



Kalām in the crossfire: A historical survey of the legitimacy of the study of theology within the Sunni school of Islam

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The aim of this article is to briefly introduce and to examine the views of the founders of the four Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence (namely, Abū Hanīfa Nu‘mān ibn Thābit, Mālik ibn Anas, Muhammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāf‘ī, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal) and that of their renowned students and followers, regarding the legitimacy of engaging in the study of Islamic doctrinal beliefs or *Kalām*. Different, and often conflicting, views have been postulated on this matter. Some Sunni thinkers have condemned the pursuit of theology as an act of heresy and denounced its practitioners as apostates. Other Sunni thinkers have extolled this discipline as the noblest of sciences whose learning and teaching are, at least under certain circumstances, incumbent. This fundamental dispute regarding the legitimacy of the discipline of theology has resulted in a rather contentious and opaque scholarly environment. In addition to the inherent importance of the discipline of theology as such, the significance of this dispute is compounded by the impact that the attitude one adopts toward this discipline can have on the development of the intellectual and rational aspects of Islam. A negative attitude toward theology, for example, can hamper the application of rational elements to Islamic doctrine. Our focus in this article is on analysing the views of the leading thinkers and jurists of the Sunni school and investigating the most authoritative sources of doctrinal tradition within this major denomination of Islam. Our study leads us to conclude that the disapproving views of the preeminent Sunni figures should be construed, not as a denunciation of the discipline of theology *per se*, but as a refutation of certain theological principles and persuasions that are viewed as incompatible with orthodox Islamic faith. In addition to and preceding that conclusion, this article provides a survey of the literature concerning the views of Muslim scholars on the legitimacy of *Kalām*. After categorising these views into the two opposite camps of *Kalam's* legitimacy and illegitimacy, the article then proceeds to evaluate and critically analyse them, and to resolve some of their initial incompatibilities.

Contribution: The article sheds new light on the historical development of the discipline of theology within the Sunni schools of Islam. This is a little-studied and often overlooked subject that can help in attaining a better understanding of how this critical field within religious studies has emerged into its present form.

Keywords: the Sunni school; *kalam*; theology; disputation; the Mu‘tazilah; the Ashā‘irah; the Māturīdiyyah; the Ahl al-Ḥadīth; credal theology; dogmatic theology.

Introduction

The branch of traditional religious studies in Islam that deals with religious belief and doctrine is designated as *kalām*, but it is also referred to by such other descriptive titles as: *al-fiqh al-akbar* ('the greatest knowledge'), *‘ilm al-tawḥīd* ('the science of divine unity') (see Taftāzānī 1401 AH, 1:6), *‘ilm uṣūl al-dīn* ('the science of the principles of faith') (see Ibn Athīr Jazarī 1400 AH, 3:161), *‘ilm sharī‘at* ('the science of the path of faith'), and *‘aqlīyāt* ('the rational principles') (see Ibn Taymīyah 1425 AH, 19:307). Shahrastānī claimed that the use of the appellation *kalām* to designate this discipline was first employed by Mu‘tazilī theologians (Shahrastānī 1404 AH, 1:30). The function of this discipline consists of proving and articulating the principal doctrines of faith – including postulating the facts that constitute the believer’s knowledge of God, shedding light on how obedience to God can be manifested, expounding on the nature of divine prophecy and the character of God’s prophets – and defending the ‘boundaries’ of faith against the criticisms posed by disbelieving sceptics (see Muẓaffar 1422 AH, 1:19). As such, *kalām* covers all doctrinal beliefs of Islam, and is not restricted to the study of God and divine attributes. (*Kalām* and its domain are

to be more elaborately defined in a separate section of the article.)

The aim of this article is to analyse the views of Muslim thinkers regarding the legitimacy or illegitimacy, of the study of *Kalām*, and why its practitioners have been denounced as heretics and apostates by some major Muslim figures. The question of the legitimacy of studying and practising theology has historically led to great controversy. On one side of this controversy were those who declared the pursuit of this discipline to be contrary to genuine faith, even going so far as to equate it with *kufur* (disbelief) and *zindiqah* (atheism). On the opposite side of the dispute (Anṣārī Hirawī 1418 AH, 5:71; Ibn Taymiyya 1425 AH, 16:473; Dāremī 1433 AH, 33) were those who pronounced engagement in this discipline and teaching it to others as a meritorious (Qīrwānī n.d.:169; Ghazālī n.d., 1:96–97) and even occasionally mandatory endeavour (Bayāḍī 1425:33–37; Ibn Abī al-‘Izz 1391 AH, 1:65). The views of the representatives of each side will be discussed below.

Considering the fact that what is intuitively expected of all devout Muslims is that they should endorse and support this discipline, as its essential function is defending the fundamental articles of Islamic faith, the question naturally arises as to why some major Muslim figures have taken such a negative stance toward the discipline of *kalām*? What compelled them to assume such a position? Is it in fact the discipline of theology as such that is the object of their condemnation? Or is it a particular subgroup of Islamic theologians that are intended? Or could it be that this stance was in response to certain topics and discussions that proved distasteful to the religious sensibilities of the detractors?

To answer these questions, we examine the views of the proponents and detractors of *kalām*, focusing primarily on the views of the *imams* of the four main Sunni schools of jurisprudence and their prominent students and followers. The conclusion we arrive at is that the occasional condemnation of theologians and the prohibition on the study of *kalām* were not directed *per se* at the discipline as we know it. Rather, the detractors were primarily opposed to certain theological questions and principles, and therefore denounced only a certain group and a certain persuasion of theologians in virtue of their position on these problematic questions and principles.

Historical background of the present study

Throughout the history of Islamic scholarship, numerous books have been produced on the question of whether it is permissible to pursue *kalām*. The following is a short list of some of the most preeminent of these works:

- *Risālat al-ghunyah ‘an al-kalām wa ahlih* (‘The Dispensability of *Kalām* and Its Practitioners’), by Abū Sulaymān Khaṭābī (d. 388 AH).

- *Aḥādīth fī dhamm al-kalām wa ahlih* (‘Reports Denouncing *Kalām* and Its Practitioners’), by Aḥmad Rāzī (d. 454 AH), also known as Muqirri.
- *Dhamm al-kalām wa ahlih* (‘Denunciation of *Kalām* and Its Practitioners’), by Khwājah ‘Abdullāh Anṣārī Harawī (d. 1489 AH).
- *Al-Intiṣār li aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* (‘Triumph of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth’), by Sam‘ānī Shāfi‘ī (d. 489 AH).
- *Iljām al-‘awām ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām* (‘Protecting the People from the Science of *Kalām*’), by Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī (d. 505 AH).
- *Nahāyat al-aqdām fī ‘ilm al-kalām* (‘The Greatest Advancement in the Science of *Kalām*’), by Muḥammad Shahrastānī (d. 548).
- *Taḥrīm al-naẓar fī kutub al-kalām* (‘Expounding the Impermissibility of Reading the Books of *Kalām*’), Ibn Qudāmah Maqdisī (d. 620 AH).
- *Al-Radd ‘alā al-manṭiqiyyīn* (‘Refutation of the Logicians’), by Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728 AH).
- *Ṣawn al-manṭiq wa al-kalām ‘an fannay al-manṭiq wa al-kalām* (‘Safeguarding Language and Speech from the Disciplines of Logic and *Kalām*’), by Suyyūfī (d. 911).

The central theme in all of the above texts is the illegitimacy of *kalām* and the impermissibility of studying it. However, there are not that many texts written in defence of this discipline. One notable work that offers such a defence is *Risālat istiḥṣān al-khawḍ fī ‘ilm al-kalām* (‘Treatise on the Merits of Engaging in the Discipline of *Kalām*’), whose authorship is commonly credited to Abū al-Ḥasan Ash‘arī (d. 324), the eponymous founder of the Ash‘arī school of Sunni theology. (The latter work is in some sources identified with the alternative title *Risālat fī al-radd ‘alā man ẓanna anna al-ishtighāl bi al-kalām bid‘ah* [‘Treatise Countering Those Who Denounce the Pursuit of *Kalām* as Heresy’].)

The topic of this article is one that has in large part been ignored by contemporary scholars. In spite of our fairly exhaustive efforts, we were only able to find two articles written on this topic: ‘*‘Ilm al-kalām bayn al-dhamm wa al-madīh*’ (‘The Science of *Kalām* in the Crossfire of Condemnation and Praise’), by Aḥmad Sāmīh ‘Alī (in the journal *Minhāj*), and ‘*‘Ilm al-kalām wa ḥukm al-ishtighāl bih*’ (‘The Science of *Kalām* and the Rule concerning its Pursuit’), by Maḥfūz Sālim (in the journal *Dirāsāt al-jazā‘ir*). In addition to lacking an analysis and appraisal of the various views on this question, the two aforementioned articles have also failed in offering a comprehensive survey of all the articulated views on this question, be it those of the proponents of *kalām* or its critics. (For instance, such a prominent figure as Abū Ḥanīfah is conspicuously absent from both articles.) As such, the present article came about as an attempt to address this question in a more comprehensive and analytic manner. To this end, we have investigated numerous sources and have endeavoured to evaluate the views of the major Islamic thinkers on this very important question in a fair and academically objective manner.

Defining *Kalām*

Kalām has numerous definitions. They vary between a minimalist concept of *kalām* and a maximalist one. One representative example that falls into the former category is the definition offered by Taftāzānī: ‘Comprehending religious beliefs by virtue of indubitable arguments’ (Taftāzānī 1410 AH, 1:6). Another such definition is that proffered by Ījī. The stress in his definition is primarily on the function of the discipline of *kalām* in proving religious beliefs (see Ījī 1417 AH, 1:31). Ibn Khaldūn’s definition exemplifies the maximalist conceptualisation of *kalām*. He defined *kalām* as:

[T]he science that defends religious beliefs by virtue of rational arguments, thus countering the heretics and those who choose to diverge from the beliefs of the predecessors and the custodians of [religious] tradition. (see Ibn Khaldūn 1984:1, 458)

Thus, in Ibn Khaldūn’s view, *kalām*, in addition to providing genuine knowledge concerning religious doctrine and proving religious beliefs, is responsible for addressing and refuting the criticisms levelled at religious doctrine. Thus, drawing on these various definitions, it would be safe to say that *kalām* is the discipline responsible for bringing rational reasoning to bear on religious doctrine, supporting and reinforcing religious beliefs by virtue of rational and demonstrative proofs, and offering rational responses to the criticisms and objections raised by the critics.

The verbal equivalent for ‘theology’ in Arabic is ‘*ilāhīyāt*’ or ‘the divine sciences’ (*al-‘ulūm al-ilāhīya*). Apparently, this gained prevalence in Islamic tradition after Ibn Sīnā entitled the section on the first philosophy of his *al-Shifā* by the term (see Ibn Sīnā 1:4). This is a later phenomenon in Islamic literature, marked with its own historical characteristics, for example, a new phase of interaction between Islamic philosophy (*Falsafa*) and *Kalām*. However, and regardless of the lexical connections, the word ‘theology’ conventionally and more often, is taken to be an equivalent for the science of *Kalam*, which is the case in this article. As such, Theology (*Kalām*) means the study of Islamic doctrinal beliefs. Early examples of these doctrines included divine attributes and their relation to God, human free will and divine providence, divine justice and predestination, and the nature of divine revelation. As can be seen, *Kalam* covers a wide range of discussions over beliefs and doctrinal principles, as opposed to jurisprudential, legal and more generally, the practice and ritual-related aspects of Islam.

The views of Sunni scholars regarding *Kalām*

As already noted, Muslim scholars are divided on the legitimacy of studying and engaging in the discipline of *kalām*. The supporters of this discipline are not content with merely asserting the legitimacy of this discipline but rather go further, deeming its pursuit to be a priority in comparison with the other branches of the Islamic studies. The detractors, however, proclaim the pursuit of *kalām* to be impermissible and thus deem Muslim theologians as worthy of

condemnation. What follows is a detailed investigation of these two opposing positions.

Advocates of the legitimacy of *Kalām*

Many Muslim thinkers, predominantly the followers of the Ash‘arī school of *kalām* and those of the Māturīdī school (the latter which, in contrast to the former school, identifies itself with the Ḥanafī school of Islamic jurisprudence) commend the discipline of *kalām* as the noblest form of human knowledge. For, they argue, its subject-matter is knowledge of God, and there is no subject that can be deemed nobler than God. As such, the pursuit of *kalām* should be encouraged, and in fact in the instances in which critics of religious faith raise objections regarding religious tenets, thus threatening to undermine the religious belief of the masses, learning this discipline in order to refute the raised objections is obligatory. To support their position, these scholars invoke the verses of the Qur‘an and the example and thought of Prophet Muhammad’s Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) and the Successors (*tābi‘ūn*). Below is a treatment of the prominent Sunni scholars who endorse the discipline of *kalām*.

Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150 AH)

Abū Ḥanīfah Nu‘mān ibn Thābit is among the advocates of the legitimacy of *kalām*. He is often hailed as the most preeminent master of the study of *kalām* (see ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Bukhārī 1418 AH, 1:17). He encouraged his students to pursue *kalām* and famously characterised the study of the principal tenets of faith as *al-fiqh al-akbar* (‘the greatest knowledge’), as contrasted with the study of the practical laws of Islam, the *sharī‘ah*, which he described as *al-fiqh al-aṣḡar* (‘the lesser knowledge’). This innovative characterisation is one obvious indicator of his favourable view of *kalām*. Another no less obvious indicator is his authorship of a book on *kalām* entitled: *al-fiqh al-akbar* (see Bazdawī n.d.:3; Zarkashī 1421 AH, 1:17). The title of the book is self-explanatory. The reason given by the author for this designation is that its most prominent and widely debated topic is divine unity and attributes, knowledge of which is the ‘greatest knowledge’, and hence the title (see ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Bukhārī 1418 AH, 1:17; Ibn Abī al-‘Izz 1391 AH, 1:65; Taftāzānī 1401 AH, 1:6). This book had such an impact that it came to be known as the ‘Book of Knowledge’, and the arguments presented in it were described as offering the most effective proofs for refuting the opponents of religious faith (Isfarā‘īnī 1403 AH:184). Abū Ḥanīfah’s contribution to *kalām* gained such widespread acceptance that some scholars maintained that those who truly wish to learn ‘the science of polemics’ ought to study Abū Ḥanīfah (Abū Ishāq Shīrāzī n.d., 1:78; Abū Shāmmah Maqdisī 1424 AH, 1:80; Mazī 1400 AH, 28:436).

Abu al-Ḥasan Bazdawī (d. 382 AH)

Abu al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad Bazdawī, the great Ḥanafī jurisprudent of Transoxiana (Dhahabī 1405 AH, 18:602), is

another eminent Sunni scholar who wrote a book on *kalām*. This is how he described this discipline:

[Religious] knowledge is of two types: the knowledge of divine unity and attributes and the knowledge of the canonic law [*sharī'ah*] and the rules of Islamic practice. What is crucial with regard to the former knowledge is to draw on the Scripture and the tradition and to avoid deviation (*hawā*) and heresy (*bid'ah*). Our predecessors – including Abū Ḥanīfah, Abū Yūsuf, Muḥammad, and their disciples – all exemplified this truth. Abū Ḥanīfah wrote the book *al-Fiqh al-akbar* on this topic, demonstrating therein the divine attributes, God's ordainment of good and evil.... (Bazdawī n.d.:3)

Ibn Abī Zayd Mālikī (d. 386 AH)

Abū Muḥammad 'Abdullāh ibn Abī Zayd Qīrwānī Mālikī – whom Dhahabī praises with such honorific titles as *imām* ('leader'), *allāmah* ('very knowledgeable'), *qā'id* ('leader'), *faqīh* ('jurisprudent'), *'ālim ahl al-maghrib* ('the scholar to whom the Islamic West defers'), and *al-mālik al-ṣaghīr* ('the little Mālik') (see Dhahabī 1405 AH, 17:10) – describes *kalām* as the noblest science and that which is dearest to God (see Qīrwānī n.d.:169).

Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī (d. 505 AH)

Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī is arguably the most prominent Islamic theologian. That subsequent scholars used such reverential descriptions as *shaykh* ('the Master'), *imām* ('the leader'), *baḥr al-ilm* ('the sea of knowledge'), *u'jūbat al-zamān* ('the marvel of all times'), *zayn al-dīn* ('the adornment of religion'), and *dhakā' mufrīḥ* ('extremely clever'), to name only a few, to refer to him is a testimony to his unique status within Sunni *kalām* (see Dhahabī 1405 AH, 19:322). His juridical affiliation lay with the Ḥanafī denomination, and in point of his theological orientation, he subscribed to the Ash'arī school. To prove the legitimacy of the study of *kalām* he cited a number of Qur'anic verses and then concluded, 'The Qur'an, from its beginning to its end, is all argumentation' (Ghazālī n.d., 1:95–96). Ghazālī emphasises the opinion that the value of the discipline of *kalām* is due to the goals that motivate the practitioner of *kalām* and the dexterity of the practitioner with respect to those goals. These can include knowing the arguments for the creation of the world and the unicity of God, and having knowledge of the divine attributes (see Ghazālī n.d., 1:95).

Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā'ah (d. 733 AH)

Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā'ah Kanānī Shāfi'ī was a grand mufti and a senior judge, a Qur'anic exegete, and an eminent Ash'arī theologian (Dhahabī 1408 AH, 2:103). He wrote many works on *kalām*. Quoting Abū Maṣṣūr 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, he enumerated the most prominent Sunni theologians, and among the Companions, he pointed to 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib as the first practitioner of *kalām* on account of his debates with the Khawārij concerning the notions of divine promises and threats (*al-wa'd wa al-wa'id*), and with the Qadarīyyah regarding the issues of divine preordination and predestination (*al-qaḍā wa al-qadar*). He named 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar – who debated with the leader of the

Qadarīyyah, Ma'bad Muhanī, and disavowed them – as the next greatest theologian among the Companions (Ibn Jamā'ah, Muḥammad, 1410 AH, 21-24).

Shāṭibī (d. 790 AH)

Abū Ishāq Shāṭibī, a prominent Mālikī jurisprudent, is of the view that by invoking the notion of 'the categorical interests' (*maṣāliḥ mursalah*), we are able to demonstrate that the discipline of *kalām* is in fact grounded in Islamic law and tradition and in the Qur'an. He reasons that *kalām* is nothing but the study of 'the principles of faith' (*uṣūl al-dīn*), and as such its function is to articulate the arguments mentioned in the Qur'an and the corpus of tradition relating to the topic of divine unity and to other such topics that belong to the purview of the Islamic belief system (see Shāṭibī 1429 AH, 1:29). This leads him to the conclusion that if in fact *kalām* – and by extension all the disciplines that are in the service of the Islamic faith but that were absent in the earliest period of Islam – is an unorthodox innovation that ought to be shunned, then by the same logic we must also disavow the consolidation of the Qur'an into a single codex and the universally accepted practice of copying the Qur'an (see Shāṭibī 1429 AH, 1:29).

Ibn Abī al-'Izz Dimashqī (d. 792 AH)

'Alī ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad Dimashqī, more commonly known as Ibn Abī al-'Izz, was a prominent Ḥanafī jurisprudent whose theological affiliation lay with the Māturīdī school of *kalām*. In his commentary on *al-'Aqīdah al-ṭahāwīyyah*, he described *kalām* as the study of the principles of faith and thus as constituting 'the greater knowledge', in comparison with the study of the secondary tenets (*furū'āt*) of faith, with which jurisprudence is concerned. Not only does he deem the pursuit of *kalām* permissible, but also consider it to be a need surpassing all other needs in importance and a necessity transcending all other necessities in significance. Furthermore, because of its unique role in providing knowledge of God and His attributes and actions, it is effective in engendering spiritual revival and inducing mental and emotional tranquillity in its students (see Ibn Abī al-'Izz 1391 AH, 1:65).

Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan Bayāḍī (1098 AH)

Kamāl al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan Bayāḍī is a renowned Māturīdī theologian who adhered to the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law. He elaborated extensively on the legitimacy of pursuing *kalām* and puts forth a number of reasons demonstrating that *kalām* is the noblest of sciences. Bayāḍī maintained that possessing a greater knowledge of God and His attributes enhances the quality of one's worship. This connection between worship and knowledge is so strong. Bayāḍī emphasised that the proper performance of religious rituals is essentially dependent on an adequate comprehension of the principles of faith and of the science of *kalām* (see Bayāḍī 1425 AH:30–33).

Opponents of the legitimacy of *Kalām*

In opposition to the scholars who have in various ways highlighted the significance of the discipline of *kalām* and have argued for its legitimacy, there are others who denounce this discipline and discourage its pursuit. The legitimacy of the study of *kalām* and the permissibility of its pursuit have come under attack from prominent authorities from all four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, for various reasons. In some of these cases, of course, the adopted stance is not as clear-cut as is sometimes suggested but is rather based on dubious quotations that are often at odds with other passages that seem to exhibit a positive stance toward *kalām*. Below, we will examine several examples of those authorities who are alleged to be opposed to the study of *kalām*.

Abū Ḥanīfah

Some Sunni scholars – most of whom are aligned with the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement (which espouses a very literalist interpretation of sacred texts) – cite certain passages from Abū Ḥanīfah that seem to suggest that he was opposed to the study of *kalām*. These scholars claim that Abū Ḥanīfah declared the study of *kalām* to be forbidden (see Muqirri, 1417 AH, 1:88), and that he condemned anyone as atheist (*zindīq*) who sought to approach religion by virtue of polemical disputation (*jidāl*) (see Khaṭīb Baghdādī 1403 AH, 2:159). Ibn Taymīyyah alleges, Abū Ḥanīfah would say, ‘God curse “Amr ibn ‘Ubayd, for it was he who led the people to the study of *kalām* and to beliefs that were irrelevant to them”’ (Ibn Taymīyyah 1408 AH, 6:561). Similarly, it is claimed that when Abū Ḥanīfah was asked to answer a question regarding the philosophic notions of substance, accident, and body, he dismissed the assertions of philosophers as heretical (*bid‘ah*) and cautioned against learning *kalām*. As opposed to that, he encouraged all people to adhere to ‘the ways of the predecessors’ (*ṭarīqat al-salaf*) (see Qāsimī 1399 AH, 1:298, and Abū Qāsim Iṣfahānī 1419 AH, 1:115–116).

Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179 AH)

Mālik ibn Anas – the eponymous founder of the Mālikī school of Sunni jurisprudence – was one of the key figures in the formation of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement within Islamic scholarship. He is said to have been opposed to the study of *kalām*. Harawī and Ibn Taymīyyah both quoted him as saying, ‘Anyone who approaches religion through *kalām* will inevitably end up an atheist’ (Anṣārī Harawī 1418 AH, 5:71; Ibn Taymīyyah 1425 AH, 16:473).

Abū Yūsuf Shaybānī (d. 182 AH)

Qādī Abū Yūsuf Shaybānī – an esteemed pupil of Abū Ḥanīfah – is one of the authorities who is often cited as condemning *kalām*. The view that the practitioners of *kalām* are apostates is famously attributed to him (see Abū Ṭālib Makkī 1426 AH, 1:239; Ghazālī 1405 AH, 88; Ibn Qudāmah Maqdisī 1410 AH, 41; Wakī‘ 1366 AH, 3:258). It is also reported that he said, ‘Knowledge of *kalām* is ignorance and ignorance of *kalām* is knowledge. Once someone gains

mastery of *kalām*, he is liable to be called an apostate’ (Abū Ṭālib Makkī 1426 AH, 1:258; Dārumī 1433 AH:33; Ṣāliḥī 1417 AH, 1:17).

Imām Shāfi‘ī (d. 204 AH)

Muḥammad ibn Idrīs Shāfi‘ī (the eponymous founder of the Shāfi‘ī school of Sunni jurisprudence) is cited as another prominent opponent of the discipline of *kalām*. He is the source of many of the most scathing criticisms of *kalām*. One of the many notable remarks in this connection that is attributed to him is: ‘It is necessary to shun *kalām* and flee from it as one would flee from a lion’ (Abū Qāsim Iṣfahānī 1419 AH, 1:224). The reason why Imām Shāfi‘ī was so vehemently opposed to *kalām* is expressed in the following passage quoted from him:

Shun *kalām*, for if one is asked concerning a juridical question, and one gives the wrong answer, such as, say, if someone is asked concerning the blood money for the murder of another soul and he answers that it is an egg, he would only be laughed at. But if someone is asked concerning a theological question and he offers an incorrect answer, he would be denounced as an apostate. (Sam‘ānī 1417 AH:9)

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH)

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (the eponymous founder of the Ḥanbalī school of Sunni jurisprudence) expressed the fiercest condemnations of the study of *kalām*. He denounced the leading figures of the various theological persuasions as heretics (see Abū Ṭālib Makkī 1426 AH, 1:172, 239; Ghazālī 1405 AH:87; Ibn Taymīyyah 1406 AH, 2:139; Sam‘ānī 141:9; ‘Umrānī 1999:1, 130), going so far as to proscribe social interaction with the practitioners of *kalām* (see Ibn Abū Ya‘lā n.d., 1:334; Dhahabī 1407 AH, 18:91; Ibn Muflīḥ Maqdisī 1417 AH, 1:223). Ibn Ḥanbal pronounced the practitioners of *kalām* as ineligible for receiving divine salvation and deemed an interest in *kalām* as indicative of the presence of a perverse inclination toward deception (see Ibn ‘Abd al-Birr 1398 AH, 2:95; Ibn Jawzī 1405 AH:102; Ibn Qudāmah Maqdisī 1410 AH:41).

Analysis and evaluation

The conflict of contradictory opinions regarding the legitimacy of the discipline of *kalām* presents a murky and confused historical picture of the debate over this very important study. This state is especially detrimental as what is at stake is more than just a theoretical position on an abstract field of study; it influences how one decides to deal with this discipline. This practical concern is further accentuated if we take account of the fact that to delegitimise the study of *kalām* would in effect stay the growth and development of the intellectual component of Islamic doctrine. This makes it all the more important that we examine and evaluate the reasons why the detractors of *kalām* assumed such a negative stance toward this discipline. To this end, we will group the various criticisms raised against this discipline into three main strands. We will see what issues gave rise to these criticisms and how they may be addressed.

First criticism: Absence of *Kalām* in the age of the companions

One of the primary criticisms levelled against *kalām* is that Prophet Muhammad never engaged in or encouraged theological discussions and inquiries. The Prophet's sole preoccupation was to teach the practical precepts and rules of Islam. The Prophet did not say anything that could be interpreted as grounds for the legitimacy of *kalām*. Moreover, one would also be hard pressed to find any statement from the Companions that could be brought to bear on the question of the efficacy of *kalām*. Thus, pursuing this discipline would be contrary to the example set by the Prophet and the Companions.

The fallacy of this criticism can be readily demonstrated. The Prophet, in line with the Qur'anic injunction 'and argue with them by virtue of that which is best' (Qur'an 16:125), was constantly debating and arguing with the unbelievers. His attitude in engaging with the unbelievers was informed by the Qur'anic dictum: 'Offer your argument if you are truthful' (Qur'an 2:111; also, Qur'an 21:24; 27:64; 28:75). And the reason for this Qur'anic approach is obvious, because with careful consideration of the contents of the Qur'an and the spirit that pervades its teachings, it will be seen that the Qur'an's call is founded on reason. With regard to the use of rational arguments, the Qur'an itself employs this method. Examples of the application of this method can be found in the Qur'an's use of a rational argument in its refutation of the polytheists' claim as to the divinity of their gods, namely, that one of the requisites of divine lordship is having the power to bestow benefits and being able to guard against affliction and harm [to one's subjects] (Qur'an 17:56 and 34:22). Another example can be found in the Qur'an's argument for the reality of the resurrection and the truth of the call of the Apostle of God to the fact that the creation of the heavens and the earth was not mere idle play (Qur'an 21:16–17). Verse 35:3 similarly argues for the exclusivity of God's Providential Lordship (*rubūbiyat*) by averring that it is only He Who is the Creator. As the Qur'an states elsewhere, those who are condemned to divine torment as sinners and disbelievers merit such a sentence only if they have rejected the truth after being presented with clear evidence of its veracity, and those who merit the heavenly life in the hereafter do so only in light of conformity to clear proofs vindicating their beliefs (see Qur'an 8:42). The debate between Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Najrān (alluded to in Qur'an 3:61) is another indication that Prophet Muhammad did not shun debates concerning theological topics and that he in fact was strongly driven to engage in theological debates when doing so was in defence of the intellectual principles of the Islamic faith.

Furthermore, the claim that the Companions did not endorse *kalām* is obviously erroneous. Because if what the critics have in mind is a practical refusal to engage in theological debates, which would be clearly at odds with historical fact. Numerous

instances of debates in which the Companions engaged with unbelievers and even occasionally with Muslims are recorded in historical documents. One example is the debate that 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās had with the Khawārij at the behest of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib (see Zamakhsharī 1412 AH, 2:66), and 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib's debate (see Ibn Baṭṭal 1423 AH, 10:326; Jariri Nahrawani, 1426 AH, 600), as well as the debates of Abu Bakr al-Siddīq (Lālaka'ī 1402 AH, 4:663) with the Qadarīyyah. 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib's debate with the Khawārij (see Bukhārī 1418 AH, 4:472) is another case in point. Historical records also point to 'Umar ibn Khaṭṭāb's debate with Jews regarding the Archangels Gabriel and Michael (see Ibn 'Abd al-Birr 1398 AH, 2:953). Many other instances of theological discussions held by such prominent Companions as Ḥasan Baṣrī (see Balādhurī 1417 AH, 2:147) and 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd are described in authoritative historical texts (see Ghazālī 1405 AH:96). Another example can be found in a debate that took place between a group of the Prophet's associates and a Christian or Jew (a member of the community of 'People of the Book') concerning the issue of destiny or God's providence and divinely ordained 'fate' (*qaḍā wa qaḍar*) (Shaybānī 1400 AH, 1:153; Tabarānī 1404 AH, 8:153). Also, the Prophet's associates would engage in rational argumentation with each other or with others in the presence of the Prophet (unto whom be God's peace) without their being prevented from doing so by the Prophet (Balādhurī 1417 AH, 2:147; Ibn Qayyim al-Juwziyya 1415 AH, 3:594). But if what the critics have in mind is that the Companions never pursued and taught *kalām* as a codified field of knowledge, the same can be said with regard to such other disciplines as *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), *ḥadīth* (the study of the reports related from the Prophet and the Companions), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). None of these disciplines, which all the detractors of *kalām* find to be perfectly credible and consistent with Islamic faith, had formally taken shape during the time of the Companions (see Ghazālī n.d., 1:96).

If, on the other hand, the thrust of the criticism concerns the use of such novel terms as *substance* and *accident*, which were borrowed from Hellenistic philosophy, the criticism would lack any substantive value, for these terms are not critical to the study of *kalām*; they only facilitate a more convenient way of communicating between the scholars and the students of *kalām*. Moreover, the same phenomenon is at play in the other disciplines of the Islamic studies, as *fiqh* and *ḥadīth* developed terms that were definitely not in use during the time of the Prophet or the Companions (see Ghazālī n.d., 1:95).

But if the criticism intends to point to the fact that theological debates and discussions were not prevalent during the time of the Companions, the answer is clear. In the early years of Islam, there was not much theological and sectarian dissension, and therefore there was no need to engage in theological disputation. Only toward the middle and the end of the age of the Companions did sectarian and theological divisions start to emerge. With the formation of such sects as the Khawārij and the Qadarīyyah, the Companions in fact

started articulating sound and robust arguments in critique of the divergent beliefs of these newly formed sects. They would engage in serious debates with the prominent figures of these sects and would attempt to offer reasonable responses to their claims. For example, Abdullah ibn Abbās participated in a debate which he referred to as *majles-i sirā'* in which he would engage in rational argumentation concerning the issue of destiny or God's providence and divinely ordained 'fate' (*qaḍā wa qaḍar*) (Al-Janādī 1995, 1:99).

Second criticism: Adverse consequences

The second strand of criticism levelled against the study of *kalām* is based on the ostensible adverse consequences of this discipline. According to some of the detractors of this discipline, pursuing *kalām* can only lead to bigotry, greater polarisation and division, and enmity among Muslims, and these are all consequences that are strongly condemned in Islam (see Ghazālī n.d., 1:95).

The fallacy in this line of criticism is that it attributes the adverse consequences entailed by the incorrect methods and presuppositions utilised by some theologians to the discipline of *kalām* as such. *Kalām* itself is based on principles derived from the Qur'an and the corpus of tradition, and any negative consequence that may result from the pursuit of *kalām* is caused by the illegitimate methods and principles employed by some of its practitioners (see Ghazālī n.d., 1:95). When contemplating the legitimacy of *kalām* as such, what we need to bear in mind is that when the proper methods and principles are utilised, the results arrived at (namely, defending Islamic beliefs and offering cogent and convincing arguments to those who raise questions and criticisms about Islamic doctrine) will be legitimate and reasonable, and this is true of all the branches of Islamic studies. With the other disciplines, too, be it *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, or *rijāl*, if the practitioner implements incorrect principles and methods, the results and consequences he will arrive at would naturally be invalid and illegitimate. But, it would be incorrect to cite these invalid and illegitimate consequence as grounds for undermining the legitimacy of the disciplines in question. Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī makes the following observation in this connection:

If the study of *kalām* leads to bigotry, division, rancour, and enmity, these are obviously unacceptable matters, and we must all avoid them. But in the same vein, arrogance, conceit, ostentation, and seeking after social and political power, which are potential consequences that may be attendant on the pursuit of such universally accepted disciplines as *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, and *tafsīr*, are never cited as grounds for the illegitimacy of the disciplines in question. (Ghazālī n.d., 1:94–96)

Third criticism: Opposition of major religious leaders

The third, and arguably the most significant, criticism directed at the study of *kalām* is the opposition voiced by prominent Sunni religious leaders against this discipline. To address this criticism, it is essential that we correctly and carefully analyse and examine the expressions of opposition purportedly voiced by the religious leaders in question. It

is only through such an analysis that we can discover their true intent.

We will start with an examination of the negative attitude ostensibly exhibited by Abū Ḥanīfah. As extensively demonstrated in the section 'The Advocates of the Legitimacy of *Kalām*', Abū Ḥanīfah is known more for his support of the study of *kalām* than for his opposition. The positive remarks attributed to Abū Ḥanīfah that are supportive of the legitimacy of the study of *kalām* far outweigh those that are deemed to be critical. But as for why Abū Ḥanīfah could have held a positive opinion of *kalām* despite the negative remarks he occasionally expressed regarding it, the exposition that numerous Sunni scholars have offered of the views of Abū Ḥanīfah in this relation are enlightening. Adducing the reports indicative of Abū Ḥanīfah's positive stance toward *kalām*, Dhahabī offers the following explanation regarding the negative remarks attributed to him:

Abū Ḥanīfah was not opposed to *kalām* as such but to certain theological topics and to certain practitioners of theology, such as 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd, who was one of the prominent figures of the Qadarīyah and Mu'tazilī schools. He did not reject *kalām per se*, that is to say, as the discipline responsible for delineating and defending the boundaries of faith. (Dhahabī 1405 AH, 6:104)

The same analysis is true of the apparently negative views expressed by Abū Yūsuf Shaybānī regarding *kalām*, which at first glance seem to imply its illegitimacy. His criticism was mainly aimed at those practitioners of *kalām* that exploited this study for improper objectives, employed invalid methods, and attacked their theological adversaries as heretics. A careful examination of the modifiers in Abū Yūsuf's remarks makes it clear that he was not opposed to the discipline of *kalām* as such. Rather, he was averse to such figures as Marrīsī and to such persuasions as the Jahmīyah and the Mu'tazilī who bickered unduly regarding the divine attributes and accused one another of apostasy. This is how Dhahabī explains Shaybānī's apparent opposition to *kalām*:

The examples Abū Yūsuf has in mind in denouncing *kalām* are the doubts and objections that arise in consequence of the views of the practitioners of *kalām*. They would bicker with one another regarding the verses [*āyāt*] and reports [*ahādīth*] bearing on the topic of the divine attributes and would denounce one another as heretics in virtue of their differing views. It was this [*problematic*] approach that resulted in the emergence of the Mu'tazilī and Jahmī persuasions and the theory of the corporeality of God [*tajsīm*] and many other woes. (Dhahabī 1405 AH, 8:539)

Likewise, Shāfi'ī's denunciation of all practitioners of *kalām* was motivated by his encounters with Abū Yaḥyā Ḥafṣ Fard. He believed the Qur'an to have been created in time, and it was on this question that Shāfi'ī debated with him (see Dhahabī 1405 AH, 10:30). What Dhahabī's report indicates is that Shāfi'ī's disapproval of *kalām* and his denunciation of the practitioners of *kalām* as heretics was aimed only at those who claimed that as the word of God, the Qur'an was a temporal phenomenon or one that was created

in time. This qualified opposition was described by some later writers, erroneously, as a categorical opposition, whereas other writers correctly highlighted the qualified scope of Shāfi'ī's opposition. It is from the reports of the latter group of writers that we may accurately understand Shāfi'ī's true stance toward *kalām*. Ibn 'Asākir, quoting Bayhaqī, points to this very fact in his elucidation of Shāfi'ī's position, and then he adds,

How could the object of Shāfi'ī's denunciation be the *kalām* of the followers of genuine Islamic tradition [*ahl al-sunnah*] and the majority view [*al-jamā'ah*] when in fact he himself would expose the falsehood of the arguments and deceptions of the followers of the deviant sects [*ahl al-ahwā'*] that had made an impression on those with whom he was acquainted. (Ibn 'Asākir 1404 AH:341)

Another critic of the discipline of *kalām* who is described as exhibiting a very negative attitude toward this discipline is Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. A consideration of his times and the historical conditions and events that defined his social environment can be of great help in correctly understanding the disapproving remarks quoted from him regarding the study of *kalām*. Ibn Ḥanbal's time saw the most intense phase in the dispute between the Ahl al-Ḥadīth (who advocated for a very literalist approach toward an understanding of sacred texts) and the Mu'tazilī theologians, especially with regard to the question of the createdness of the Qur'an. The dispute was so intense that it was characterised as a *fitnah* – an instance of religious dissension. The debate was such a prominent social phenomenon that in 218 AH the Abbasid caliph Ma'mūn ordered the governor of Baghdad to 'test' the judges, jurists, and reporters of Prophetic tradition with the question of the creation of the Qur'an. Those who believed in the creation of the Qur'an were free to go, but those who believed otherwise were to be reported to the caliph (see Ibn Athīr Jazarī 1417 AH, 5:572). Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal was one of the figures who resisted the governor's pressure, ultimately leading to his arrest and his forcible transfer to the court of Ma'mūn while bound and in shackles. He remained in prison for his refusal to believe in the creation of the Qur'an until the ascension of Mutiawakkil to the caliphate (see Ibn Athīr Jazarī 1417 AH, 5:576).

Under the caliphate of Mutiawakkil, the tables were turned in favour of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth and to the detriment of the Mu'tazilī theologians. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and all those imprisoned for rejecting the createdness of the Qur'an were freed and belief in the creation of the Qur'an was banned. Mutiawakkil issued a decree, effective in all Islamic lands, that prohibited the study of *kalām* and the belief in the creation of the Qur'an (see Ibn Kathīr 1424 AH, 14:350). This clearly indicates that in that day and age, *kalām* was used exclusively to refer to the debate over the creation of the Qur'an.

The foregoing interpretation is further corroborated by another statement made by Ibn Ḥanbal in this relation. He is said to have remarked, 'Those who study *kalām* will never attain salvation, for they are not immune from being persuaded into accepting the Jahmī position' (Dhahabī 1405

AH, 11:29, 1407 AH, 18:90; Ibn Muflīh Maqdisī 1417 AH, 1:223). This quote once again shows that the object of Ibn Ḥanbal's opposition was not *kalām* as the discipline responsible for arguing for and defending the articles of faith but as a harmful preoccupation with such contentious topics as the creation of the Qur'an and the nature of the divine attributes, which he deemed to be heretical. This understanding is reinforced by the historical fact that Ibn Ḥanbal would himself engage in theological debates with theologians belonging to the Mu'tazilah, Qadarīyyah, and Jahmīyyah sects, attempting thereby to put pressure on his theological adversaries and convince the caliph to endorse his theological position on the issues in question.

Ibn Taymīyyah and Bayāḍī both agree with this interpretation of Ibn Ḥanbal's position. Ibn Taymīyyah explained that Ibn Ḥanbal employed *valid* rational arguments in defending the religious beliefs of Islam. However, if the arguments adduced in theological discussions were contrary to the contents of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition or involved some unorthodox innovation, Ibn Ḥanbal was quick to dismiss them. In a letter he wrote to Mutiawakkil explaining his position, Ibn Ḥanbal stated,

I do not favour *kalām*, unless it aligns with a verse in the Qur'an or a report related from the Prophet, the Companions, or the Successors in the corpus of tradition. (Ibn Taymīyyah 1417 AH, 7:155)

Kamāl al-Dīn Bayāḍī agreed with Ibn Taymīyyah's assessment. He explained that the *kalām* that was the object of Ibn Ḥanbal's denunciation was the *kalām* that was articulated by deviant and heretical sects (*ahl al-ahwā' wa al-bid'ah*), not the discipline of *kalām* as such (see Bayāḍī 1425 AH:37).

Discussion

Having analysed the views of the proponents and detractors of *kalām*, we demonstrated that from the Islamic standpoint, the application of reason to the principal or creedal doctrines of faith is legitimate. This then led us to conclude that denouncing the practitioners of *kalām* as heretics on the basis of their use of rational argumentation is unfounded. The only genuine ground that the detractors of *kalām* invoke in support of their stance is the critical statements of the prominent scholars of Islamic jurisprudence and theology regarding the illegitimacy of pursuing the study of *kalām*. We showed, however, that when viewed in light of the socio-political conditions of their time, these statements are insufficient in proving that the persons in question were in fact opposed to the discipline of *kalām* as such.

The second and third centuries AH were a time of intense conflict between the Mu'tazilah and the other doctrinal persuasions in Islam. The Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement, represented by such influential figures as Mālik, Shāfi'ī, and Ibn Ḥanbal, was fiercely opposed to the Mu'tazilah. As the application of the term *kalām* to the discipline responsible for defending the articles of Islamic faith was first popularised

by the Mu'tazilah, the designation *mutikallim* (student or practitioner of *kalām*) was used by the members of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement to refer exclusively to Mu'tazilī theologians. This reference was aided by the fact that the most contentious issue faced by the scholars and that indicated the rift between the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement and Mu'tazilī theology was the precise nature of 'the word of God' (*kalām allāh*) as manifested in the Qur'an, and whether it was a temporal phenomenon created in time (*ḥādīth*) or an eternal being (*qadīm*).

Furthermore, the Mu'tazilites were pejoratively labelled as '*ahl al-ahwā'*' literally meaning 'those given to whims and desires' because, all other things being equal, they considered the value of rational arguments as being on a par with the Qur'an and the hadith report corpus. Thus, the senior scholars in the 'scripturalist' school (*ahl al-hadīth*) opposed them. This in fact is how the opposition to the science of *kalām* arose (Ibn Asākir 1404 AH:345). Additionally, the opposition of these jurists against the science of *kalām* and its advocates was not because they used neologisms such as 'attribute', 'substance', and 'corporeity'. Instead, it was because of [their belief] that they disseminated deviant beliefs which contravened [the teachings of] the Qur'an, the hadith report corpus, and plain reason (see Ibn Taymiyyah 1417 AH:vol. 1, 232–233).

In addition to all this, many of the major Sunni religious leaders, first and foremost among them being Abū Hanīfah, described *kalām* as 'the noblest of the sciences'. A number of them asserted that learning *kalām* in order to be able to respond to criticisms of Islamic doctrine is obligatory and teaching it to others is mandatory. In light of the inherent purpose of the discipline of *kalām*, which is to offer a rational account and defence of the doctrines of faith, a favourable stance toward the discipline of *kalām* as we understand it today is more reasonable and in greater agreement with the Qur'an, with Islamic tradition, and even with the expressed position of the most prominent Sunni jurists and religious leaders, including those who denounce the practitioners of *kalām* as heretics. For, these seemingly unapologetic detractors were themselves, in a sense, practitioners of *kalām*, as they would argue against those beliefs and sects that in their view contradicted orthodox doctrine, and to this end they would engage in theological debates and write numerous texts of a theological character.

Conclusion

This study sought to answer the question as to why some of the well-known figures among Sunni scholarship anathemised (pronounced *takfīr* upon) the practitioners of *kalām* (*mutikallimīn*); and whether the subject of their anathemisation included everyone engaged in creedal theology or whether their criticism was limited to specific groups who harboured specific objectives in specific (and more limited) theological controversies.

In response to the above questions, the following points were established in this article:

1. The prohibition of *kalām* and the excommunication of its practitioners by scholars such as Abū Hanīfa Nu'mān ibn Thābit, Mālik ibn Anas, Muhammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and the like, has nothing to do with the later concept of *kalām* as it is commonly understood among Muslim scholarship. Rather, the main objective of those who advocated such prohibitions was to oppose a particular side in certain controversies such as the one over the createdness of Qur'an as the word of God, and/or targeting a specific group among the *mutikallimīn* (*Kalam practitioners*), who disseminated certain (believed to be heretic) beliefs of specific sects such as the Mu'tazilites, the Qādirīya, and the Jabrīya. The intention was not an all-encompassing ban on *kalām* as the science of understanding doctrinal beliefs and defending religious dogma. *Kalām* as a general category of that discipline was never a controversial issue.
2. Many senior Sunni figures such as Abū Hanīfa, Abū al-Hasan al-Bazdawī, Abū Zayd Qirawānī al-Mālikī, Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī al-Shafi'ī, Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā'a, Abū Ishāq al-Shātibī, Ibn Abī'l-'Az al-Dimashqī, Kamāl al-Dīn Bayāḍī, Imām al-Harṁayn al-Juwaynī, and so on, consider the study of *kalām* as a legitimate practice and [some of them] have even issued religious verdicts (*fatāwā*) that learning the science of *kalām* for apologetic purposes, that is, defending the religion and its creeds in the face of disbelievers' intellectual attacks, is a religious obligation (*wājib*).
3. Objections and counterarguments such as 'that the Prophet and his companions did not practise *Kalam*' or the ones based on the negative consequences of studying it, and so on, were thoroughly examined. It was concluded that these objections do not serve as plausible grounds for the prohibition against *kalam*, and that the arguments for its legitimacy prove to be stronger and more logical, considering their compatibility with the verses of the Qur'an, the hadith report corpus, and the tradition-setting practice of the early companions of the Prophet, as well as the scholars in the formative period of Islam (*ulamā-i salaf*).

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