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The Attributes of God in Medieval Islamic Thought: the conception of the Omnipotence of God between the *Qur'ānic* verses and the Islamic theology

**Os atributos de Deus no pensamento islâmico medieval:
a concepção da onipotência de Deus entre os versos do Alcorão
e a teologia islâmica**

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Abstract

As part of research on the omnipotence of God in Islam, it should be remembered that this object is a subject of a great debate on the conception of God, which has occupied the thoughts of both philosophers and medieval theologians since the 2nd century AH/ 8th century AD. Christ. In fact, the main theological problem in this period can be summarized in questions such as these: is it possible to know the Essence of God through His attributes? Can God be known through His attributes? Are the attributes of God logically and ontologically identical to His Essence or rather complementary? Therefore, can omnipotence be conforming or identifying attributes with the Essence of God? How do Muslim theologians discuss these names and attributes, especially divine omnipotence? In the context of these controversial issues, this paper focuses on the treatment of the Omnipotence between the *Qur'ān* (the sacred text of Islam) and medieval Islamic theological schools, notably the Ash'arite and the Mu'tazilite.

Keywords

Theology. *Qur'an* (*al-Qur'ān*). Divine attributes. Omnipotence. Ash'arite. Mu'tazilite.

Resumo

Como parte da pesquisa sobre a onipotência de Deus no Islã, deve-se recordar que esse tema é objeto de um grande debate sobre a concepção de Deus que ocupa o pensamento tanto de filósofos quanto de teólogos medievais, do século II ao século VIII d.C. De fato, o principal problema teológico deste período pode ser resumido em questões como estas: é possível conhecer a Essência de Deus através de Seus atributos? Deus pode ser conhecido por meio de Seus atributos? Os atributos de Deus são lógica e ontologicamente idênticos à Sua Essência ou, antes, complementares? Portanto, pode a onipotência conformar ou identificar atributos

com a Essência de Deus? Como os teólogos muçulmanos discutem esses nomes e atributos, especialmente a onipotência divina? No contexto dessas questões controversas, este artigo se concentra no tratamento da Onipotência entre o Alcorão (o texto sagrado do Islã) e as escolas teológicas islâmicas medievais, notadamente a Ash'arite e a Mu'tazilite.

Palavras-chave

Teologia. Alcorão (*al-Qur'ān*). Atributos divinos. Onipotência. Ash'arite. Mu'tazilite.

Introduction

As part of research on the omnipotence of God in Islam, it should be remembered that this object is a subject of a great debate on the conception of God, which has occupied the thoughts of both philosophers and medieval theologians since the 2nd century AH / 8th century AD. Christ.

In other words, the question of omnipotence is only part of the overall question about God, especially in relation between His Essence and attributes.

In fact, the main theological problem in this period can be summarized in questions such as these: is it possible to know the Essence of God through His attributes? Can God be known through His attributes? Are the attributes of God logically and ontologically identical to His Essence or rather complementary? Therefore, can omnipotence be conforming or identifying attributes with the Essence of God?

The treatment of these issues in medieval Islamic theological schools reveals two opposing views, namely one belongs to the Mu'tazilite school and the other belongs to the Ash'arite school.

To clarify further, the mu'tazilites on the one hand identify between the Essence of God and his attributes (*al-sifat 'ayn al-dāt*) and on the other hand they deny the pre-eternity of these attributes in Him (the attributes are not pre-eternal (*Qadima*) in God. This means that the divine attributes are not different from His Essence, rather they are the same as His Essence but not pre-eternal in Him.

As for ash'arites, on the one hand, they claim that the attributes are not identical with the Essence of the God but rather they are different from His Essence (*al sifat muḡayira li 'l-ḡat*) and on the other hand they announce that the attributes are additional to the Essence of God (*zaida' an al ḡat*) but are not separate from His Essence.

This means that the two theoretical opinions: that of the mu'tazilites and that of the ash'arites are strictly opposed; while the first school is based on the negation of the divine attributes, the second is based on their affirmation.

In this context of theoretical contradiction between the two mentioned schools, we are not going to work on all the divine attributes but we will choose to analyze only one of them which is the attribute of the Omnipotence of God, through the different arguments of each school.

Then, how do islamic theological schools deal with the attribute of Omnipotence? What are the theoretical bases of each school as well as its arguments? What is the main difference in its conceptions?

Thus the plan of this article will be divided into two elements: the first treats Omnipotence as it is presented in the *Qur'ān* (the sacred text of Islam) since it represents the theoretical basis of Islamic theology.

As for the second element, it addresses the attribute of Omnipotence as it is discussed and supported in medieval Islamic theology.

1. The meaning of divine Omnipotence in the *Qur'ānic* verses

We note here that "God" in Islam is called "*Allah*". In fact, on the one hand, the name of *Allah* appears around 2,700 times in the *Qur'ānic* verses (cf. BÖWERING, 2002), and on the other hand it is repeated each time in the "*Basmala*", the fixed introductory formula of all the suras (except Q:9), (but it's repeated two times in Q:27).¹ This introductory formula is

¹ We note here: the Basmala appears in its full form as a fixed introductory formula of 113 suras in the *Qur'ān*, it is not presented only in Q:9 but it is repeated two times in Q:27, the first one is fixed as the introduction of Q:27 and the second one is presented at the head of Solomon's letter to the Queen of Sheba.

expressed as “in the Name of *Allah* the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful (“*Bism Allah Arraḥmân Arraim*”).

In addition, the name of *Allah*, the one, only and unique is considered to be the basis of the Muslim profession of faith (*Ashahada*). This one is expressed as follows: “there is no other God but in *Allah*, *Mohamed* is the Messenger of *Allah*” (*La -Ilaha Illa Allah, Mohammed Rassoul Allah*).

Moreover, *Allah*, who is also called the Merciful (al-Raḥmân)² is described in the *Qur’ānic* verses by ninety-nine attributes called “the Most Beautiful Names of Allah”, and they are named in their Arabic origin: *Asmā Allah al-ḥusnā* or *al-Asmā al-ḥusnā*.

By the way, it has been said in the *Qur’ān* for example in sura (Q17: 110): “Say, invoke *Allah* or invoke al-Raḥmân, however (whatever) you invoke Him, to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names”, or as it was said in sura Taha “Allaho, no deity but to Him, to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names” (sura Taha Q17: 110).

These Most Beautiful Names (*Asmā Allah al-ḥusnā*) which are mentioned 57 times in the *Qur’ān* (for example: in, Q7: 180, 17: 110, 20: 8, 59: 24) have remarkable theoretical importance not only because they describe the conception of *Allah* (God), but because they were considered to be the theoretical basis of all islamic theology, namely the islamic theological schools built their theses as their systems on the conception of the divine Essence (*dāt*) in relation to both his attributes (*sifāt* and his beautiful names) (cf. BÖWERING, 2002; GIMARET, 1988). As well as all the theoretical conflicts between the two schools: Mu’tazilite and Ash’arite, are related to their conception of the relation between *Allah* (God) and His names and attributes.

How to know God through His attributes?

Here, we select Omnipotence as an example of a divine attribute to deal with the islamic conception of *Allah* (God) as it is represented in the *Qur’ān*.

² We note that the best name of *Allah* “al-Raḥmân” (the Merciful) is repeated 57 times in the *Qur’ānic* text as in Q17: 110: “Say, call upon Allah or call upon al-Raḥmân, however you call Him, to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names”.

To better understand the notion of divine Omnipotence as it is presented in Islam through *Qur'ānic* verses, it is important in the beginning to refer to its Arabic meanings, the native language of *Qur'ān*.

In fact, on the one hand, the meaning of Omnipotence is distinguished by its opposite, in other words, Omnipotence can be known as the opposite of impotence (al'azj); and on the other hand, the meaning of Omnipotence is linked to a lexical field which includes the notions of power, might, the ability to act or the ability to leave.

In this context, on the one hand, power is defined in the *Qur'ān's* encyclopedia by: “the ability to act or the possession of controlling influence over others” while “impotence means the lack of one of these abilities” (cf. KNYSH, 2004, p. 210).

On the other hand, “these various connotations of the english word “power” “are conveyed in *Qur'ānic* verses and commentaries by arabic terms such as sultan, mulk, qahr, 'izza, nufud, quwwa, ghalaba, istita'ah, and some others” (cf. KNYSH, 2004, p. 210).

Likewise, referring to the *Qur'ānic* verses, *Allah* describes himself by both a variety of meanings of absolute power and of strength, such as the examples here:

1. In the sense of strength God is called: “The Mighty” (*Al-Qadir* Q2: 20), “the strong” (*Al-Qawi*, Q11: 66), “The Great” (*Al-Kabir*, Q22: 62 or (*Al-'Azim*, Q 2: 255), “The overpowered restorer” (*Al-Jabbār* Q59: 23), “the dominator”, (*Al-Qahhar*, Q12: 39 (*Al-Mouhaimen*), the solid *Al-Matin* and the powerful (*Al-'Aziz*: Q2: 129).

2. In the sense of absolute control, He is called both: the accountant (*Al-ḥassib*, Q4: 86) and the observer (*Al-Raqib*, Q 4: 1).

3. In the sense of the power of creation He is called: not only the creator (*Al-ḥaliq*, Q59: 24) but also, who constantly creates *Al-allaq* Q36: 81), as well He is the creator of the heavens and the earth (*Badi' al-samawati wal-ard*, Q6: 101) and he is both the creator (*Al-Bari*, Q2: 54) and the shaper (*Al-Mussawwir*, Q 59: 24).

4. In the sense of power and omnipotence, God is called by the one who gives life and death (*Yuhyi wa Yumit* Q 15: 23) as well as the one who prevails over everything (*Al-Muqtadir*, Q18: 45) and who gathers everything on the day of judgment (*Al-Jāmi'*, Q 3: 9; 4: 140).

5. God is also recognised by the power of science and wisdom, so on the one hand He is called the Omnipotent (*Al-'Alim*: Q 2: 32) and on the other hand He is the "Wise or the judicious" (Q 2: 32) (*Al-ḥakim*) mentioned a hundred times in the *Qur'ān*.

6. In the sense of the power of forgiveness and judgment, God is also named, the Merciful (*Al-Raḥmān*) as well as the Compassionate (*Al-Raḥim*). He is also both the forgiver (*Al-ḡafir*, Q 7: 155), often the forgiver (*Al-ḡafur*, Q 2: 173) and the all-forgiving (*Al-ḡhaffar*, Q38: 66). He is likewise the Forgiver (*Al-'Afuww* Q4: 43) and also the one "turned to" humans with favor (*Al-Tawwab*, Q 2: 37).

7. The omnipotence of God occupies also the power of Judgment in addition to possession, so the *Qur'ān* calls God is not only "the righteous" "*Al-'Adil*" but also the righteous of the judges (*Aḥkamul-ḥakimin* Q 11: 45, 95: 8), as He is called "the possessor of majesty and bounty" (*du l-jalal wa -l-ikram* (Q 55: 78), the holy king "*(Al-malik al Quddus*, Q 59: 23, 62: 1), the ruler of the kingdom" (*Malik al-mulk*, Q 3: 26) and the owner of the day of judgment "*(Malik yawm al-din*, Q 1: 4)" (cf. BÖWERING, 2002, p. 319-233).

From the above, and referring to the Arabic terminology, we can notice that the notion of omnipotence is found scattered in all the meanings of all the Most Beautiful Names of *Allah*, hence the Omnipotence of God is an attribute included in all of Most Beautiful Names of God.

Therefore, *Allah* in Islam is considered to be All-Powerful, the Almighty and the Omnipotent, on the one hand because He has "the ability to act, to create, to destroy and impose His own will, the ability to give and to take power as well as authority and possession of control over nature and human beings" (KNYSH, 2002, p. 210), and on the other hand by what He has the capacity "to delegate this capacity to those of His creatures whom He chooses, notably to

the prophets and the kings” (KNYSH, 2002, p. 211). such as the divine power given to Alexander the Great as it is said in (Q 18 :84), that given to Solomon to master both natural and evil forces (satan) and the divine miracles given to Abraham, Zechariah and Moses and Christ and Muhammad.

To sum up the first part of this paper, we can note that the abstract conception of Allah (God) established yet in the Quranic verses is deeply constructed on the theoretical bases of His Most Beautiful Names.

In fact, these Most Beautiful divine Names have a special structure in Arabic grammar to prove divine omnipotence only for God, namely, the grammatical formulas of the Most Beautiful divine Names can never be shared with any creature. Rather, divine attributes and Beautiful Names belong only to *Allah*.

To further clarify, the beautiful names and divine attributes are presented in two logical forms:

The first form, is the universal form of the term which implies in it the sense of universality, this universal formula is indicated by the defined prefixes (presented by the two Arabic letters “alif +lam”: “Al”) added to each name and divine attribute.

The second form, is the superlative form of the beautiful divine names. Therefore, the Arabic language guarantees in its structure, grammatically and logically, that no one can be called by the Most Beautiful Names except *Allah*.

The questions that arise here: if the *Qur’ānic* verses fix the conception of God on the theoretical basis of his most beautiful names and attributes, then how do these Beautiful Names become the essential object of islamic theology? How do Muslim theologians discuss these names and attributes, especially divine omnipotence?

2. Conceptions of Islamic theology of the divine Omnipotence

It should be recalled here that the term “divine attributes” is known among Islamic medieval theologians by the plural Arabic term “*al – sifat*”³. This term which indicates the diversity of the names of *Allah* and of his attributes is generally used in connection with the singular Arabic term “*al-dhat*” to indicate both the essence and the uniqueness of God.

In other words, the theological debate is centered around the uniqueness of the divine essence (*al-dāt*) in front of the multiplicity of its attributes (*al-sifat*), so around this paradoxical relationship between the divine unity and the multiplicity of his attributes that all medieval Islamic theology built up its theses.

In fact, the paradoxical question between both the unity of the divine Essence and the diversity of its attributes was widely discussed in medieval Islamic theology, as a result major questions arise in this direction: Is the Essence of God identical to His attributes? Is Allah identical to His attributes or is He different from them? How to distinguish between the Essence of God and His attributes, or rather how to associate the diversity of attributes with the uniqueness of God without diversifying His uniqueness?

The theological debate around these issues began very early in Islamic civilization, namely, as early as the eighth century A.D. We can recall here on the one hand, what Binyamin Abrahamov indicates. The latter indicates *Jahm ibn Safwan* (died 129AH/746AD) (cf. ABRAHAMOV, 2002, p. 204) as the first theologian who dealt with this object.

Binyamin Abrahamov announces that *Jahm ibn safwan* has opted for the following thesis: “God is neither a thing nor a being, but He is infinite and undefined, He is also other than creation and totally transcendent, Consequently, He is considered above all attributes and it is impossible according to *Jahm* to apply the attributes, which are understood as entities (*jihat*) existing in God, to God” (ABRAHAMOV, 2002, p. 204).

³ We note that the term “*sifat Allah*” (the attributes of God) are taken by Islamic theology from classical grammarians of the Arabic language. However, in the *Qur’ān*, the attributes of God are called the “Most Beautiful Names” of God (*al-Asmā al-ḥusnā*, Q7: 180, 17: 110, 20: 8, 59:24).

On the other hand, medieval Islamic theology saw the birth of two famous schools and consequently of two opposing theses on the problematic of the attributes of God in its relation with His essence.

The two famous schools are: that of the mu'tazilites (As examples of Mu'tazilite scholars: *Le Qadi Abd al-Jabbār, Wasil ibn Ata, Abu Ali al Jubaii, Abu -al Hudhayl al Allaf*), and that of the ash'arites (cf. ABRAHAMOV, 2002, p. 204). As examples of the scholars of this school: *Abu al-Hassan al Ash'ari, al Baqillani, al Jouini, and Fakhr al -din Razi*.

In this context, the mu'tazilites consider that attributes have no real meaning and no real existence, because according to them, attributes are only a kind of "description" to express "someone described" (this means that the attributes are only used to describe God), therefore they deny the actual existence of the pre-eternity of the attributes of God and they regard the attributes as identical to the essence of God (*al-sifat 'ainat*). That means that God is identical to the omnipotent, the omniscient, the great, etc. and these attributes are identical, in value to each other.

The argument used by the mu'tazilites to prove their thesis is that the confirmation of the existence of the attributes of the pre-eternity of God, leads to the confirmation of the multiplicity of essences which touches the unity of God and contradicts it.

In contrast, the asharites confirm the existence of the attributes of pre-eternity on the one hand, as a real existence in the essence of God, and on the other hand as additional and positive (+) to the essence but not separated from it.

Therefore, according to them, the divine attributes are not identical to the essence of God. In the same way, they consider that God is omnipotent by omnipotence, he knows by knowledge, etc.

They argue in their thesis as opposed to the mu'tazilites by saying: that the confirmation of the multiplicity of the attributes of pre-eternity does not imply the multiplicity of essences, therefore for them, what must be denied is the multiplicity of the divine essences of pre-eternity, but not the multiplicity of attributes which belong to a single essence.

It is thus in this context of theological opposition that our study of divine omnipotence belongs. In fact, the treatment of this object and its issues cannot be conceived apart from one

side of the two theological theses already mentioned and the other side of their arguments. In other words, Islamic theological thought on divine omnipotence is strictly classified under the comprehensive theoretical bases of the schools and their theses.

From the above, we can distinguish between the two opposing opinions on divine Omnipotence: that of the mutazilites versus that of the asharites.

Here, we can note that the omnipotence divine attribute belongs to the seven mental attributes attributed to God by the Ash'arite school such as omniscience, life, will, etc.

According to the Mu'tazilite school, it is in accordance with their basic thesis which on the one hand denies the divine attributes of pre-eternity and, on the other hand, confirms the identification of the attributes with the divine essence, that it follows that God is omnipotent in himself without any attribute attributed to his essence. It is thus because his omnipotence is both proper and positive to his essence that he did not need to attribute omnipotence alongside its existence.

This school supports this conception by the idea of perfection of God. Therefore, as it is perfect, it follows that He is Omnipotent in Himself without needing the attribute of omnipotence.

In contrast, the Ash'arite school considers that the attribute of omnipotence exists as an attribute of pre-eternity, which is both in the essence of God and not separate from it. According to the Ash'arites, omnipotence is also related at the same time to create or perform or adapt all possibilities (cf. AL-GHAZALI, 2003, p. 72).

The arguments of the ash'arite to prove their thesis are as follows: The first argument is called "The rational proof of the existence of divine omnipotence". This argument is based on the form of organization and precision of the universe. This means, if the universe was well organized by a very precise and arranged system, then it can never be created by a powerless God. So this proves that God, the Creator of the universe, is Omnipotent.

The second argument is strictly related to the first. This argument is used to prove both the existence of God and the infinity of divine omnipotence. It is known by "the argument of omnipotence" (*dalil al- Qudra*).

This argument indicates that the contemplation of the universe, the realization of its order, its perfection and its precision of creation which are manifested in the human and the animal and the vegetable creatures at the same time, support on the one hand the existence of a supernatural omnipotence behind these indications, which belongs to a Creative and Regulating Essence of this universe called "God" and on the other hand, the unlimited omnipotence which runs over the universe (cf. AL-GHAZALI, 2003, p. 37).

In the same context, the notion of unlimited divine omnipotence posed many theological problems as well as many views. In fact, many problems are related to this object and formulated in certain questions such as: Does God do wrong? Does He give life to someone who will die tomorrow? In other words, is it possible to do otherwise with what we know about the omniscience of God: for example: if God knows that someone will die tomorrow, is it possible or not to create for him a new life? (cf. AL-GHAZALI, 2003, p. 75).

In another way, how to explain the relation between the Omnipotence of God and the human will and acts? Are human acts free from the divine will and omnipotence? And, on the one hand, if human acts are free, then how can we prove that God's omnipotence is unlimited? But, on the other hand, if human acts are not free and depend on divine omnipotence, then how to explain the fairness or justice of God to reward and punish?

Here are some examples of the debate among Islamic theological schools on the topic of the omnipotence of God, and if we cannot give all the details, we can refer for example to the text of *iqtisad fi - al i'tiqad* of Al Ghazali to see the diversity of school theses and their arguments.

To clarify further, we can choose only one example from the diversity of schools views like the following:

The school of al Jabriya adopts the conception of the negation of freedom to human acts. That means, according to this school, human beings are forced to do anything, they are not free and their actions depend on divine power.

However, the mu'tazilites reject the conception of al Jabriya because they consider that the omnipotence is related to human actions. As a result, they adopt that man creates his actions with a power or a capacity deposited in him by God, for this, man will be responsible for his acts.

As opposed to both al Jabriya and the Mu'tazilite schools, the Asharite school deny both opinions. According to Asharite school there is no force to do, and there is no absolute human freedom to create acts. Therefore, human actions are made by the conformity of both: the divine power and the human power. Thus, man acquires his acts with a will deposited in him by God (which is called the theory of the acquisition "*al kasb*" (cf. AL-GHAZALI, 2003, p. 75).⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, we can mention the difficulty of certain theological subjects such as the description of God from His attributes, but at the same time this difficulty did not prevent medieval Islamic theology from building its own systems, and we can deduce that it is only from these controversial issues as well as from the in-depth debates and discussions that Islamic theology has been enriched despite the practical results.

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⁴ See Al-Ghazeli, 2003, p. 75 and following about some examples of problems and the opinions of sects and theological doctrines.