

Faraz A. Khan. *An Introduction to Islamic Theology: Imām Nūr al-Dīn al-Şābūnī's Al-Bidāyah fī uşūl al-dīn: Introduction, Translation, Annotation and Appendices*. Berkeley, CA: Zaytuna College, 2020. 482 pages. ISBN: 9780985565992.

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Until the modern period, the rich genre of theology (*ilm al-kalām*) within Islamic civilisation, like other scholarly disciplines, was usually written in Arabic. The rise of modernity has led to the translation of theological textbooks into a range of national vernaculars for the use of scholars, madrasa or university students, and the wider Muslim public. In recent decades, such translations into English have become important for growing Muslim populations in the West, and have reflected the emergence of English as a global language of Islamic scholarship. Along with the aim to make classical expressions of theological orthodoxy – from various schools of thought – accessible, this linguistic shift has sometimes betrayed the worry that earlier great works in the genre are no longer sufficient for contemporary needs.

Faraz A. Khan, the author of *An Introduction to Islamic Theology*, demonstrates a keen attention to these concerns. Choosing to translate a well-known work by the Māturīdī theologian Nūr al-Dīn al-Şābūnī (d. 580/1184), he composes an introduction to provide a basic history to *kalām* and to contextualise the text for contemporary readers; divides the book's forty sections into six chapters, each with copious endnotes; and supplies two appendices on the *kalām* cosmological argument (KCA) and descriptions of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632). The English translation is given on facing pages of the Arabic text, which is based on two published editions of the book. The quality of the translation is generally

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excellent: with only rare exceptions (see below), the author conveys the meaning accurately and idiomatically. The Arabic text has been fully vowelled, which prioritises the general public ahead of dedicated students of Islamic theology who, in my view, benefit from the requirement to independently vocalise such a book. Throughout, Khan is diligent in ensuring that any potential obscurity in his source text is removed.

Beyond the accurate translation of a classical Sunnī work of *kalām*, we may ask the question: in what intellectual project is Khan engaged? In his introduction, he addresses a contemporary Muslim audience who are in search of theological answers. He suggests that the wrong turns of modernity and postmodernity have led to abandoning the correspondence between concept and reality for a philosophical mirage. As well as opening a window onto insights from the tradition, the return to a classical text, once appropriately clarified, can provide the resources to deal with the questions of today. Study of al-Ṣābūnī's *Al-Bidāya* is evidently meant as just the beginning. He argues, in my view justifiably, that renewal of *kalām* should start with appreciation of its heritage. Yet there is not a systematic statement on how to take further steps towards a *kalām jadīd*, beyond studying the more detailed works that Khan uses to explain *Al-Bidāya*. This would not necessarily be a problem in an introductory text (though it should be noted that despite its name, *Al-Bidāya* would not be an easy first exposure to *kalām*). But Khan does not stop at explaining classical theological doctrine; he actively responds to modern concerns in the notes and Appendix A. The result is that in his discussion of contemporary debates, he takes up a fairly apologetic position from within the late classical tradition.

When explaining al-Ṣābūnī's book, Khan treats late classical manuals, such as *Sharḥ al-'aqīda al-Nasafīyya* by Ṣa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 793/1390) and its commentaries, as authoritative. This leads him to minimise any distinctive aspects of *Al-Bidāya* as a work within the classical Māturīdī tradition. For example, in his commentary on the most famous such question, whether *takwīn*, which he translates as 'act of creating', is an eternal attribute, Khan cites the view of the Sunnī 'scholars of verification (*muḥaqqiqīn*)' that *takwīn* is merely a logical relation (153-54). As a methodology of Islamic scholarship this procedure is unremarkable. But I would argue that it can be counterproductive to the goal of unearthing the riches of classical *kalām*. The intellectual historian should be alert to the development of the prior tradition and the problems with which a given theologian, in this case al-Ṣābūnī, was grappling. Khan does not emphasise the features of al-Ṣābūnī's own theological system, which is closely linked to that of his predecessor

Abū al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī (d. 508/1114). Instead, he mainly uses *Al-Bidāya* to frame Islamic theology according to the concerns of its later proponents. This approach is underscored both by the frequency of his citation of such works and from the fact that he does not directly quote from al-Ṣābūnī’s larger theological text *Al-Kifāya fī al-hidāya* (published in 2014), from which *Al-Bidāya* was summarised. Instead, he only refers to the excerpts of *Al-Kifāya* included by Bekir Topaloğlu (d. 2016) in his edition of *Al-Bidāya*. To solely rely on Topaloğlu’s judgement for what is relevant from al-Ṣābūnī’s major theological compendium is a notable oversight.

There are also regrettable lapses in critical scholarship on aspects of the intellectual history broached within the book. The narrative provided in the introduction is mainly hagiographical. Though this is partly a matter of style, mistakes in the annotations suggest an unfamiliarity with some of the sources. For instance, when discussing the Miḥna (218-233/833-847), the pivotal political event in the history of early *kalām* in which a series of Abbasid caliphs persecuted traditionists to accede to the doctrine of the Qur’an’s createdness, Khan suggests that al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) fled and died four days later, and that ‘Īsā b. Dīnār (d. 212/827) was imprisoned for twenty years (148). In reality, the former lived for two decades after the Miḥna concluded and was ultimately rejected by many traditionist compatriots for holding the verbal articulation of the Qur’an to be created. The latter died before the Miḥna began. Other slips include citing the theologian Abū al-‘Abbās al-Qalānīsī (d. 4th/10th c.) and the jurist Abū al-‘Abbās Ibn Surayj (d. 306/918) as Ash‘arīs when they actually preceded Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936) (254-55).

The most substantial treatment of a contemporary theological question is the essay on the KCA in Appendix A. This argument was revived in Christian philosophical theology during the twentieth century by William Lane Craig, drawing mainly from al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), and has attracted a lot of attention since. Khan defends the argument at length from some of the criticisms that it has received in contemporary academic literature. He takes his main stand on the classical distinction between a potential and actual infinity. By rejecting the latter, he denies the possibility of an infinite past regress, which would negate the KCA as traditionally conceived. But in the post-Cantorian world, merely asserting the invalidity of an actual infinity is not sufficient to silence critics. One must be ready to engage related questions in the philosophy of mathematics, as Craig has done with work on the anti-realism of abstract objects. There is also a mistake in the essay with respect to the philosophy of Kant (d. 1804). The author takes the

thesis of Kant's first antimony as support for the finitude of time (376-77) and later argues against his first antithesis for the same reason (400-1). But Kant's aim in producing the antimonies is to show that one can reach either of the opposed conclusions depending on one's initial premises, and thereby to reveal the inability of reason to go beyond the limits of possible experience.

Finally, whereas Khan studies the core syllogism of the KCA in depth, the basis of inference from the necessary being to the divine attributes is dealt with only briefly. This is to the detriment of his apologetic goal, as an important objection for the argument to overcome is that it leaves a gap between the necessary being and the God of theism. Khan suggests that from the conclusion of the KCA alone, one arrives not just at the eternal and necessarily existent creator, but also at eternal, as well as real and distinct, attributes of life, knowledge, will and power (395). This amounts to the claim that the KCA has two corollaries: (1) the predication of these specific four properties to the necessary being, and (2) their ontically distinct character, as opposed to other deflationary options within a model of divine simplicity. On the first point, Khan argues that knowledge, will and power are required to give preponderance to a merely possible universe, and that life is required to possess these three attributes (396). Yet it seems difficult to establish the distinctive function of each of these attributes, or even the category of properties at all, without some kind of additional inference from things within the world. The case of life is even more stark; it is a purely analogical argument that only living things have knowledge, will and power. On the second point, there is no reason that the necessary being's eternality mandates the distinct eternality of the attributes – it is a separate question entirely. In fact, the KCA was in use among Mu'tazili theologians who rejected distinct eternal attributes before it was adopted by Sunnīs who were committed to them. Thus, my concern with this section of the author's argument is that certain theological assumptions are presupposed that exceed the limits of the conclusion of the KCA alone. They deserve to be clarified. Also, when listing the attributes that can be derived from the KCA, Khan leaves out *takwīn*, an attribute that is important to al-Ṣābūnī and the Māturīdī tradition (400). This again underscores a commitment to the authority of late classical Sunnism over the views of the author of the translated text.

I can suggest a few improvements that could be made to the translation:

- (1) Al-Ṣābūnī's definition of substances and accidents is heavily paraphrased. It reads: "A substance is that which directly occupies space, without ascription to anything else that directly occupies space, while an accident is that which

exists only as ascribed to a substance and cannot conceivably exist otherwise” (42). A more literal translation would be as follows: “A substance is that which is established in its own right (*mā taqūmu bi-nafsihā*) and may exist without a substrate (*maḥall*), whereas an accident is that which is established in something else and cannot conceivably exist without a substrate.” There is no basis to replace the concept of independent subsistence with the distinct, albeit related, concept of occupying space.

- (2) The word *al-majūs* is translated as magians (48). This is a term drawn from the Quran (22:17) that refers to Zoroastrians and not magians (Zoroastrian priests).
- (3) Active participles (*asmā' al-fā'il*), such as knowing (*'ālim*), are described as nouns (*asmā'*) by al-Ṣābūnī and the translator notes that they are adjectives in English (64). They are possibly better classified in English as verbs that function adjectivally.
- (4) Azar is glossed as the paternal uncle, rather than the father, of the Prophet Ibrāhīm without mentioning that there is no basis for preferring this interpretation in al-Ṣābūnī's text (338).

Khan's translation of al-Ṣābūnī's *Al-Bidāya fī uṣūl al-dīn* is a lucid rendition of this classical Māturīdī *kalām* manual. The editing and typesetting of both the English and Arabic text are to a high standard and the annotations provide the reader with detailed discussion of the main theological positions. Yet the commentary lacks a critical appreciation of the early history of *kalām* and the Māturīdī tradition to which the text belongs, remaining anchored to the positions bequeathed by later developments. When addressing contemporary questions of philosophy and theology, the situation is mirrored: the late classical tradition cannot provide convincing answers without engaging in a more robust dialogue with the intellectual resources of modernity. Such a conversation requires an openness to the possibility that Islamic theology has not just a past but a future, one that is foreclosed by adopting an overly apologetic stance.