Recent Scholarship in the Field of *kalām*

*Jan Thiele*

ILC-CCHS, CSIC, Madrid

jan.thiele@cchs.csic.es

**Abstract:** This article reviews recent scholarship on *kalām*-theology and attempts to briefly describe some tendencies that appear to be promising for opening new perspective for future work. Scholarship has made significant attempts to transcend previous limitations of the field along the confines of religious communities and scholarly disciplines (theology vs. philosophy) and has extended the geographical scope and timeframe of investigation.

**Keywords:** Islamic theology – *kalām* – Mu’tazilism – Aš‘arism

I. INTRODUCTION

An earlier version of this overview of recent scholarship in the field of *kalām* (or, more completely, ‘ilm al-*kalām*) was presented at the *Atelier d’historiographie critique* organised by the present journal (Paris, 10th February 2017). It has since then been slightly updated. The scholarship reviewed here is devoted to a discipline that is often translated as ‘theology’. This translation is not entirely wrong, but nevertheless somewhat imprecise: to be sure, the *mutakallimūn*, that is, the practitioners of the discipline of *kalām*, actually addressed theological questions. Yet the spectrum of their reflections also included fields that the Western tradition would attribute to the domain of philosophy, including metaphysics and physics, epistemology or ethics. It is therefore not surprising that *kalām* shares many subjects with falsafa, that is, the heirs of Hellenic philosophy in the Islamicate world.

The second problem of the translation ‘theology’ is that there are other forms of theology distinct from *kalām*. They are all subsumed under the label *uşūl al-dīn* (‘principles of religion’). The reason for there being various forms of theology was that theologians were divided over the appropriate and legitimate methodology for addressing theological problems. The starting point of *kalām* was rational reflection—as opposed to their detractors, whose departing point was scripture. The latter group of opponents to

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1 I gratefully acknowledge funding from the Spanish Government’s Ramón y Cajal programme (RYC-2015-18346).

2 The presentation covered works published during the five years before the meeting. I have added some studies that were published since then.
kalām were primarily found in the milieu of the Traditionalists, and more specifically the Ḥanbalites. This is at least what the general picture looks like. The historical reality is however somewhat more complex: more than 35 years ago, D. Gimaret demonstrated, for example, that a thinker like Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) adopted a very rational approach in his attempts to resolve theological questions. The same Ibn Taymiyya is a major reference for historical and contemporary Ḥanbalites. More recently, studies have provided significant additional evidence for the influence of speculative theology on him. The inclusion of Ibn Taymiyya in an overview of research in kalām is certainly debatable, but omitting him completely would no be less problematic.

This overview of recent research on kalām is selective. I attempt to briefly describe some tendencies that appear to me promising for opening new perspectives for future work. In addition, I will provide lists of recent contributions to several subfields of kalām studies. One might blame me for not systematically reviewing recent scholarship on the Māturidite school, that is the second important movement of Sunni kalām after Ašʿarism. The reason is that I do not feel sufficiently competent to assess the extensive production from Turkey.

3 There were, however, other 'literalists' or 'scripturalists' like, for example, the Zāhirīs.
Readers who would like to keep an eye on future publications in the field are referred to T.-A. Druart's Brief Bibliographical Guides in Medieval Islamic Philosophy and Theology, from which this overview has also greatly benefited. The Brief Bibliographical Guides are hosted at the webpage of the Catholic University of America and are currently in the process of being converted by A. Lammer and P. Adamson into a combined and searchable version, which should be accessible soon via Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. A recent attempt to outline the 'state-of-the-art' in the field of the history of Islamic theology, The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology, may also serve as a bibliographical guide for research in the field of kalām.

II. THE BEGINNINGS OF KALĀM (2ND-3RD/8TH-9TH CENTURIES)

In an article published in 1991, D. Gimaret took stock of the achievements in the field of kalām and deployed an unbalanced focus on the study of the earliest phase of kalām. Today the situation appears almost reversed. Since J. van Ess' monumental Theologie und Gesellschaft, relatively little work has


been done on the earliest speculative theologians. An exception is the work of D. Bennett, who wrote his doctoral thesis (University of California 2011) on one of the most important early mutakallimūn, Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām (d. between 220/835 and 230/845) and several shorter papers. There were some additional studies that returned to older research questions, such as the origins of the dialectical methodology in kalām, the Christian contribution to early kalām and an article that revises the composition history of al-Aš'arī's (d. 324/935) Maqālāt, one of the most important heresiographies of early theology.

The study of early kalām will perhaps receive new impetus: van Ess' work is currently being translated into English and will consequently be accessible to a much wider audience than the original German version. In addition, the study of early kalām will most likely benefit from the recent rise of Ibaḍi studies. W. Madelung and A. Al-Salimi have unearthed some early Ibaḍi kalām texts, the oldest of which were dated by the editors to the late second/eighth and the early third/ninth century. Provided they are au-

17 The first three volumes have already been published: Josef van Ess, Theology and Society in the Second and Third Century of the Hijra, trans. John O’Kane and Gwendolin Goldbloom, Leiden, Brill, 2016-2017.
18 Abdulrahman Al-Salimi and Wilferd Madelung, Early Ibaḍi Theology. Six kalām texts by
thentic, they would be the earliest primary texts of kalām ever discovered. The study of Ibaḍī sources is still in a rudimentary stage, of which a collective volume edited by E. Francesca offers a first outline.\(^1\) Yet the recent finds of primary sources offer a new textual basis for studying the early phase of kalām.


Cornelia Schöck, ‘Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/745–6) and the “Jahmiyya” and Dirār b. ‘Amr (d.

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\(^{1}\) *Abd Allāh b. Yazīd al-Fazārī*, Leiden, Brill, 2014.

From the fifth/eleventh century onwards, the Mu'tazila was increasingly marginalised from Sunni Islam. They were regarded as heretics and their literature was no longer transmitted—and sometimes intentionally destroyed. Our most important sources for the study of the first important school of kalām are therefore found outside the Sunni realm: on the one hand among the Shiites, and specifically the Zaydis, and on the other hand in Jewish manuscript sources.

Karaite Sources

From the late fourth/tenth century onwards, Karaite Jews came to adopt Mu'tazilite teachings in their theology. We still possess a substantial corpus of Mu'tazilite manuscripts copied by members of this community. However, most of these texts were not preserved in their entirety. Rather, they are remnants of the Geniza, that is, store rooms for books that were no longer used. The surviving codices tend to be more or less complete fragments of works. The most important collection of Karaite fragments of Mu'tazilite works is found in the Firkovitch collection in the National Library of Russia.

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St Petersburg. Since these manuscripts were practically unaccessible until the fall of the Soviet Union, the study of this material started only late.

The texts preserved in the Karaite repositories are not necessarily treatises written by members of their community. Rather, they include works by Jewish and Muslim authors. In recent years several valuable critical editions of key texts for the study of Mu’tazilism have been prepared on the basis of Karaite manuscripts. Of significant importance are fragments of the multi-volume *al-Muğni fi abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-ʿadl* by the Mu’tazilite chief theologian qāḍī ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār al-Hamaḍānī (d. 415/1025). The *Muğni* is the most important *summa* of Mu’tazilite teaching that has come down to us. Parts of it were previously accessible in the edition of the fourteen (out of originally twenty) volumes discovered in Yemeni manuscripts. The Karaite fragments recently edited by O. Hamdan and S. Schmidtke contain sections of the work that are not included in the Yemeni recension and were previously believed to be lost.²⁰

Additional primary sources that complement the previous finds of Mu’tazilite works are two treatises by the Būyid vizir al-Ṣāḥib b. ‘Abbād (d. 385/995), the patron of qāḍī ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār. It is again S. Schmidtke who worked on this edition, this time in collaboration with W. Madelung.²¹ The texts are of great interest, despite their relative shortness and their fragmentary character: they are among the most ancient surviving sources of the Baṣrān school of Mu’tazilism; in addition their thematic focus is specifically relevant to the study of Mu’tazilite metaphysics and atomistic ontology. Several recent articles with a more narrow focus shed further light on the Karaite reception of Mu’tazilism. Yet the study of the material is still very much in its infancy, and many fragments of works remain unidentified.


Yoram Erder, ‘The Karaïtes and Mu‘tazilism’, in Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora


**Shiite Mu’tazilism (Zaydis and Imāmīs)**

The second subfield of Mu’tazilite studies that has seen significant progress is its reception among Shiite theologians. Although the Imāmīs are of some importance, recent scholarship has been specifically productive with respect to Zaydi Mu’tazilism in Iran and Yemen.22 As is the case with the study

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of the Karaite-Mu‘tazilite textual corpus, the study of Zaydi Mu‘tazilism has been advanced primarily on the basis of (previously) unedited manuscript sources. Publications in this field include in-depth studies—either monographs or series of articles—and critical editions, as well as a special issue of Arabica (see below the contributions to vol. 59, no. 3–4). Several individual theologians, like al-Ḥasan al-Raṣṣās (d. 584/1188)\(^{23}\) or Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-ʿAnsī (d. 667/1269)\(^{24}\) have received specific attention. A significant amount of scholarship has focused on the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries. This period was specifically relevant to the transmission of knowledge and literature from the Iranian Zaydi community to Yemen.\(^{25}\) As a result of this process, Yemen became the new cultural and intellectual centre of Zaydism. Some additional studies shed light on later developments and provide insight into the continuity of the Mu‘tazilite tradition among the Zaydis of Yemen.\(^{26}\) A recent initiative of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton together with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML) at Saint John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota attempts to build a comprehen-


sive digital repository of Zaydi manuscripts and is gradually providing open access to a growing corpus of unexplored Mu'tazilite sources. Recent finds have shown the value of such endeavours: for example, some substantial fragments of Ibn al-Malāḥīmi al-Ḥwārazmī’s Kitāb al-Mu’tamad fī ʿuṣūl al-Dīn were recently discovered in Zaydi manuscript libraries (Ibn al-Malāḥīmi was not a Zaydi, though). These additional portions of texts allowed W. Madelung to publish a new, enlarged edition of the work.


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Abū l-Qāsim al-Ka‘bī al-Balḥī and the Mu‘tazila of Baghdad

Recent research on kalām has also produced significant work on the Mu‘tazilite school of Baghdad and its most prominent representative, Abū l-Qāsim al-Ka‘bī al-Balḥī (d. 319/931). This branch of Mu‘tazilism has long been neglected by scholars of the history of kalām—for obvious reasons: the sources are quite problematic because they were mostly written by later antagonists and consequently tend to be polemical. The first detailed study on Abū l-Qāsim al-Balḥī was eventually published in 2016 by R. el Omari. Her monograph is the first systematic collection and critical analysis of secondary reports about central elements of the doctrines of this important theologian. Yet el Omari was apparently unaware of the publication of one of Abū l-Qāsim al-Balḥī’s works in kalām, namely his ʿUyun al-masā’il wa-l-ḏawārābāt, a work she assumed to be lost. Both the recent edition and el Omari’s monograph open important new perspectives for further research.

IV. Studies on Aš’arism

After the decline of Mu‘tazilism, Aš’arism became the predominant school of kalām. Its adherents were primarily Šāfi‘ites and Mālikites. Scholars widely agree that the history of Aš’arism can be roughly divided into two major phases, and that the transition from the ‘methodology of the earlier’ to that of the ‘later ones’ is closely linked to the teaching of the famous Abū Ḥāmid al-Gazālī (d. 505/1111). Al-Gazālī’s intellectual activity was a landmark in a longer transformation, to which later theologians, like for instance Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), also contributed. On the other hand, some innovations previously associated with al-Gazālī could actually be traced to earlier phases of Aš’arite history. Nonetheless, the periodisation of ‘early’ (or ‘classical’) and ‘later’ Aš’arism is still helpful and will also structure the following outline.

Early Aš’arism

If Aš’arism is the most important school of Sunni kalām, this has not saved it from a significant loss of its literature. The majority of the writings of the earliest representatives of Aš’arism have not survived. Having said this, it is particularly important that two primary sources of great relevance to the early history of Aš’arism have recently been published. The first is an edition of Abū Ġa’far al-Simnānī’s (d. 444/1052) al-Bayān ‘an usūl al-īmān.31 The work has survived in a single manuscript and was used extensively by D. Gimaret in his classical 1980 study Théories de l’acte humain en théologie musulmane.32 The second publication is a facsimile edition of volume two of the autograph of Nihāyat al-marām fī dirāyat al-kalām by Fāhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 606/1210) rather lesser-known father, Diyyā’ al-Dīn al-Makkī (d. middle of the 6th/12th c.).33 Long passages of the Nihāya comprise a recompilation of a work by the author’s teacher, namely Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī’s (d. 512/1118) al-Ǧunya fī l-kalām.34 Both works are incomplete so that each of them allows a relatively clear idea of the missing parts of the other text. Additional major texts of ‘early’ Aš’arism have been recently discovered but still wait to be published. However, they have been used in some studies on specific theological issues. Problems that have been dealt with include debates on the ‘argument from ignorance’ (with specific focus on Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, d. 403/1013, and Abū l-Ma‘ālī al-Ǧuwaynī, d. 478/1085);35 the adoption of Abū Hāṣim al-Ǧubbāʾī’s (d. 321/933) theory of abwāl (literally ‘states’) by Aš’arite theologians;36 and al-Bāqillānī’s theory of the human act in his Hidāyat al-mustarṣādīn.37

37 Jan Thiele, ‘Conceptions of Self-Determination in Fourth/Tenth-Century Muslim


**Al-Ḡazālī**

Al-Ḡazālī is not only an exceptional thinker because of his contributions to Muslim intellectual history but also because modern scholarship has devoted numerous publications to him. This should make him one of the best studied figures in Muslim intellectual history. Three recent monograph studies by A. Treiger, A. Cissé and K. Garden show that interest in al-Ḡazālī has not decreased.38 Al-Ḡazālī’s 900th anniversary in 2011 was the occasion for several collective volumes and special issues of academic journals.39 Some

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39 *The Muslim World* vol. 101, no. 4, 2011 & vol. 102, no. 1, 2012 (ed. M. Afifi al-Akiti); *Mélanges
new translations of al-Ġazālī’s works have also been published, including a partial translation of Ḩiyā’ilūlm al-dīn into English40 and a translation of Kitāb Asās al-qiyās into Italian.41


Later Aš‘arism

Until recently, the development of Aš‘arism after al-Ḡazālī and the increasing integration of elements from the Avicennian system of thought during this period went almost unnoticed by experts in kalām. This has greatly changed. Among other researchers, A. Shihadeh has made significant contributions to bringing this era more to the forefront, specifically with his 2006 monograph study on the ethics of the period’s most influential thinker, Fahhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.42 More recently, A. Shihadeh has further advanced this field and has focused specifically on the interim period between al-Ḡazālī and Fahhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and the theologians’ increasing engagement with Avicenna. Apart from several article-length studies,43 he published a critical


43 Ayman Shihadeh, ‘A Post-Ghazālīan Critic of Avicenna: Ibn Ghaylān al-Balkhī on the
edition and comprehensive analysis of an aporetic commentary on Avicenna's *Iṣārāt* by Šaraf al-Dīn al-Masʿūdī (d. before 605/1208). Furthermore, Fāhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s approach to interpreting the Qurʾān was subject to a monograph study by T. Jaffar. Finally, Fāhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s voluminous *Nihāyat al-ʿuqūl* has been published. Various shorter studies have shed light on specific theological and philosophical problems discussed by Fāhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and some post-Rāzian thinkers, as well as on the reception of his thought among the Copts.


Alnoor Dhanani, ‘The Impact of Ibn Sīnā’s Critique of Atomism on Subsequent *kalām* Discussions of Atomism’, *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* vol. 25, no. 01, 2015, pp. 79-104.


‘Regional Manifestations’ of Aš’arism

The growing interest in the developments of Aš’arism after al-Ǧazālī shifted the geographical focus onto the Islamic east. It was specifically thinkers from this geographical region—including Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī himself—who contributed to the process that can be described as a synthesis of Aš’arism and post-Avicennian philosophy. Yet some recent works have also focussed a spotlight on the development of Aš’arism in other areas, including the Indian subcontinent47 and the Islamic west. The study of Maghrabi Aš’arism is receiving new stimuli from research activities in the region itself, with some initiatives of individual scholars and institutions specifically dedicated to the study of Maghrabi Aš’arism, such as the Markaz Abī l-Ḥasan al-Aš’arī based in the Moroccan city of Tetuan. In addition, large sections of a recent monograph on Islamic intellectual history in the eleventh/seventeenth century by K. El-Rouayheb are devoted to Mālikite Aš’arism in North Africa.48 A. Spevack’s book on an Egyptian Aš’arite theologian from the twelfth/eighteenth century further broadens the geographical and temporal perspective of recent approaches.49


Justin Stearns, “All Beneficial Knowledge is Revealed”: The Rational Sciences in the Maghrib in the age of al-Yūsī (d. 1102/1691), Islamic Law and Society vol. 21, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 49-83.


V. Conclusion

In many respects, the ‘state-of-the-art’ in kalām studies still appears unsatisfactory. A number of desiderata that had been identified already in 1991 by D. Gimaret have only been partially addressed, and a great deal of basic research remains to be done, including the identification and edition of sources that remain in manuscript form. Yet one has to bear in mind that modern research on kalām is a relatively young field of study and that it has seen significant advances, including contributions that have opened perspectives for future work.

The claim that the study of kalām can and should not be limited to Muslim scholars and their literary production is not entirely new. However, recent scholarship has underscored that non-Muslim sources are indispensable for the field: the fact that we now possess significant new portions of ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār’s al-Muḏnī fi abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-’adl and even textual fragments from the pen of al-Ṣāḥīb b. ‘Abbād that predate ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār are
just two striking examples from the domain of Mu’tazilite studies. These texts indeed require closer analysis in order to complete and refine our knowledge of Baṣṣan Mu’tazili kalām. As for the Aš’arite school, studies on the Coptic reception of Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s teaching has also highlighted the relevance of cross-denominational approaches to the study of kalām.

Scholars have not only challenged the limitations of the field along the confines of religious communities. The appropriateness of sharply distinguishing between theology and philosophy has also become an important issue. Recent scholarship has devoted a great deal of work to studying the synthesis of post-Avicennian philosophy with kalām, specifically with regard to later developments in the Aš’arite school. It is now beyond doubt that later kalām made a significant contribution to the continuity of falsafa (as opposed to the outdated narrative of the ‘decline’ of philosophy caused by the attacks of the theologians). The methodological distinction between the ‘demonstrative’ nature of falsafa and the ‘dialectic’ (and therefore inferior) nature of kalām appears no longer tenable in the light of recent research. As a result, surveys of ‘Islamic philosophy’ increasingly acknowledge the ‘philosophical’ nature of kalām in general. This opens new room for further exploring the relationship between kalām and falsafa.

Some significant attempts to ‘decentralise’ the perspective on kalām have been made: interest in developments in more ‘peripherical’ regions like Yemen, Oman or the Maghrib has significantly grown. One might also add the advances in the study of Ottoman kalām. However, the latter’s marginalisation in scholarship of Islamic intellectual history had nothing to do with a geographical periphery but rather with the previously unquestioned narrative of a ‘decline’ of Islamic thought under the Ottomans. With the widening of the geographical scope, the timeframe of investigation has also been extended. If several years ago the field was specifically concerned with early kalām, the perspective is today much wider than ever before, and important

work has been done on periods and trends that were previously considered
unworthy of serious investigation.