



*Routledge Studies in Islamic Philosophy*

# THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

CONTEMPLATING ALLAH

Edited by  
Mansoorah Khalilizand



# The Attributes of God in Islamic Thought

The debate over Allah's attribute – the “nature” and the inner articulation of Allah – is one of the focal debates in the intellectual history of Islam. This edited collection aims to highlight and examine some aspects of this debate in their original context, based on the relevant primary literature.

By showing that even an apparently self-evident concept such as Allah, which lies at the heart of every reading of Islam, is highly ambiguous and polysemous, the chapters also emphasise the plurality that has always existed in Islamic thought. Through highlighting the philosophical and theological reflections on the concept of Allah, the results of this study challenge the juristic reading of Islam, in which Allah's function consists mainly in providing a detailed plan for the human life and also rewarding or punishing the ones who deviate from it. The book also attempts to demonstrate the relevance and the actuality of the tradition and to stress its contemporaneity.

This volume makes a significant part of the intellectual tradition of Islam accessible for students and scholars of Islamic theology, Islamic philosophy, Islamic studies and the like, as well as providing a secondary source for teaching on the debate in question.

**Mansooreh Khalilizand** is a research fellow at the Department of Philosophy of Freiburg University in Germany. She is currently working on the philosophy of the 17th-century Iranian philosopher Şadr al-Dīn Shirāzī. Her research interests include metaphysics, ontology and epistemology in Islamic philosophy, and Islamic feminism.

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# **The Attributes of God in Islamic Thought**

Contemplating Allah

**Edited by Mansooreh Khalilizand**

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# Contributors

**Abdulhakeem Yousuf Alkhelaifi** is a professor of Islamic philosophy at Qatar University. He has authored *maqūla al-shay' al-rawāqīya wa 'atharuhā fi al-fikr al-'islāmī* (2022) and articles on various subjects in Islamic philosophy and theology, such as the Idea of Man (2017), Mathematics (2011), and The Concept of Essence (2006).

**Mehmet Fatih Arslan** is an assistant professor of Islamic Philosophy at Istanbul University, Faculty of Theology. His field of research includes post-classical Islamic philosophy, specifically the Ottoman and Safavid eras. His contributions in the field include works such as multiple entries in the *Atlas of Islamic Thought* (2023), *Pax Ottomana* (2018) and *Jalal al-Din al-Dawānī's Philosophy of Existence* (2015).

**Angelika Brodersen** is a research fellow at the Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. She authored “Der unbekannte *kalām*. Theologische Positionen der frühen Māturīdīya am Beispiel der Attributenlehre” (2014); “Tradition und Transformation in der Māturīdiyya des 6./12. Jahrhunderts. Mit einer kritischen Edition des *Kitāb al-Kifaya fi l-hidaya* des Nūr ad-Din aṣ-Ṣābūnī al-Buḥārī” (2022).

**Alnoor Dhanani** is an independent scholar and a specialist in the intellectual history of Islamicate civilization. His research interests include physical theory; the interaction between *kalām*, *falsafa*, and the natural sciences; and questions categorized as belonging to the genre of *latīf al-kalām*.

**Mohammad Gharaibeh** is a professor of Islamic Intellectual History at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. A recent focus of his research has been the commentarial tradition on the *Muqaddima* of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and its role in the context of scholarly networks in Damascus and Cairo in the Mamluk period.

**Mehmet Emin Güleçyüz** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, USA, focusing on medieval and early modern Islamic thought. His doctoral project is a study of Mollā Fenārī's (d. 1431) intellectual life and metaphysics. He holds degrees from Istanbul 29 Mayıs University, Turkey, and Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.

**Ahmed Husić** is a research associate at the Paderborn Institute of Islamic Theology in Germany. He is currently working on his PhD thesis, which focuses on divine attributes in post-Avicennian Ash‘arite theology. His research interests include early Islamic theology, philosophy of religion, and interfaith dialogue.

**Mansooreh Khalilizand** is a research fellow at the Philosophy Department of Freiburg University in Germany. One of her recent articles is “Revelation, Prophetic Reading of the World, and the End of *Fiqh*. Shabestari’s Hermeneutical Approach to the Qur’ān” (2022). She is currently working on a monograph on philosophy of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī.

**Colin Fitzpatrick Murtha** is a doctoral candidate at Radboud University in the Netherlands and is writing his dissertation on the meteorological writings of Avicenna.

**Kutlu Okan** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He is the author of *Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī’s Epistemology* (2015) and various entries in the *Atlas of Islamic Thought* (2017). He is part of the research project titled *Epistemic Transitions in Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science*.

**Sajjad Rizvi** is Professor of Islamic Intellectual History at the University of Exeter. He is the author of *Mulla Sadra and Metaphysics* (2008), and co-editor of *Knowledge and Power in Muslim Societies* (2023). He is currently collaborating on a volume on philosophy in contemporary Iran and completing a monograph on maximalist Imamology.

# Preface

“Exalted is Allah above what they describe.”

(Quran 37:159)

In 2020, when I was planning to teach an undergraduate course on theories of revelation according to Muslim thinkers, I needed to return to the question that in my view lies at the core of these theories, i.e. the question of how Allah’s attribute of speech (*ṣifa al-kalām*) is to be apprehended.

It is true that in the modern context it is the very experience of revelation, i.e. how the revelation is given to and experienced by the human subject, that lies at the center of the enquiry. However, in the let us say classic controversies about this problem, the principal issue was more about what ‘in’ Allah makes it possible for Him to speak. The answer to this question was, simply put, His attribute of speech. Nevertheless, how this attribute is to be spelt out and how it stands in relationship to His essence, as well as many other related questions, were the subject of countless disputes and a source of grave disagreements among the philosophers and the theologians.

My search for secondary literature on the attribute of speech, however, revealed to me how little this subject had been investigated and how limited are the secondary sources on the controversies over it. I was looking for sources of academic quality, which on the one hand would introduce some of the principle primary literature on this topic, and on the other hand could also be used by undergraduate students. Despite the theoretical importance and centrality of this theme in the intellectual tradition of Muslims, I discovered that many aspects of it have remained untouched until our time. Furthermore, it also struck me how little attention in the research has been paid to the fundamental debate over Allah’s attributes in general.

The question of Allah’s attributes asks about how to conceptualize Allah. Apart from being the origin of all creation, what more can be said about Him, with which concepts and attributes is He to be described and how can the relationship between His multiple attributes and His essence be set out so that His unity is not put in jeopardy? These and similar questions have been discussed intensively by Muslim theologians and philosophers throughout the history of Islamic thought. The various solutions they proposed in this regard led to the emergence and development

of various schools of thought, which together represent a rich spectrum of radically different positions on the matter – from the radical apophatic positions, according to which even the “existent” (al-mawjūd) and the “thing” (al-shay’) cannot be predicated of Allah (the position of *al-mu‘aṭṭila*), to the radical cataphatic positions, which construed the concrete descriptions of Allah in Quran in a thoroughly anthropomorphic manner (as in the case of *al-mujassima*).

The debate on Allah’s attributes does not pertain only to the manner in which Muslims reflected on and conceptualized Allah; rather, it provides the ultimate basis for many other disputes. As mentioned earlier, the decisive and still very vivid dispute regarding revelation and its nature, for example, has its origin in the way Allah’s attribute of speech is grasped. In order to systematically and coherently conceptualize Allah’s attributes, some Muslim thinkers even moved away from the confined framework of Aristotelian binary logic and tried to define a new model, with a third instance between existence and non-existence (the theory of *aḥwāl* of Abū Hāshim).

That Allah is ‘built of’ an essence plus a plurality of attributes, is the common model presupposed and further developed by most of these thinkers. This model is not only philosophically and theologically motivated; rather, it seems to be the only model within which the Quranic descriptions of Allah can consistently be construed. However, despite the simplicity of its general make-up, the closer description of this model has always aroused intense controversies. The relationship between the essence and its multiple attributes, as well as the ‘nature’ of each attribute needed to be clarified.

The lack of the adequate secondary sources on this major debate in the Islamic thought motivated me to plan a collected volume that could to some extent fill this gap, introduce some of the main primary literature on the debate to the scholarship, and be usable by the students of Islamic philosophy and theology. With regard to these considerations the emphasis in this volume is put primarily on the text-based contributions on individual thinkers situated within a broader historical and theoretical context of various schools of thought. Nevertheless, it should be added that the study of Allah’s attributes is not merely of historical relevance. Rather, it also aims at underlining the plurality that has always existed in the Islamic thought in this respect. It tries to make it clear that even an apparently self-evident concept such as Allah, which lies at the heart of every reading of Islam, is highly ambiguous and polysemous, so that one can reasonably speak about *Allahs*, systematically questioning every claim considering the orthodoxy of a very particular reading.

Through highlighting the philosophical and theological reflections on the concept of Allah, the results of this study should also challenge the juristic reading of Islam, i.e. the reading of the *fuqahā*. The Muslim jurists, as widely known, propagate for a very particular concept of Allah, whose function consists mainly in providing a highly detailed plan for the human life in every respect and also rewarding or punishing the ones who deviate from it. Engaging with the sophisticated, philosophical and theological, disputes on the concept of Allah help expose the simplistic nature of *fuqahā*’s understating, which has always been the most socially and politically dominant understanding in the history of Islam. In this

sense, this volume also attempts to demonstrate the relevance and the actuality of the tradition and to stress its contemporaneity. In brief, reviving a question around which many discussions and disputes were developed throughout the centuries in the Islamic world is the ultimate aim of the planned volume. This should pave the way for re-reflecting Allah, a concept that is largely taken as self-evident and hence not disputable.

In concluding this preface, I would like to express my thanks to all those who have contributed to this volume, the authors of the chapters as well as the reviewers, whose comments and remarks were so helpful in the work of enhancing its academic value. I also particularly want to thank Oliver Leaman, editor of the *Routledge Studies in Islamic Philosophy* series, for accepting this volume for the series.