Miḥna*. Ibn Ḥanbal insisted that God does really have hands, does take His seat upon a throne, etc., though we do not ask "how" these things are so. He also insisted on the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān. Whereas the Muʿtazilites rejected the idea that God had *ṣifāt* such as knowledge and power in any sense other than a verbal one, Ibn Ḥanbal

[24] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa-Ikhtilāf al-Musallīn, Helmut Ritter, ed., Die Dogmatischen Lehren der Anhænger des Islam, in Biblioteca Islamica, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Devlet Matbaasi, 1929).

insisted that these *ṣifāt* are real in God because the Qur'ān speaks of God's "knowledge" and "power," and not just of God as "Knowing" and "Powerful." Ibn Ḥanbal was seen as embodying a conservative popular reaction, driven by loyalty to the Qur'ān and the Sunna, against the "innovating" Muʿtazila.

Al-Ashʿarī was himself a Muʿtazilite until the age of 40, and he was one of the leading disciples of the most important Muʿtazilite thinker of his day (al-Jubbā'ī). Then, at the age of 40, he underwent a dramatic conversion to the teaching of Ibn Ḥanbal. Unlike Ibn Ḥanbal before him, al-Ashʿarī used the method of dialectical theological discourse (*kalām*) which he had learned from the Muʿtazila, but he turned this method on them to refute their doctrines and to defend the doctrines of Ibn Ḥanbal.

Some scholars have described al-Ashʿarī as representing a "middle-ground" between Muʿtazilism and Ḥanbalism. However, I believe that even a cursory reading of al-Ashʿarī's book *Al-Ibāna ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyāna* clearly shows this to be untrue. More recent scholarship[25] agrees that al-Ashʿarī was fully loyal to Ḥanbalism, and that he was totally opposed to the Muʿtazila. His reasons for believing as he did were exegetical – rooted in the Qur'ān and Sunna – not rationalist. Though he used the rational methods of the Muʿtazila, he did so only to refute what he saw as their pernicious doctrines.

In this context we can trace the historical development of the doctrine of the divine *ṣifāt al-dhāt* and their relation to the divine essence. The main line of development on this question moves from Abū al-Hudhayl through al-Naẓẓām through Ibn Kullāb to al-Ashʿarī.

Abū al-Hudhayl

Abū al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf (d. between 226/840 and 235/850 in extreme old age) was the first speculative theologian of the Muʿtazila. In tracing the historical process of reflection on the

[25] E.g. Gimaret's books, cited above and in the bibliography to this paper.

ṣifāt, Joseph Van Ess begins with Abū al-Hudhayl's exegetical study of the Qur'ān:

> With Abū al-Hudhayl, namely, a major shift takes place. He seems to be the first person to have addressed the problem through a systematic analysis of the qur'ānic data. The Scripture contains... not only "names" of God, but also attributes: In addition to statements like *inna llāh*^{a} *ʿālim*^{u} *ġaib*^{i} *s-samawāt*^{i} *wal-arḍ*... stood others like *qul: innamā l-ʿilm*^{u} *ʿinda llāh* oder *wasiʿa rabbunā kull*^{a} *šai'*^{in} *ʿilm*^{an}. So one was justified in deriving nouns, i.e. the attributes, from the adjectival names. God is "Knowing" could be understood as "God has knowledge." [26]

However in Abū al-Hudhayl's view these *ṣifāt* were identical with God's essence. God has knowledge and power, but God's knowledge and power are the same as God's essence – the same as God's own self. Al-Ashʿarī, in his description of Muʿtazilite doctrine in *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, says the following:

> Their sheikh Abū al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf said, "The knowledge of the Creator (exalted is He) is Himself (*huwa huwa*). And the same is true of His power, His hearing, His sight, His wisdom. He says the same about the rest of the *ṣifāt* of His essence. He used to assert that when one asserts that the Creator is Knowing, one affirms a knowledge which is God, and one denies ignorance of God, and this indicates something known, regardless of whether it exists or will exist. And when one says that the Creator is powerful, one affirms a power which is God, and one denies powerlessness of God, and this indicates something over which power is exercised, whether or not it exists. He says the same about the rest of the *ṣifāt* of essence.[27]

Elsewhere in the same book al-Ashʿarī writes:

> Abū al-Hudhayl said, "He is Knowing by virtue of knowledge which is He. He is Powerful by virtue of power which is He. He is Living by virtue of life which is He… If I say that God is Knowing, I affirm that He has knowledge which is God."[28]

Al-Ashʿarī also makes the intriguing remark that "Abū al-Hudhayl took this doctrine from Aristotle."[29] Whether or not Abu al-Hudhayl's doctrine really was influenced by

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[26] Van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft, pp. 441-442. "Mit Abū l-Hudhail nämlich vollzieht sich eine Wende. Er scheint als erster das Problem durch eine systematische Analyse des koranischen Befundes angegangen zu haben. Die Schrift enthielt… nicht nur „Namen" Gottes, sondern auch Attribute: Neben Aussage wie *inna llāh*^{a} *ʿālim*^{u} *ġaib*^{i} *s-samawāt*^{i} *wal-arḍ*... standen andere wie *qul: innamā l-ʿilm*^{u} *ʿinda llāh* oder *wasiʿa rabbunā kull*^{a} *šai'*^{in} *ʿilm*^{an}. Man war also berechtigt, aus den „Namen," den Adjektiven, die Nomina, d.h. die Attribute, herauszuholen; „Gott ist wissend" ließ sich verstehen als „Gott hat ein Wissen."

[27] Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn, Ritter edition, p. 484, lines 5ff.

[28] Ibid., p. 165, lines 5-8.

[29] Ibid., p. 485, line 7.

Aristotelianism, it is clear that al-Ashʿarī *thought* that the Muʿtazilite doctrine on this point (which al-Ashʿarī rejected) had been influenced by what he considered to be pagan, non-Islamic sources, and not just by the Qur'ān and the Sunna.

Al-Naẓẓām

The Muʿtazilite theologian Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm al-Naẓẓām (d. between 220/835 and 230/845), who was a nephew of Abū al-Hudhayl, generally accepted the basic outline of his uncle's system, but he made one important modification which, in al-Ashʿarī's opinion, moved the Muʿtazila even further away from the traditional doctrine of the Qur'ān and the Sunna.

Van Ess describes as follows al-Naẓẓām's critique of Abū Hudhayl's doctrine and the solution which al-Naẓẓām proposed:

> But now, when one postulates in God not only an act of knowledge, but also an act of will (parallel to *Allāh murīd*), and an act of creation (parallel to *Allāh khāliq*), etc., doesn't this introduce plurality into God? [30]

The Muʿtazila saw themselves as champions of the divine unity. They described themselves as *ahl al-ʿadl wa-l-tawḥīd* – the People of Justice and of Divine Unity. If God possesses knowledge which is eternal, and will which is eternal, etc., that would seem to mean multiple eternal things. And that would seem to compromise the divine unity. Not all Muʿtazilites were persuaded by al-Naẓẓām's argument, but most did follow him on this point. Thus Van Ess writes:

> (Al-Naẓẓām) modified Abū al-Hudhayl's model in a way which became the standard for the Muʿtazilites in Baṣra and Baghdād: he replaced the statement "God is Knowing by virtue of Knowledge which is identical with himself" with "God is Knowing through himself." He retained the remainder of Abū al-Hudhayl's framework.[31]

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[30] Van Ess, vol. IV, p. 442. "Bringt man nicht, wenn man nunmehr nicht nur einen Wissensakt, sondern auch einen Willensakt (parallel zu *Allāh*^{u} *murīd*), einen Schöpfungsakt (parallel zu *Allāh*^{u} *ḫāliq*) usw. bei Gott postuliert, doch eine Vielheit in ihn hinein? Naẓẓām formulierte darum anders: Gott is nicht wissend durch einen Wissensakt, den er hat, sondern er ist wissend durch sich selber (*bi-nafsihī*)."

[31] Ibid., vol. III, p. 399. "An dem Modell Abū l-Hudhail's nahm [al-Naẓẓām] jene wichtige Änderung vor, die für die Mehrzahl der Muʿtaziliten in Baṣra und in Baġdād maßgeblich wurde: er ersetzte die Aussage „Gott ist wissend

Al-Ashʿarī describes post-Naẓẓām Muʿtazilite doctrine as follows:

> Most of the Muʿtazila and the Khārijites, and many of the Murji'a, and some of the Zaydites say that God is Knowing and Powerful and Living by virtue of Himself, not by virtue of knowledge or power or life. They say that God has knowledge only in the sense that He is Knowing.[32]

Al-Ashʿarī further describe's al-Naẓẓām's doctrine as follows:

> As for al-Naẓẓām, he denies knowledge, power, life, hearing, sight and the *ṣifāt* of essence, and he says that God is eternally knowing, living, powerful, hearing, seeing, and permanent by virtue of Himself, not by virtue of knowledge or power or life or hearing or sight or permanence. He says the same about the rest of the *ṣifāt* of essence. He used to say, "When I affirm that the Creator is Knowing, Powerful, Living, Hearing, Seeing, and Permanent, I affirm His essence, and I deny of Him ignorance, powerlessness, death, deafness, and blindness." He says the same about the rest of the *ṣifāt* of essence.[33]

Thus God's knowledge and power, of which the Qur'ān speaks, do not have any real existence. To say "God has knowledge" is simply a circumlocution for "God is Knowing." God's knowledge and power, then, are nothing more than verbal terms used as a way of speaking. They have no underlying reality. To traditionalists like Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal this sounded shockingly like "explaining away" (*ta'wīl*) difficult-to-understand statements in the Qur'ān, rather than accepting at face value what God's word has said.

Ibn Kullāb

The theory of al-Naẓẓām had at least two serious problems. The first, noted above, is exegetical. The Qur'ān seems to most readers to speak of God's knowledge, power, word/command, etc. as real things that God has. And, in al-Ashʿarī's opinion (as will be seen below) it even ascribes to God's knowledge and word some kind of agency in creation, when it says that God creates things by the agency of God's word (*qawl*) "Be!," and when it says that the

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aufgrund eines Wissenaktes, der mit ihm identisch ist" durch „Gott ist wissend durch sich selber"… Das übrige Gerippe von Abū l-Hudhail's Theorie behielt er bei."

[32] Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn, Ritter edition, p. 164, lines 14ff.

[33] Ibid., p. 486, lines 10ff.

mountains are established by God's command, and when it says that God "sends things down by His knowledge." The Muʿtazila had to explain away these kinds of verses by treating them as metaphorical, just as they treated as metaphorical other verses which speak of God's hands, God's sitting on a throne, God's descending to the lowest heaven, God's weighing of our deeds in a scale, etc.

The second problem with the theories of both Abū al-Hudhayl and al-Naẓẓām is logical. If God's knowledge, power and life are all identical with God's essence, then they are identical with each other. They are simply three different ways of speaking about the same thing. Thus, as al-Ashʿarī points out, the Muʿtazila are forced to claim that God's knowledge is alive, that God's power knows things, that God's life exercises power, etc. This seems logically absurd.[34]

One of the more prominent thinkers who argued publicly against the Muʿtazilite doctrine on this point was ʿAbdallāh ibn-Saʿīd ibn Kullāb (d. shortly after 240/854). He was a contemporary of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and is said to have argued against the Muʿtazila at the court of the caliph al-Maʾmūn.[35] This would mean that he risked his life or freedom in doing so, and it would also make him an ally of Ibn Ḥanbal.

W. Montgomery Watt says the following about Ibn Kullāb:

> There were also Mutakallimūn [theologians] during the ninth century whose doctrinal position was not far removed from that of the Ḥanbalites and Ḥanafites. The most influential seems to have been Ibn Kullāb, who died shortly after 854, and who was remembered for his elaboration of the doctrine of the attributes (*ṣifāt*) of God. For a time there was a group of Sunnite[36] Mutakallimūn known as the Kullābiyya, and it was apparently to this group that al-Ashʿarī attached himself when he abandoned the Muʿtazilites.[37]

It is now realized that there were forms of Sunnite Kalām before al-Ashʿarī, notably among

[34] Though perhaps on this point John of Damascus's concept of "perichoresis" (2nd/8th century) might be seen as a way of defending the Muʿtazilite view.
[35] W. Montgomery Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought (Edinburgh: the University Press, 1973), p. 287.
[36] By "Sunnite" Watt means loyal to the kind of traditionalist, anti-Muʿtazilite beliefs championed by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and others like him.
[37] W. Montgomery Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, second edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), pp. 58-59.

> the Kullābiyya… and it is probable that on his 'conversion' al-Ashʿarī attached himself to the Kullābiyya… It was possibly nearly a century later before this group of theologians began to think of themselves as Ashʿarites, and to be so regarded by others.[38]

Richard Frank goes further, describing al-Ashʿarī and his school as "descended from" Ibn Kullāb and as "tracing its origins to" Ibn Kullāb.

It seems to me that Watt and Frank may be overstating somewhat the degree of al-Ashʿarī's dependence on Ibn Kullāb. In al-Ashʿari's writings which remain extant today it is to Ibn Ḥanbal, not Ibn Kullāb, that al-Ashʿarī eagerly professes his loyalty. True, he speaks of Ibn Kullāb's ideas in positive terms, but the evidence of al-Ashʿarī's extant writings suggest to me that he would have preferred the label "Ḥanbalī" over the label "Kullābī."

Nevertheless Ibn Kullāb did influence al-Ashʿarī and his intellectual descendants in their view of the *ṣifāt* by providing the verbal formula which expressed in one pithy phrase the idea that al-Ashʿarī saw as being implicit in Ibn Ḥanbal's thought. Watt writes: "Ibn-Kullāb's chief contribution to Kalām, however, was his elaboration of the doctrine of the attributes (*ṣifāt*) of God… These attributes were 'not God and not other than God'."[39]

Most Muʿtazila, it will be recalled, under the influence of al-Naẓẓām, asserted that God does not have knowledge, power, word, etc., except in a strictly verbal sense. In this view, the Qur'ān's references to God's knowledge, power, word, etc. did not refer to underlying realities, but were nothing more than circumlocutions for speaking of God as the Knowing One, the Powerful One, the Speaking One. For if these *ṣifāt* were realities other than God's essence, the Muʿtazila reasoned, and if they were eternal, then there would have to be multiple eternal beings, which would be polytheism. The problem with this theory was that it seemed to most people to be exegetically unfaithful to the Qur'ān, and that it seemed to contain logical inconsistencies.

[38] Ibid., p. 64.
[39] Watt, Formative Period, p. 287.

Van Ess describes as follows Ibn Kullāb's role in the reaction against this theory:

> The countermodel first takes shape with Ibn Kullāb; later the determining spokesperson is al-Ashʿarī. For Ibn Kullāb the attributes were no longer identical with God, but rather were "moments" (*maʿānī*) in his essence, which could lay claim to an existence of their own… Thus Ibn Kullāb landed on the formula that they were "neither identical with God nor not-identical with him."[40]

To say that God's knowledge, power, life, etc. are "not His essence, nor are they other than He," but that they are "underlying realities eternally subsisting in His essence"[41] is to embrace the paradox that seems inherent in the Qur'ānic texts on the subject. This paradox may be beyond the finite capacity of the human mind to fully understand. But, then, Ibn Ḥanbal and other traditionalists did not hesitate to say that there are certain things (like God's hands, God's sitting on the throne, etc.) which we affirm to be true because the Qur'ān asserts them, even though we do not know "how" they are true, nor do we ask. God is infinite, and we are finite. It is not given to us to understand about God everything that God understands about God's own self. The principle of *tawqīf* asserts that we must not presume to know about God anything more than exactly what has been revealed about God in the Qur'ān and the Sunna.

Van Ess makes an interesting observation at this point:

> Thus Ibn Kullāb landed on the formula that they were "neither identical with God nor not-identical with him." This was the way in which Christians for ages had described the relationship between the divine essence and the hypostases. Ibn Kullāb opened himself up thereby to the suspicion of having been influenced by Christians. Nonetheless, even if this was at all true, it was a polemical oversimplification. The formula was quite at home in Islamic theology. [42]

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[40] Van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft, vol. IV, pp. 443-444. "Das Gegenmodell nimmt zum erstenmal Gestalt an bei Ibn Kullāb, der entscheidende Wortführer ist später al-Aš'arī. Für Ibn Kullāb waren die Attribute nich mehr identisch mit Gott, sondern „Momente" (*maʿānī*) in seinem Wesen, die ein eigenes Sein beanspruchen können… Ibn Kullāb landete darum bei der Formel, daß sie „weder identisch mit Gott noch nicht-identisch mit ihm" seien.„

[41] See below for where Ibn Kullāb said this and al-Ashʿarī agreed.

[42] Van Ess, p. 444. "Ibn Kullāb landete darum bei der Formel, daß sie „weder identisch mit Gott noch nich-identisch mit ihm" seien. Auf diese Weise hatten die Christen seit je das Verhältnis zwischen dem göttlichen Wesen und den Hypostasen umschrieben; Ibn Kullāb setzte sich darum dem Verdacht aus, von ihnen beeinflußt zu sein. Jedoch war dies, wenn es überhaupt stimmte, eine polemische Verkürzung. Die Formel war in der islamischen Theologie längst heimisch."

I agree with Van Ess here. Ibn Kullāb's formula "not His essence, nor other than He" was deeply rooted in Islamic thought and in Qur'ānic exegesis, as I believe is evident from the material I have reviewed above. In the review below of al-Ashʿarī's own writings this should become even clearer. One need not to resort to non-Islamic influences to explain this statement.

Al-Ashʿarī himself summarized Ibn Kullāb's teaching as follows:

> He used to say, "The underlying reality of 'God is Knowing' is that He has knowledge. And the underlying reality of 'He is Powerful' is that He has power. And the underlying reality of 'He is Living' is that He has life. The same is true of statements about the rest of His names and *ṣifāt*." He used to say that the names of God and His *ṣifāt* of His essence are not God, nor are they other than He (*lā hiya Allāh wa-lā hiya ghayruhū*), but that they are subsistent in God (*qā'ima bi-Allāh*).[43]
>
> The *ṣifāt* of essence… do not subsist in themselves (*lā taqūmu bi-anfusihā*): rather they are subsistent in God (*qā'ima bi-Allāh*). [Ibn Kullāb] asserted… that His *ṣifāt* are not He and not other than He. The same is true of the statement about the *ṣifāt*… that [God's] knowledge is not [God's] power, nor is the former something other than the latter. The same is true of the rest of the *ṣifāt*.[44]

It was in the context of this discussion that al-Ashʿarī underwent his conversion from Muʿtazilism to the traditionalism of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. This is the historical background and debate that provide the context for understanding al-Ashʿarī's own statements about God's *ṣifāt* and their relation to the divine essence.

Al-Ashʿarī's Doctrine, in His Own Words

After al-Ashʿarī's death, his "school of thought" gradually became the dominant orthodoxy of Sunnī Islam. In the process, many of his ideas were developed and modified by his successors. As a result, ideas are sometimes associated with his name which he himself may have never formulated. A good example of this would be his doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān. He certainly did teach this. But in succeeding centuries the discussion of this doctrine

[43] Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn, Ritter edition, p. 169, lines 10ff.
[44] Ibid., p. 546, lines 8ff.

became much more detailed, with debate focused on whether the paper and ink in the physical book are created, and whether the sounds brought forth by the human tongue in reciting it are created. Al-Ashʿarī was cited in support of one or another position on questions which he himself may have never even considered.

In what follows below I hope, by giving the reader direct access to al-Ashʿarī's own words, to minimize the danger of falling into the same trap myself. In particular, since the next section of the paper *after* this one will consider the sensitive question of possible parallels between al-Ashʿarī's doctrine and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, I think it is especially important to give the reader substantial undiluted material from the primary sources.

The chief primary sources available today on al-Ashʿarī's thought are five books/treatises from his pen:

1) *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa-Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn*,
2) *Al-Ibāna ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyāna*,
3) *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ fī al-Radd ʿalā Ahl al-Zaygh wa-l-Bidaʿ*,
4) *Risāla ilā Ahl al-Thaghr fī Bāb al-Abwāb*, and
5) *Risālat Istiḥsān al-Khawḍ fī ʿIlm al-Kalām*.

In addition to these, Daniel Gimaret has argued persuasively (see below) that Ibn Fūrak's book *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī* should be viewed as an excellent primary source on al-Ashʿarī's thought.

I have read through each of these six books/treatises and have sought to cull from them all that al-Ashʿarī says in them on the questions of interest in this paper. In only one of the six (*Risālat Istiḥsān al-Khawḍ fī ʿIlm al-Kalām*) did I find nothing directly relevant to the issues of the divine *ṣifāt* and their relation to the divine essence.

Rather than analyzing al-Ashʿarī's ideas in my own words, and running the risk of falling into the trap mentioned above, I will provide the reader with lengthy verbatim quotations from

al-Ashʿarī in his own words, with only minimal analysis. The main exceptions are those places where there is need to summarize a long argument for reasons of space, or where I omit an argument that he has already made elsewhere. Then at the end I will try to summarize what I understand to be the main points of al-Ashʿarī's teaching, and the reader can judge whether I have summarized accurately. All translations from Arabic works in this paper are my own. In some cases, where published English or French translations exist, I have consulted those translations.[45] However, the translation decisions in this paper, and the responsibility for any errors that result, remain my own.

Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa-Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn

This book, as noted above, is primarily al-Ashʿarī's encyclopedic analysis of the views of *other* Muslim sects and teachers, not those of al-Ashʿarī himself. We have already seen his analysis of the doctrines of Abū al-Hudhayl and al-Naẓẓām. In his analysis of Ibn Kullāb we saw a clue to al-Ashʿarī's own views. The main clue, though, to al-Ashʿarī's own views in *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* is found in the chapter which he titles "The Teaching of the People of the Ḥadīth and the Sunna."[46] Here he is essentially summarizing the teaching of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, and he shows his own agreement by concluding this chapter with the words "This is our teaching."[47] This chapter is sometimes referred to as al-Ashʿarī's "Credo." It is parallel to a similar "Credo" chapter in *Al-Ibāna ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyāna*.

Among the affirmations of the "People of the Ḥadīth and the Sunna" are the following:

> [They confess] that the names of God should not be said to be something other than God, as the Muʿtazila and the Khawārij say. They confess that God (lofty is He) has knowledge, as He says, "He sent it down by His knowledge (Q 4:164)," and as He says, "No female

[45] See bibliography at the end of this paper.
[46] Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn, Ritter edition, pp. 290-297. There are a few other places in the book which he labels as "teaching of the people of truth" and other similar labels, but the material which directly addresses the questions in which this paper is interested are in the chapter in pp. 290-297.
[47] Ibid., p. 297, line 8.

becomes pregnant nor gives birth except by His knowledge (Q 35:12)." They affirm hearing and sight, and they do not deny them of God as do the Muʿtazila. They affirm that God has strength (*quwwa*), as He says, "Do they not see that God, who created them, is mightier than they in strength? (Q 41:14)."

Al-Ibāna ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyāna[48]

This book contains a similar "Credo" titled "Chapter on Making Clear the Teaching of the People of Truth and of the Sunna." The chapter explicitly expresses loyalty to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal by name. At the beginning of this chapter[49] he says that this is "our teaching, which we teach, and our religion, which we profess." He goes on to say:

> [We hold] that whoever claims that "God's names are other than He" is in error. [We hold] that God has knowledge, as He says [Q 4:166], "He sent it down by His knowledge," just as He says [Q 35:11], "No female becomes pregnant or gives birth except by His knowledge." We affirm that God has hearing and sight, and we do not deny this as the Muʿtazila and the Jahmiyya and the Khawārij have done. And we affirm that God has strength (*quwwa*), as He says [Q 41:15], "Did they not see that God, who created them, is mightier than they in strength?" And we say that God's word (*kalām*) is uncreated, and that He has not created anything without saying to it, "Be!" as He says [Q 16: 40], "Rather Our saying (*qawl*) to a thing, if we want it, is to say, 'Be!' and it is."[50]

Later in the book al-Ashʿarī has a chapter on the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān as God's word. This also contains material relevant to the questions with which this paper is concerned:

> If someone asks for proof that the Qur'ān is God's uncreated word (*kalām*), we say to him that the proof of that is His saying (mighty and glorious is He) [Q 30:25], "Among His signs is that the heavens and the earth are established by His command." The command (*amr*) of God is His word (*kalām*) and His utterance (*qawl*). Since He commanded them to be established, and they were established and do not fall, their being established is by His command. And He says [Q 7:54], "Do not the creation and the command belong to Him?" Everything He has created is included in "the creation."…So when He says, "Does not the creation belong to Him?" this is referring to all of creation. And when He says, "and the command," He is referring to a command which is something other than all of creation. So what we have described proves that God's command is not created.[51]
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> Another proof: Among the proofs from God's Book that His word is uncreated is His

[48] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, "Kitāb al-Ibāna," in Al-Rasā'il al-Sabʿa fī al-ʿAqā'id (Hayderabad, Deccan: Maṭbaʿat Jamʿiyyat Dā'irat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1948).
[49] Ibid., p. 5.
[50] Ibid., p. 6, lines 11ff.
[51] Ibid., p. 19.

> saying (mighty and glorious is He) [Q 16:40], "Rather Our saying to a thing, if we want it, is to say, 'Be!', and it is." So if the Qur'ān were created, then "Be!" would have to be said to it, and it would be. But if God (mighty and glorious is He) were saying "Be!" to His utterance (*qawl*), then the utterance would have an utterance. And this would necessitate one of two things: 1) either that the matter be interpreted to mean that God's utterance is uncreated, or 2) every utterance would occur by virtue of another utterance *ad infinitum*, and this is absurd. Since this is absurd, it is solid and firmly-established that God (mighty and glorious is He) has an uncreated utterance.[52]

Pages 27-33 are an entire chapter which simply lists one ḥadīth after another in support of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān.

Kitāb al-Lumaʿ fī al-Radd ʿalā Ahl al-Zaygh wa-l-Bida ʿ[53]

Kitāb al-Lumaʿ affirms the same doctrines as the *Ibāna*, but its style is very different. The *Ibāna* was very likely written for a traditionalist audience, which might have been suspicious of al-Ashʿarī's Muʿtazilite background. The argumentation in the *Ibāna* is therefore primarily exegetical – from the Qur'ān and ḥadīth – rather than emphasizing dialectical reasoning. By contrast, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* may have been written for a Muʿtazilite audience (or at least an audience of *mutakallimīn*). He uses their method of dialectical reasoning to refute Muʿtazilite doctrines. Nonetheless the exegetical/Qur'ānic element is also prominent in *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*. Gimaret writes, "Of al-Ashʿarī's own works, which were considerable, alas very few have survived. Of the few that do remain, indisputably the most precious is the *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*."[54]

In the opening paragraphs of the book al-Ashʿarī seeks to prove the existence of God and the unity of God. Then, in paragraphs 13-14,[55] he argues that the wise works which order the universe show that God is knowing, and that they must have been produced by a being who is

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[52] Ibid., p. 20, lines 2ff.
[53] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, The Theology of Al-Ashʿarī: The Arabic texts of al-Ashʿarī's *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* and *Risālat Istihsān al-Khawḍ fī ʿIlm al-Kalām,* with briefly annotated translations, and appendices containing material pertinent to the study of al-Ashʿarī. Richard McCarthy, ed., Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953.
[54] Gimaret, Doctrine, p. 9. "De l'oeuvre même d'A[shʿarī], qui fut considérable, très peu, hélas, a survécu. Du peu qui subsiste, la pièce la plus précieuse est incontestablement le *K[itāb] al-Lumaʿ*."
[55] Page 10, McCarthy edition.

also powerful and living. Then he continues:

> If someone says, "Do you say that God (exalted is He) has eternally been Knowing, Powerful, Hearing, Seeing?" we say, "That is what we say." If someone then says, "What is the proof of that?" we say, "The proof of that is that the Living One, if He were not Knowing, would be characterized by the opposite of knowledge, such as ignorance or doubt or other defects. If the Creator (exalted is He) were eternally Living but not knowing, He would be characterized by the opposite of knowledge, such as ignorance or doubt or other defects. If He were eternally characterized by the opposite of knowledge, then it would be impossible for Him to know [anything]; for this opposite of knowledge, if it is eternal, could not cease to exist. And if that could not cease to exist, then it would not be possible for Him to perform wise works. Since He has performed such works, this proves that He is Knowing. It is solid and firmly-established that He has eternally been Knowing, since it is impossible that He should have been eternally characterized by the opposite of knowledge.[56]
>
> "In the same way, if He were eternally Living but not powerful, He would have to have been eternally powerless, characterized by the opposite of power. If His powerlessness were eternal, it would be impossible that He should exercise power or that acts should originate from him. In the same way, if He were eternally Living but not hearing and not seeing, He would have eternally been characterized by the opposite of hearing (such as deafness and other defects) and by the opposite of sight (such as blindness and other defects). But it is inconceivable to speak of defects in the Creator, since they are marks of temporality. So what we have said proves that God (exalted is He) has eternally been Knowing, Powerful, Hearing and Seeing."[57]
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> If someone says, "Why do you say that the Creator (exalted is He) has knowledge by virtue of which He knows?" we say, "Because wise works, just as they come only from someone knowing among us, likewise occur among us only from someone who has knowledge. If the works do not prove the knowledge of the person among us from whom they come, then neither do they prove that the person among us from whom they come is knowing. If they were to prove that the Creator (exalted is He) is Knowing (by analogy with their proving that we are knowing), but if they were to fail to prove that He has knowledge (by analogy with their proving that we have knowledge), then one could say that they prove our knowledge but do not prove that we are knowing. And if this cannot be said, then neither can the statement of our questioner."[58]
>
> If someone says, "You do not deny, do you, that a wise act proves that a human being has knowledge which is something other than he, just as you said that it proves [the existence of] knowledge?" we say, "If a wise act proves that a human being has knowledge, that does not prove that it is other than he, just as, if it proves that he is knowing, that does not prove that he is other than himself (*mutaghāyir*) in any sense at all. And furthermore, the meaning of 'otherness' (*al-ghayriyya*) is that it is possible for one of two things to be

[56] Ibid., p. 11, paragraph 16.
[57] Ibid., p. 11, para. 17.
[58] Ibid., p. 12, para. 18.

separated from the other in some sense. So since we have already proved the eternity of the Creator (exalted is He) and of His knowledge, it is impossible that they should be something other than each other (*ghayrayn*)…"[59]

The proof that God (exalted is He) has power and life is like the proof that God (exalted is He) has knowledge.[60]

Among the things which prove that God (exalted is He) is Knowing by virtue of knowledge is the fact that God must be Knowing either by virtue of Himself or by virtue of knowledge which cannot be Himself. If He were Knowing by virtue of Himself, then His self would be knowledge. For if someone were to say, "God (exalted is He) is Knowing by virtue of a an underlying reality which is other than He, then he would be compelled to admit that that underlying reality is knowledge. It is impossible for knowledge to be knowing, or for the knower to be knowledge, or that God (exalted is He) be synonymous with His *ṣifāt*. Do you not see that the way by which it is known that knowledge is knowledge is that the knower knows by virtue of it? For a human being's power (by which he does not know) cannot be knowledge. Since it is absurd to say that the Creator (exalted is He) is knowledge, it is absurd to say that He is Knowing by virtue of Himself. And if that is absurd, then it is true that he is Knowing by virtue of a knowledge which cannot be Himself… This proof proves the affirmation of all of God's *ṣifāt* of His essence (exalted is He), such as life, power, hearing, sight, and the rest of the *ṣifāt* of the essence.[61]

If someone says, "Why do you say that God (exalted is He) has eternally been Speaking, and that the word (*kalām*) of God (exalted is He) is uncreated?" we say, "We say that because God (exalted is He) says, 'Rather, our utterance (*qawl*) to a thing, if We want it, is to say to it, 'Be!' and it is. (Q 16:40).' So if the Qur'ān were created, then God (exalted is He) would be saying to it 'Be!' But the Qur'ān is His utterance, and it is absurd that His utterance should be spoken to. For this would necessitate a second utterance, and one would have to say about the second utterance and its relation to a third utterance the same thing that was said about the first utterance and its relation to a second utterance. This would result in an endless process of utterances, and that is senseless. If that is senseless, then it is senseless to say that the Qur'ān is created. If one could say that He speaks to His utterance, then one could say that He wills His will, and that is senseless both in our opinion and in theirs."[62]

In chapter 2, paragraphs 34-35,[63] he argues for the eternity of God's word by a process of dialectical reasoning, in which he shows the close relationship between God's knowledge and God's word, and shows that the proof of the eternity of one of them proves eternity of the other.

[59] Ibid., p. 12, para. 20. The implication is that if God and His knowledge were two different beings, and if they were both eternal, then this would violate the unity of God. Al-Ashʿarī is here affirming the "*lā ghayruhū*" (not other than He) part of Ibn Kullāb's formula.
[60] Ibid., p. 13, para. 23.
[61] Ibid., p. 14, paragraphs 25-26. In this paragraph al-Ashʿarī affirms the "*lā dhātuhū*" (not His essence) part of Ibn Kullāb's formula.
[62] Ibid., p. 15, chapter 2, para. 27. "And in theirs," i.e. in the opinion of his Muʿtazilite opponents.
[63] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

Then, in chapter 36,[64] he applies the same proof to the eternity of God's will. The rest of the chapter,[65] argues that this proof does not apply to other things by which God is described, such as God's acts.

Risāla ilā Ahl al-Thaghr fī Bāb al-Abwāb[66]

This treatise is a letter which al-Ashʿarī wrote to a group of Muslims living in a frontier town (Bāb al-Abwāb) on the outskirts of the Muslim empire. Its purpose is to provide them with accurate information about what constitutes sound doctrine, and about the basis for asserting that doctrine, and about how to refute opposing doctrines.

Robert Caspar suggests that this treatise is "of discussible authenticity."[67] The chief authenticity problem is that its preamble ascribes to it an erroneous date. Nonetheless, ʿAbdallāh Shākir al-Junaydī offers a vigorous defense of its authenticity,[68] and I find his argument persuasive. He points out, among other things, that Ibn ʿAsākir viewed it as authentic, that Ibn Taymiyya quoted it repeatedly, that Fuat Sezgin does not question its authenticity, and that its contents agree in doctrine and in language with al-Ashʿarī's other writings which are undisputed.

The book contains two parts. The structure of the second (larger) part is a list of fundamental principles (*uṣūl*), i.e. doctrinal affirmations, on which the early Muslim community (*salaf*) were unanimous (*ajmaʿū*). The following affirmations relate to the concerns of this paper:

> The fourth unanimous affirmation: They were unanimous in affirming God's life (mighty and glorious is He), by virtue of which He has eternally been Living, and [God's] knowledge, by virtue of which He has eternally been Knowing, and [God's] power, by virtue of which He has eternally been Powerful, and [God's] word, by virtue of which He has eternally been Speaking, and [God's] will, by virtue of which He has eternally been Willing, and

[64] Ibid., p. 18.
[65] Ibid., pp. 19-23.
[66] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, Risāla ilā Ahl al-Thaghr, ʿAbdallāh Shākir Muḥammad al-Junaydī, ed. (al-Madīna al-Munawwara: Maktabat al-ʿUlūm wa-l-Ḥikam, 1988).
[67] Robert Caspar, Traité de Théologie Musulmane (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, 1987), p. 177. French : "d'une authenticité discutable."
[68] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, Risāla ilā Ahl al-Thaghr, ʿAbdallāh Shākir Muḥammad al-Junaydī, ed. (al-Madīna al-Munawwara: Maktabat al-ʿUlūm wa-l-Ḥikam, 1988), pp. 103ff.

[God's] hearing and sight by virtue of which He has eternally been Hearing and Seeing.

Nevertheless none of these *ṣifāt* can possibly be temporal (*muḥdath*), for if any of them were temporal, then before its creation in time He (exalted is He) would have been characterized (*mawṣūf*) by its opposite. And if that were the case, then He would have departed from divinity.[69]

These *ṣifāt* must be affirmed… [God] has made that clear by His saying (mighty and glorious is He) "Possessor of strength, the Firm" [Q 51:58], and He has said, "He sent it down by His knowledge" [Q 4:166], and He has said "And they do not comprehend anything of His knowledge except what He wills" [Q 2:255].[70]

Though these *ṣifāt* are not other than He, they cannot be Himself, because of the impossibility of His being life or knowledge or power; for an act does not originate in one who is thus. That is, an act originates in the Living, Powerful, Knowing One, rather than in life and knowledge and power.[71]

The sixth unanimous affirmation: They were unanimous that His command (*amrahū*) (mighty and glorious is He) and His utterance (*qawlahū*) are not temporal and not created. God (exalted is He) has proved the truth of this in His saying (*bi-qawlihī*), "Do not the creation and the command belong to Him?" [Q 7:54]. So He distinguished (exalted is He) between His creation and His command. He also said, "Rather His command, if He wills a thing, is to say to it, 'Be!' and it is." [Q 36:82]. By this He made it clear (exalted is He) that by His utterance and His will the created things become things after having not existed."[72]

So His utterance is not the created things, since His command (exalted is He) to these things and His utterance to them is existential. If it were created, He would have had to create it by another command. And that utterance, if it were created, would have been created by another utterance. This would impose upon the One who uttered it one of two possibilities: either 1) that every utterance is created and preceded by a created utterance *ad infinitum* (this is precisely the teaching of the Dahriyya), or 2) that utterance occurs without His (mighty and glorious is He) giving a command to it, but then His being praised for that would cease to have any meaning.[73]

Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī[74]

As noted above, Daniel Gimaret[75] argues convincingly that Ibn Fūrak's book *Mujarrad*

[69] Ibid., p. 214-215. Note the formula "*lā dhātuhū wa-lā ghayruhū*" ("not His essence, nor other than He").
[70] Ibid., p. 217.
[71] Ibid., p. 219.
[72] Note the agential role of God's word in creation.
[73] Ibid., pp. 221-223.
[74] Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Fūrak, Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Hasan al-Ashʿarī, Daniel Gimaret, ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1987).
[75] Ibid., Introduction, pp. 11-20. Also Daniel Gimaret, La doctrine d'al-Ashʿarī (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1990), pp. 16-20.

Maqālāt al-Ashʿarī should be viewed as an excellent primary source on the teachings of al-Ashʿarī. Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Fūrak al-Anṣārī al-Iṣbahānī (d. 406/1015) was one of the leading Ashʿarite theologians of his time, and only one generation stood between him and al-Ashʿarī. The stated purpose of his book *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ashʿarī*, as the title implies, is to set forth al-Ashʿarī's own words on various theological issues, without additional comment or redaction by Ibn Fūrak.

Gimaret is convinced that Ibn Fūrak was reliably successful:

> I need not repeat here the considerable interest of this text: everyone will now be able to judge for themselves. To be sure, the thought of al-Ashʿarī was not completely unknown to us, at least in its essentials, thanks in particular to the *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, edited by McCarthy. Nonetheless, that was relatively little in comparison with the profusion of information which the *Mujarrad* brings us, and the word *resurrection* in this connection is perhaps not too strong. This is because, for those who might still have doubts – given how often al-Ashʿarī has been the victim of false ideas – this is indeed the authentic thought of al-Ashʿarī which here is restored to us in its fulness. This is attested not only by the authority of Ibn Fūrak, as well as by the abundant references to the works of the master (thirty titles cited, of which some are cited more than ten times), but also the perfect agreement between the arguments advanced here and those in *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* or those reported by Baghdādī, Juwaynī, Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, etc.[76]

Al-Ashʿarī can be found in various parts of the book to have addressed the issues which are the focus of this paper. Some of his remarks are as follows:

> [Al-Ashʿarī] says, "The underlying reality (*maʿnā*) of knowledge – its reality (*ḥaqīqa*) – is that by which the Knower knows what is known." He relied on this in his proof that God (exalted is He) is Knowing by virtue of knowledge, for if He were knowing by virtue of Himself, His self would be knowledge. For the reality of the underlying reality (*maʿnā*) of knowledge is that by virtue of which the Knower knows what is known. If the self of the Preeternal One (*al-qadīm*) (lofty is He) were a self by virtue of which He knew the things

[76] Gimaret, "Introduction" to Ibn Fūrak, Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ashʿarī, pp. 11-12. «Je n'ai pas besoin de redire l'intérêt considerable de ce texte : chacun désormais pourra en juger par lui-même. La pensée d'Aš'arī, certes, ne nous était pas complètement inconnue, du moins pour l'essentiel, grâce en particulier au *K. al-Lumaʿ* édité par McCarthy. C'était cependant bien peu de chose par rapport à la profusion d'information que nous apporte le *Muǧarrad*, et le mot de *résurrection*, en l'occurrence, n'est peut-être pas trop fort. Car, pour ceux qui pourraient encore en douter – tellement le personnage a été victime d'idées fausses –, c'est bien l'authentique pensée d'Aš'arī qui nous est ici restituée dans son intégralité : l'attestent non seulement l'autorité d'Ibn Fūrak, ainsi que les abondantes références aux œuvres du maître (trente titres cités, dont certains plus de dix fois), mais aussi la parfaite conformité des thèses énoncées avec celles du *K. al-Lumaʿ* ou avec celles rapportés par Baġdādī, Ǧuwaynī, Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, etc.»

which are known, it would have to be knowledge, even in its underlying reality (*maʿnā*).[77]

He said in his book *Naqḍ Uṣūl al-Jubbā'ī*, "The names of God (exalted is He) are His *ṣifāt*, and it cannot be said of His *ṣifāt* that they are He, nor that they are other than He."[78]

He said, "The *ṣifāt* of God (exalted is He) fall into two categories: 1) those which cannot be said to be other than He (these are subsistent in His essence [*qā'ima bi-dhātihī*]), and 2) those which must be other than He because of their subsisting in something other than Him (*li-qiyāmihā bi-ghayrihī*).[79]

He used to say, "The underlying reality of Powerful (*qādir*) and Strong (*qawiyy*) is the same, and power (*qudra*) and (*quwwa*) are the same."… And he said that power (*qudra*) and ability (*istiṭāʿa*) are the same…

Likewise he did not distinguish among knowledge (*ʿilm*) and awareness (*dirāya*) and understanding (*fiqh*) and comprehension (*fahm*) and sagacity (*fiṭna*) and reason (*ʿaql*) and sense (*ḥiss*) and cognition (*maʿrifa*).[80]

As for what is predicated by saying that He is Loving and Pleased, or Displeased or Hostile, for [al-Ashʿarī] that was a reference to His will. He used to say that God's pleasure (exalted is He) over believers is His will to reward them and to praise them, and His displeasure over unbelievers is His will to punish them and to censure them. The same is true of His love and His enmity.[81]

He used to say, "The word of God (exalted is He) is a preeternal *ṣifa* belonging to Him, eternally subsisting in his essence (*inna kalām Allāh taʿālā ṣifa lahū qadīma lam yazal qā'im bi-dhātihī*)."[82]

[Al-Ashʿarī said in reference to both divine and human speech] "The Word is the underlying reality (*maʿnā*) subsisting in the self, apart from the sounds and letters."[83]

Summary of Al-Ashʿarī's Doctrine on the *Ṣifāt*

As promised earlier, I will attempt here to summarize the main points of al-Ashʿarī's teaching about the *ṣifāt* and their relation to the divine essence. I see the following as the major points in summary:

[77] Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Fūrak, Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Hasan al-Ashʿarī, Daniel Gimaret, ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1987), p. 10, line 12.
[78] Ibid., p. 38, line 19.
[79] Ibid., p. 40, line 4.
[80] Ibid., p. 44, lines 10-12, 14-15.
[81] Ibid., p. 45, lines 11-13.
[82] Ibid., p. 59, line 11.
[83] Ibid., p. 68, line 6.

1) God has seven *ṣifāt* of essence – knowledge, power, life, word, will, sight, hearing. This is not necessarily a closed list, but God does have other *ṣifāt* which are *not* on this list.
2) These are not merely ways of speaking; they are underlying realities. God is Knowing by virtue of His knowledge, Powerful by virtue of His power, Living by virtue of his life.
3) These *ṣifāt* have existed eternally. They are not temporally originated or created.
4) They are not His essence, nor are they other than He.
5) Rather, they are underlying realities eternally subsisting in His essence.
6) The Qurʾān describes God's knowledge and word as having some kind of agency in creation. That is, God creates *by* them.

The reader can judge whether these points accurately and adequately reflect al-Ashʿarī's ideas as seen in his writings reviewed above.

Possible Parallels in Christian Doctrine

So God's power, God's knowledge and God's life are eternal realities which have always been present in God. They are not God's essence, nor are they other than He; rather they are underlying realities eternally subsisting in His essence.

This description of God is remarkably similar to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as expounded by Patristic and Scholastic Christian writers. Indeed at first glance the two doctrines seem nearly identical. As I will show below, a variety of Muslim, Christian and Jewish writers through the centuries have noticed this similarity and have commented on it.

Some Christians have simply suggested that God's "power" is precisely what is meant by the first hypostasis of the Trinity, and that God's "knowledge" is what is meant by the second hypostasis of the Trinity, and that God's "life" is what is meant by the third hypostasis of the Trinity. Ibn Ḥazm, the 5th/11th-century Muslim historian of religious ideas, met Christians who asserted precisely this.[84]

However, this is not how all Christians would state the doctrine. Virtually all writers from the Patristic period would take as a starting point that God's knowledge, God's wisdom, God's

[84] Abū Muḥammad ʿAlī ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī al-Ẓāhirī, Kitab al-Fasl fī al-Milal wa-l-Ahwāʾ wa-l-Nihal (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1964(?)), p. 50, lines 18ff.

understanding, and God's word are all different ways of referring to the same thing which in Greek is called the "Logos" (λόγος).[85] And all see the Logos as being the second hypostasis of the Trinity. The third hypostasis – the Spirit – is variously described as being God's life,[86] as God's power, and as God's love.[87]

An interesting example from the Scholastic period, with remarkable parallels to al-Ashʿarī's teaching, comes from the pen of Thomas Aquinas in the 7th/13th century.[88] He describes the second hypostasis of the Trinity (the Logos) as being God's understanding/word, and the third hypostasis (the Spirit) as being God's love.[89] Thomas says:

> God's word is co-eternal with God Himself.[90] But in God, understanding is not something other than His being, and consequently neither is the Word which is conceived in His intellect some accident or something foreign to His nature.[91] That divine Word is not any accident, nor any part of God, who is simple, nor is it something foreign to the divine nature; rather it is something complete subsisting in the divine nature.[92]
>
> We do not say that these three hypostases or Persons are different by essence… Whatever is said about God absolutely is not something other than God's essence. For God is not Great or Powerful or Good accidentally, but by His essence.[93] The essence of the Word and Love in God is not other than the essence of God.[94]

The primary concern of this paper is al-Ashʿarī's doctrine, not Christian doctrine, so I will not go into further detail on the doctrine of the Trinity as expounded in various Christian writers of the Patristic and Scholastic periods. However, the one example given above should at least provide a small indication of the kinds of parallel ideas and language that can be found

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[85] As has been seen above in *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ashʿarī*, p. 44, al-Ashʿarī would agree that God's knowledge, wisdom and understanding are different ways of saying the same thing. But he did not think that knowledge and word were the same thing, though in chapter 2 of *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* he described them as being closely intertwined.
[86] Note the term ζωοποιόν in the Creed.
[87] The suggestion that the Spirit is God's love is found particularly in the western, Augustinian tradition.
[88] Thomas Aquinas, "De Rationibus Fidei ad Cantorem Antiochenum," in Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1969), pp. 58ff.
[89] Recall that in *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ashʿarī*, p. 45 (quoted above), al-Ashʿarī says that God's love is a reference to God's will.
[90] "De Rationibus Fidei," chapter 3, lines 105-106. Here and below the translation from Thomas's Latin is mine.
[91] Ibid., ch. 3, lines 55ff.
[92] Ibid., ch. 3, lines 62ff.
[93] Ibid., ch. 4, lines 74ff.
[94] Ibid., ch. 4, lines 109-111.

between al-Ashʿarī and these writers. When one moves to medieval Christian writers who wrote in Arabic, the parallels become more explicit.

This is not to imply that there are *only* parallels and no differences between Muslim *ṣifāt* and Christian hypostases. In another section below I will examine some possible points of difference. But first I would like to review some of the other writers in history who have noticed how much the Muslim and Christian doctrines have in common.

Others Who Have Noticed This Connection

The observation of striking similarities between al-Ashʿarī's doctrine of *ṣifāt* and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is far from being original with me.[95] A long and diverse list of scholars, both medieval and modern, and including Muslims, Christians and Jews, have noticed these similarities and have commented on them. Some have gone so far as to say that there is no difference between the Muslim and Christian doctrines – that they are essentially identical.

An example of this in the modern period is H.A. Wolfson, who wrote an essay on the subject of "The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity."[96] He concludes that:

> Muslims [were led] to adopt a Christian doctrine which is explicitly rejected in the Koran,[97] and transform it into a Muslim doctrine… [They were] led to the substitution in Muslim theology of divine attributes for the Christian Trinity.[98]

I would argue that Wolfson does not give sufficient credit to the indigenously Islamic reasons, rooted in the Qur'ān and the Sunna, for orthodox Islamic doctrine to make the choices it

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[95] My attention was first drawn to these similarities by a book by J.N.D. Anderson, Islam in the Modern World (Leicester: Apollos, 1990). However, I am not aware of any book or article which has analyzes the similarities between the two doctrines in the kind of depth I have attempted in this present paper.

[96] In The Philosophy of the Kalām (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 113-132. This is a revision of an earlier, freestanding article in The Harvard Theological Review, 49:1-18 (1956). I am indebted to Tariq Jaffer for calling my attention to this essay.

[97] I would question whether the Qur'ān does explicitly reject the Trinity. Certainly it rejects a triad of God, Jesus and Mary as three gods, but it is not at all clear that it addresses the concept of one God in whom three hypostases or *ṣifāt* of essence subsist.

[98] Ibid., p. 128.

did. The analysis in this present paper, and al-Ashʿarī's own words, should make clear that al-Ashʿarī was most certainly not simply adopting a Christian doctrine. And I think Wolfson oversimplifies both the Ashʿarite and Christian doctrines on some points. Nevertheless the forcefulness of Wolfson's comment (perhaps deliberately hyperbolic) shows just how similar (identical?) he thought the two doctrines were.

I think that Joseph Van Ess is closer to the truth in his remarks, noted earlier, about the formula that the divine *ṣifāt* are not God's essence, nor are they other than He:

> Thus Ibn Kullāb landed on the formula that they were "neither identical with God nor not-identical with him." This was the way in which Christians for ages had described the relationship between the divine essence and the hypostases. Ibn Kullāb opened himself up thereby to the suspicion of having been influenced by Christians. Nonetheless, even if this was at all true, it was a polemical oversimplification. The formula was quite at home in Islamic theology.[99]

Some of the strongest examples of medieval texts which compare the Ashʿarite doctrine of *ṣifāt* with the Christian Trinity come from Muslim members of anti-Ashʿarite groups (no longer extant today) who rejected *both* al-Ashʿarī's doctrine *and* Christianity on the grounds that both taught the same thing. One example of this is Ibn Ḥazm, mentioned above. He writes:

> One of [the Christians] has said, "Since it must be the case that the Creator (exalted is He) is living and knowing, it must be the case that He has life and knowledge. His life is what is called the Holy Spirit, and His knowledge is what is called the Son."
>
> But this is the feeblest kind of argumentation there is, since we have previously shown that the Creator (exalted is He) should not have anything like this predicated of Him based on deductive reasoning, but rather specifically based on divine revelation (*al-samʿ*).
>
> If they [the Christians] say that he [the Son] is not he [the Father] nor is he other than he, then they have become insane in the same way as those[100] who claim the *ṣifāt* are not the

[99] Van Ess, p. 444. "Auf diese Weise hatten die Christen seit je das Verhältnis zwischen dem göttlichen Wesen und den Hypostasen umschrieben; Ibn Kullāb setzte sich darum dem Verdacht aus, von ihnen beeinflußt zu sein. Jedoch war dies, wenn es überhaupt stimmte, eine polemische Verkürzung. Die Formel war in der islamischen Theologie längst heimisch."

[100] Miguel Asín Palacios, in his Spanish translation of Ibn Ḥazm, has a footnote here: "Alude a los *axaríes*," i.e. the Ashʿarites. Miguel Asín Palacios, Abenházam de Córdoba y su Historia Crítica de las Ideas Religiosas (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1928), vol. II, p. 156.

same as the One of whom they are predicated (*al-mawṣūf*) nor are they other than He.[101]

Michel Allard points out examples of Muʿtazilites who accused the traditionalists of being closet Christians because they affirmed the uncreatedness of God's word and the reality of the divine *ṣifāt*:

> This state of mind appears clearly, for example, in the letters (reported by Ṭabarī) which the Caliph al-Maʾmūn is reported to have written to demand an examination of his *qāḍī*s on the question of the nature of the Qur'ān. In the second of these letters, in reference to those who hold that the Qur'ān is uncreated, we read in effect: "By this affirmation they become like the Christians, who say that Jesus son of Mary (according to their claims) is uncreated because he is the Word of God." [102]

Allard says that Ibn al-Nadīm reports that Ibn Kullāb was accused of being a Christian because he affirmed that the Word of God is God:

> Subkī, who in his *Ṭabaqāt* takes up the information given by Ibn al-Nadīm, declares that the accusation… is unfounded. As an argument he states that this accusation is nothing but a particular form of the accusation "of all of the Muʿtazilites against the partisans of the *ṣifāt*: the Christians are infidels because they affirm three (divine entities), and you because you affirm seven."[103]

Shahrastānī makes the following interesting comment on the Muʿtazilite Abū al-Hudhayl:

> Abū al-Hudhayl affirmed these *ṣifāt* [specifically: knowledge, power, life] as aspects (*wujūh*) of the [divine] essence. These are precisely the same as the hypostases of the Christians (*hiya bi-ʿaynihā aqānīm al-naṣāra*) or the "modes" (*aḥwāl*) of Abū Hāshim.[104]

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[101] Abū Muḥammad ʿAlī Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī al-Ẓāhirī, Kitab al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa-l-Ahwāʾ wa-l-Niḥal. (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1964(?)), vol. I, part 1, p. 50, lines 18ff. and p. 55, lines 24ff.

[102] Michel Allard, Le Problème des Attributs Divins dans la Doctrine d'al-Ashʿarī et de ses Premiers Grands Disciples (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1965), pp. 154-155. « Cet état d'esprit apparaît clairement par exemple dans les lettres rapportées par Ṭabarī, que le calife al-Ma'mūn aurait écrites pour réclamer l'examen de ses qāḍī sur la question de la nature du Coran. Dans la deuxième de ces lettres on peut lire en effet, à propos de ceux qui soutiennent que le Coran est incréé : « Par cette affirmation, ils deviennent semblable aux chrétiens qui disent que Jésus fils de Marie, selon leurs prétensions, n'est pas créé, puisqu'il est le Verbe de Dieu. »

[103] Michel Allard, Le Problème des Attributs Divins dans la Doctrine d'al-Ashʿarī et de ses Premiers Grands Disciples (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1965), pp. 154-155. «Subkī, qui reprend dans ses Ṭabaqāt les informations données par Ibn Nadīm, déclare que l'accusation… est sans fondement. Il donne comme argument que cette accusation n'est qu'une forme particulière de celle… « de tous les muʿtazilites à l'égard des partisans des ṣifāt : les chrétiens sont infidèles en affirmant trois (entités divines), et vous en affirmant sept. »

[104] Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-Nihal. William Cureton, ed. (London: Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts, 1842-1846), vol. 1, p. 34. The relevance of Shahrastānī's comments to the question of this paper is pointed out by W. Montgomery Watt in his book, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought (Edinburgh: the University Press, 1973), p. 246, and also by Sweetman, part I, vol. 2, p. 26 and ibid., pp. 92-93. It was Frank Griffel who called my attention to this passage in Watt.

Wolfson cites similar examples of several medieval Muslim and Jewish writers:

> Abulfaraj, also known as Bar Hebraeus, speaking of the Muʿtazilites, who denied the reality of divine attributes, says that thereby they steered clear of 'the persons (*aqānīm*) of the Christians,' the implication being that the belief in the reality of the divine attributes indirectly steers one into the belief of the Christian Trinity. ʿAḍad al-Dīn al-Ījī similarly reports that the Muʿtazilites accused those who believed in the reality of divine attributes of having fallen into the error of the Christian belief in the Trinity. And prior to both of them, among the Jews, David al-Muḳammaṣ, Saadia, Joseph al-Bāṣir, and Maimonides, evidently reflecting still earlier Muslim sources, whenever they happen to mention the Muslim doctrine of the reality of divine attributes, compare it to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.[105]

McCarthy notes that "Averroes found this doctrine [i.e. that God's *ṣifāt* are not God's essence, nor are they other than He] as distasteful as that of the Trinity."[106]

But the witnesses on this are not only hostile witnesses who reject both Ashʿarism (or Sunnī traditionalism) and Christianity. Examples can also be found of Muslims and Christians who tentatively explored this theological territory to seek whether there might really be common ground between the two religions on this point.

Thus, in the famous Hāshimī-Kindī[107] dialogue (originally held at the court of the caliph al-Ma'mūn in the early 3rd/9th century, but the text was substantially redacted later) we see an exchange between a Muslim and a Christian who (according to the text) are personally good friends. The Christian tries to explain the Trinity as follows:

We know that the *ṣifāt* in God (blessed and exalted is His name) are of two kinds:

- An essential (*dhātiyyah*), natural *ṣifa*, by which He is eternally described, and
- A *ṣifa* which He has by acquisition, and this is the *ṣifa* of act (*ṣifat al-fiʿl*).

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[105] Wolfson, "Muslim Attributes and Christian Trinity," pp. 112-113. Wolfson provides footnotes here for the reader who wishes to trace these Jewish and Muslim writers in the primary-source literature.

[106] In: Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, The Theology of Al-Ashʿarī: The Arabic texts of al-Ashʿarī's *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* and *Risālat Istiḥsān al-Khawḍ fī ʿIlm al-Kalām,* with briefly annotated translations, and appendices containing material pertinent to the study of al-Ashʿarī. Richard McCarthy, ed. (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953), p. 17 n. 16.

[107] Risālat ʿAbdallāh ibn Ismāʿīl al-Hāshimī ilā ʿAbd al-Masīh ibn Ishāq al-Kindī… (London: Gilbert R. Rivington, 1880), pp. 32-35.

> As for the *ṣifāt* which He has by acquisition by virtue of His act, they are for example: Merciful, Forgiving, Compassionate. As for the eternal *ṣifāt*, which are natural and essential, and which are eternally predicated of Him (majestic and mighty is He), they are Life and Knowledge. For indeed God is eternally Living and Knowing. So Life and Knowledge are both eternal; there is no way around this.
>
> The conclusion that we can draw from the foregoing is that God is One, having Word and Spirit, in three hypostases (*aqānīm*) subsisting in their essence, encompassed in the single divine substance (*jawhar*). This is the manner of description of the One – triple in hypostases – whom we worship; and this is the manner of description which He has been pleased to choose for Himself.

J.N.D. Anderson, a modern Christian scholar of Islamic law at the University of London, was more tentative and cautious in suggesting that the parallels between the Ashʿarite doctrine of *ṣifāt* and the Christian Trinity might serve as a bridge of understanding for dialogue. He wrote:

> So is there, perhaps, some controversy in the history of Islamic theology which might help Muslims to understand this mystery [i.e. the Trinity]? I think that a 'stepping stone' - no more - can be found in the debate about the relationship between God's divine essence (*dhāt*) and his divine qualities (*ṣifāt*)… The orthodox insisted that God's eternal qualities are 'not He nor are they any other than He' (*lā dhātuhū wa lā ghayruhū*). This last statement is certainly not the doctrine of the Trinity, but provides a stepping stone for Muslim understanding.[108]

For an example of a Muslim scholar who is similarly open but similarly cautious, I would suggest the case of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) the great Qur'ān commentator and theologian. In his comments on Sūrat al-Nisā' (4): 171-172, he lists multiple different possible interpretations of the meaning of "And do not say 'Three.' Cease!" One option is the following:

> The doctrine of the Christians is very little known. What emerges from it is that they affirm an essence (*dhāt*) characterized (*mawṣūfa*) by three *ṣifāt*. However, even if they call them *ṣifāt*, in reality they are essences (*dhuwāt*)… Even if they call them *ṣifāt*, nevertheless in reality they are affirming a multiplicity of essences subsisting in themselves (*qā'ima bi-anfusihā*). And that is downright unbelief. So it is in this sense that He said (exalted is He), "And do not say 'Three." Cease!"
>
> But if we take the word "three" as referring to their affirming three *ṣifāt*, then this is something that cannot be denied. How could we not say that? We ourselves say: "He is God – there is no god but He – the Ruler, the Holy One, the Faultless, the Knowing, the

[108] J.N.D. Anderson, Islam in the Modern World (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), "Epilogue / A look forward: Some Points to Ponder / The Divine Unity."

> Living, the Powerful, the Willing," and we understand by each of these terms something other than what we understand by the other terms. The multiplicity of *ṣifāt* has no meaning other than that. And if speaking of a multiplicity of *ṣifāt* were unbelief, then we would have to reject the entire Qur'ān, and we would have to reject reason, since we know of necessity that what is understood from His (exalted is He) being Knowing is [something] other than what is understood from His (exalted is He) being Powerful or Living. [109]

Al-Rāzī here does not think the Christian use of the term *ṣifa* can be consistently maintained. He thinks the Christian concept of hypostases (just before the passage above he notes the term *uqnūm*) is really equivalent to essences, not to *ṣifāt* – i.e. that the Christians really *mean* three essences, regardless of what they *say*. But *if* (and this is a big "if") the Christians *really do mean* three *ṣifāt* subsisting in a single essence, then he thinks that the Christians and Muslims actually do not have to disagree on this point. He notes that Muslims, following the Qur'ān, also believe in certain essential *ṣifāt* which subsist eternally in the single divine essence.

Possible Differences Between the Two Doctrines

I have argued above that al-Ashʿarī was certainly not copying or "adopting" (Wolfson's term) the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, whether wittingly or unwittingly. The reasons for his views were thoroughly rooted in the Islamic tradition. Indeed, as will be seen below, he accused his Muʿtazilite *opponents* of being improperly influenced by Christianity.

Furthermore al-Ashʿarī was sufficiently familiar with Christian doctrines that he is unlikely to have *accidentally* slipped and imitated Christian doctrine which he did not recognize as such. Ibn Fūrak tells us that al-Ashʿarī wrote an entire book "containing an exposition of the doctrine of the Christians."[110] Al-Ashʿarī certainly could judge better than anyone else the extent to which he agreed or disagreed with Christians. If there is common ground between his doctrine

[109] Muḥammad Al-Rāzī Fakhr al-Dīn, Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī, al-Mushtahir bi-al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-Ghaib, Khalīl Muḥyiy al-Dīn al-Mais (ed.) (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1990), vol. 6, pp. 118.

[110] In: Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, The Theology of Al-Ashʿarī: The Arabic texts of al-Ashʿarī's *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* and *Risālat Istiḥsān al-Khawḍ fī ʿIlm al-Kalām,* with briefly annotated translations, and appendices containing material pertinent to the study of al-Ashʿarī. Richard McCarthy, ed. (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953), p. 227.

and Christian doctrine, he was very likely aware of it.

I have found four specific points on which al-Ashʿarī *distanced* himself from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as he understood it. Nonetheless, I would suggest that these points of difference are not on the core issues at stake either in his doctrine of *ṣifāt* or in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

The first point is, of course, that al-Ashʿarī has a list of seven *ṣifāt* of essence which eternally subsist in God's essence, and this is not necessarily a closed list, whereas the Christians insist on speaking of three and only three subsistences in God. In the *Ibāna* he writes:

> The Muʿtazila deny the *ṣifāt* of the Lord of the Worlds, and they claim that the meaning of "Hearing, Seeing (*samīʿ baṣīr*)" is "Seeing (*rā'in*)," in the sense of Knowing, just as the Christians claim that [God's] hearing is His sight (*baṣruhū*), and is His vision (*ru'yatuhū*), and is His word, and is His knowledge...[111]

> [Those such as the Jahmiyya who deny that God has hearing or sight] agree with the Christians, for the Christians do not affirm that God is hearing or seeing except in the sense that God is knowing.[112]

In effect he is accusing the Muʿtazila and Jahmiyya of being unduly influenced by Christians. In his opinion their effort to collapse the various *ṣifāt* into a single thing is just like what he perceives to be the Christians' effort to collapse seven *ṣifāt* into three. He implicitly accuses Christians of acknowledging too *few* hypostases in God, not too *many*!

On the other hand, he himself does see God's word and God's knowledge as being very closely linked. From the Christian point of view, both "word" and "knowledge" translate the Greek word "Logos" in the New Testament.[113] Christian writers often suggest that a word is simply the outward expression of inward thought/understanding.

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[111] *Ibāna*, Hyderabad edition, p. 49, lines 8-10 (in the "Chapter on refuting the Jahmiyya in their denial of God's knowledge and power, etc.").
[112] Ibid., p. 39, line 20ff.
[113] Jn 1:1 – "In the beginning [i.e. εν αρχή] was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. It was in the beginning (εν αρχή) with God. All things came into being through it, and apart from it nothing came into being which came into being. In it was life, and that life was light for humankind." (translation mine)

In the *Ibāna* al-Ashʿarī also says that some of the Muʿtazilites "distinguish between [God's] knowledge and [God's] word,"[114] so that they affirm that God has a word, but deny that God has knowledge. In response al-Ashʿarī argues that the proof of one proves the other. He does not say or imply that God's word and God's knowledge are the same thing, but he does see them as closely linked concepts.[115]

The second point of apparent difference between al-Ashʿarī and the Christian Trinity is that Ibn Fūrak says that al-Ashʿarī explicitly rejected equating God's life with God's spirit, on the grounds that life is an "accident" (*ʿaraḍ*) in created beings and a *ṣifa* in God, but spirit is a substance (*jism*) which can have life subsisting in it but which cannot *be* life.[116] On the other hand this seems to be more of a difference in definition of the term "spirit" rather than an unbridgeable difference on the core issues at stake in the Muslim and Christian doctrines. And since it comes from Ibn Fūrak, not from any surviving writings from al-Ashʿarī's own hand, one may question whether al-Ashʿarī was as unequivocal on this point as Ibn Fūrak implies.

The third point of difference is that al-Ashʿarī explicitly rejects the idea that God's word could become incarnate or have *ḥulūl* ("taking up residence," or "descent") in any particular place (*maḥall*), since God's *ṣifāt* do not have location in space, but only subsistence in God's essence. Thus he writes in the *Ibāna*:

> The Jahmiyya claim the same thing as the Christians. For the Christians claim that Mary's womb contained the word of God, and the Jahmiyya go beyond them and say that God's word is created and descended (*ḥalla*) into a bush, and that the bush contained it.[117]

This is a more serious point of difference than the previous two. But it is, strictly speaking, a problem related to the Christian doctrine of incarnation, not to the Trinity as such.

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[114] Ibid., p. 46, lines 2ff. (in the "Chapter on refuting the Jahmiyya in their denial of God's knowledge and power, etc.").
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ashʿarī*, p. 44, lines 20-21, and p. 257, lines 1-18.
[117] *Ibāna*, Hyderabad edition: p. 21, lines 7-9. The "bush" is an allusion to Moses' encounter with the burning bush.

Furthermore one wonders whether al-Ashʿarī does not, after all, imply elsewhere that God's word *does* have *ḥulūl* in the Qur'ān. The relation of the Qur'ān as uncreated *kalām Allāh* to the Qur'ān as physical book is a question that often preoccupied al-Ashʿarī's successors.[118]

The fourth (and last) point of difference is the one which prompts al-Ashʿarī's most vehement objection to Christianity. Christians argue that since God's thought or word is something God conceives or generates within God's being, one may legitimately speak of the word thus conceived or generated in God as metaphorically God's "offspring" or "Son." Thomas Aquinas, in the treatise cited above, makes use of the fact that the Latin word "conceptus" means both "concept" and "offspring." Al-Ashʿarī thinks this is anathema. Thus he writes:

> The Christians claim that [God's] hearing is His sight (*baṣruhū*), and is His vision (*ru'yatuhū*), and is His word, and is His knowledge, and is His Son. Mighty and glorious is God and exalted highly above that![119]

This is also a very serious objection, but like the third objection above it is, strictly speaking, a christological issue, not a Trinitarian issue. It is worth remembering in this context that al-Ashʿarī (like Ibn Ḥanbal before him) rejects *all* use of metaphor (*majāz*) in describing God. So when the Qur'ān speaks of God's hands and God's sitting on a throne and God's nightly descent to the lowest heaven, these must be understood as literal realities, though we do not ask "how."[120] Summarizing al-Ashʿarī's views on God's sitting on a throne, Gimaret concludes, "As elsewhere, all metaphorical interpretation is excluded."[121]

If one rejects all metaphorical language in reference to God, then the only way to understand the word "Son" is as implying that God literally took a wife and carnally begot a son.

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[118] Their conclusions on this point sound, in some ways, very similar to the chalcedonian Christian doctrine of incarnation, but it would be beyond the scope of this paper to explore that further.
[119] Ibid., p. 49, lines 8-10 (in the the "Chapter on refuting the Jahmiyya in their denial of God's knowledge and power, etc.").
[120] Ibid., p. 6, lines 8ff., and pp. 40ff.
[121] Gimaret, Doctrine, p. 328. "Comme par ailleurs toute interpretation métaphorique est exclue."

Such a suggestion is seen by both Muslims and Christians alike as blasphemous and offensive. Christians would agree with al-Ashʿarī in reacting to such a suggestion by saying, "Mighty and glorious is God and exalted highly above that."

Conclusion

The average Christian today has a relatively superficial understanding of the Trinity, just as the average Muslim knows little about al-Ashʿarī's doctrine of *ṣifāt*. But what both would probably agree on is that they *disagree* about their doctrine of God in this area, and that the differences are too profound and too wide to be bridged.

I think, though, that a deeper analysis of both doctrines shows that they are much closer to one another than is commonly supposed. The differences which al-Ashʿarī has noted about *ḥulūl*/incarnation and about use of the word "Son" are important, but they are, properly speaking, related to christological doctrine, not to the Trinity as such.

The issues he raises which relate specifically to the Trinity itself (namely: 1) equating of "word" and "knowledge" and insisting on only three hypostases, and 2) al-Ashʿarī's apparent insistence that God's life cannot be called Spirit) are both bridgeable differences, in my opinion. Furthermore, apart from these differences there is a huge amount of common ground between Muslims and Christians on the fundamental issues at stake in the *ṣifāt* and in the Trinity – far more common ground than is generally supposed by either Muslims or Christians. I hope that this paper has made a small contribution to taking up the challenge proposed by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and by J.N.D. Anderson – a challenge to cautious exploration of this common ground.

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