

Al-Bantānī and the Interpretation of *Ṣifāt* verses in *Marāḥ Labīd*



Authors:

Umar Muhammad Noor¹ 
Abur Hamdi Usman² 

Affiliations:

¹School of Humanities,
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

²Faculty of Islamic Civilization
Studies, Kolej Universiti
Islam Antarabangsa
Selangor, Kajang, Malaysia

Corresponding author:

Abur Hamdi Usman,
aburhamdi@kuis.edu.my

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This article examines the stance held by a Meccan-Indonesian exegete in the 13 AH or 19 AD century, Muḥammad Nawawī al-Bantānī (d. 1230–1314 H/1813–1897 AD), in dealing with *Ṣifāt* verses in his exegetical work, *Marāḥ Labīd li Kashf Ma'nā al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*. As an established term, *Ṣifāt* verses refer to Quranic expressions that ostensibly ascribe anthropomorphic dimensions to God. Interpretation of such ambiguous verses has been bitterly contended since the 2/8th century and remains one of the most debated topics in the pre- and postmodern era. This study applies literature and document analysis focused on many of al-Bantānī's works. The results show that al-Bantānī actively applied *ta'wīl* [figurative interpretation] in dealing with *Ṣifāt* verses without totally discarding amodality position [*tafwīd*].

Contribution: Although al-Bantānī never mentioned Wahhabism in any of his works, his interpretation of *Ṣifāt* verses alludes to his indirect response to the Wahhabi's literalism and anti-*ta'wīl* approach. In addition, by accepting both of *ta'wīl* and *tafwīd* solutions, al-Bantānī underpinned the *wasafī* [moderate] stand, which later became the most distinctive tradition in Malay-Islamic discourse.

Keywords: Wahhabism; *ta'wīl*; *Ṣifāt* verses; Ash'arī; al-Bantānī.

Introduction

Wahhabism has become one of the major controversial topics among Southeast Asian Muslims since 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Sa'ūd took over Mecca and Medina in 1924. Discussions on the Wahhabis and their tenet are bitterly contested in every village in Malaya (Shiozaki 2015). Concerns about the sect's inclusion prompted Indonesian scholars to form the Committee of Hijaz in 1926 to ask Ibn Sa'ūd to allow the freedom of following traditional school [*madhhab*] in the Haramain (Gunawan 2017). The polemic about Wahhabism resurfaced in the mid-1920 when the Saudi government expanded its influence on the entire Islamic world through students learning from its universities and the activities of agencies and institutions related to the Saudi government (Abdul Hamid 2016; Malik 2017). The reception of the local '*ulamā'* [body of religious scholars] towards Wahhabism is generally hostile. They have seen that the Wahhabi's teachings differ from and occasionally contradict the Islamic tradition long-rooted in the Indo-Malay region. After a series of discussions, Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) decided that Wahhabism is unsuitable for Malaysians even though it is not deemed heresy (Mas'od 2013).

Despite being popularly seen as a political movement, Wahhabism is intrinsically theological and indoctrination-oriented (Bayram 2014; Nahouza 2018). Followers generally sought to redefine *Sunnī* theology and history to provide a more radical version. The effort sparked polemics in various Muslim countries regarding theological and legal issues. The most sensitive one relates to construing the ambiguous Quranic texts that seem to equate God with humans. These texts are also known as the *Ṣifāt* verses. In line with the Hanbali tradition, the Wahhabis strongly reject scholastic theology and the allegorical reading held by mainstream *Sunnīs* (Ashā'irah and Māturīdiyyah). Instead, they require everyone to accept the literal meaning of those texts unconditionally [*bilā kayfa*]. On top of that, they claimed that their approach is the stance held by the first generation of Islam [*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*]; therefore, any other approach should be deemed deviant. However, the mainstream '*ulamā'* strongly disapproves of the claim stating that the Wahhabi's literalistic reading could lead to anthropomorphism ('Āshūr 2017; Jumu'ah 2006; Marzūq n.d.; Nahouza 2018). Disputes in this matter sparked numerous debates that often ended in accusations of heresy and infidelity. Both parties have produced countless works to defend their stand and retaliate against their opponents.

As part of the Islamic scholarly tradition, the Nusantara 'ulamā' are also affected by the spread of the Wahhabi approach to *Ṣifāt* verses. Several studies were conducted to analyse the approach applied by these scholars in dealing with this kind of verse (Mat Nor & Ali 2021). The following study attempts to expose the early response of Nusantara scholars to the Wahhabi challenge. The exposition will be accomplished by analysing the Muḥammad al-Nawawī ibn 'Umar al-Bantānī's (1230–1314/1813–1897) methodology as seen in his exegesis work entitled *Marāḥ Labīd li Kashf Ma'nā al-Qur'ān al-Majād*. The book was penned and published during the second uprising of the political Wahhabis led by Turkī ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Sa'ūd (d. 1249/1833), who succeeded in conquering Riyadh and then threatened the sovereignty of other states in the Arabian Peninsula. This study will argue that, although al-Bantānī did not explicitly mention the Wahhabis in any of his published works, his interpretation method, to a certain extent, was influenced by the Wahhabi cultural threat. The influence is seen in how he avoids a literal reading by constantly applying a figurative reading without entirely discarding the *bilā kayfa* approach. He did that to escape falling into anthropomorphism which, in his opinion, conflicted with the Muslim consensus. Nevertheless, al-Bantānī did not call someone who associates human attributes to God infidel [*kāfir*] unless they meet certain conditions. This moderate stand plays an essential role in forming a *wasatī* [moderate] stand, which later became the main pattern of the Nusantara Islamic intellectual tradition (Mohd Salleh et al. 2015).

This article is divided into three consecutive topics of discussion. First, a brief history of *Ṣifāt* verses and the theological polemics that revolved around them will be presented. The author will show the formation of the Hanbalite and Ash'arites schools following the abolition of *Mihnah Khalq al-Qur'ān* (an inquisition over the createdness of the Quran) in the mid 3rd century AH or mid 9th century AD. The theological polemic between the two schools reappears in the modern era in the form of Wahhabism. The discussion continues in the second section with a study on al-Bantānī's life and theological inclination, as well as his take on Wahhabism. In the third section, the author will examine al-Bantānī's methodology in dealing with the *Ṣifāt* verses and its contrast to the Wahhabi tenet.

The *Ṣifāt* verses and the Wahhabis

The term '*Ṣifāt* verses' [*ayāt al-ṣifāt*] has been widely used among scholars, especially in the discourse of Quranic sciences [*ulūm al-Qur'ān*]. It is usually discussed under the subtheme *mutashābihāt* (verses with ambiguous or unclear meaning). In short, the *Ṣifāt* verses refers to certain kinds of Quranic verses that describe God in terms of human attributes as if he has limbs, occupies specific directions and places, and performs some physical movements. Most past scholars believe that these ambiguous verses, like any *mutashābihāt* verses, must be accepted without ascertaining their meaning (Abdullah, Abd. Rahman & Usman 2019). They subsequently differ based on whether a human can

achieve the knowledge about the intended meaning or not. Most scholars believe that only God knows the real meaning of the verses. Others stipulate that the intended meaning of the *mutashābihāt* verses is known by God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge [*al-rāsikhūn fi al-'ilm*] through a proper method (al-Karamī 1985).

In the lifetime of the Prophet and his companions, the *Ṣifāt* verses never initiated a discussion, let alone a polemic (al-Maqrīzī n.d.). The controversy over divine attributes surfaced for the first time in Damascus in the last years of the Umayyad era when Ja'ad ibn Dirham (d. 106/725) denied all the attributes of God. When his teachings came into the attention of the prominent scholars of the time, such as Wahb ibn Munabbih, Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī and Maymūn ibn Mahrān, they all anonymously censured the opinion (al-Tamīmī 1997). Ibn Dirham's argument was then developed by Jahm ibn Ṣafwān al-Rāsibī (c. about 128/745) and the rationalistic Mu'tazilah. The polemic about the divine attributes became a political action when the Mu'tazilites convinced Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833) to impose their belief on the entire Muslim community through *Mihnah Khalq al-Qur'ān* (the inquisition on the createdness of the Quran). Anthropomorphism and the literalistic approach in dealing with *Ṣifāt* verses became the primary target. Everyone who defended this approach was severely punished with imprisonment, canning and even death (Muhammad Noor & Abur Hamdi 2021). Countless scholars of hadith and fuqaha fell victim to this policy. However, after almost two decades (218–237/833–851) of implementation, *Mihnah* failed to convert the Islamic community into the Mu'tazilite rationality. The resistance showed by Ahmad ibn Hanbal eventually brought down Mu'tazilah's popularity. In 237/851, Caliph al-Mutawakkil officially revoked the *Mihnah*, followed by eliminating all traits of Mu'tazila's influence in his administration. He also installed their opponents, the proponents of hadith (Ahl al-Ḥadīth) group, to replace their prestigious role as the highest religious reference for the Islamic community (Hoover 2014).

Following Ibn Hanbal's heroic position during the *Mihnah* period, a new school of thought carried his name. Hanbalism emerged as both a school of theology and a law in Baghdad and other cities in Iraq (Makdisi 1979; Mez 1973). Its proponents mostly are hadith authorities who strongly denounce rational theology and all forms of textual interpretation. They emphasise the obligation to accept all religious texts in their apparent meaning on divine attributes. Hanbali scholar and activist Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī al-Barbahārī stated that it is imperative to accept, believe, subjugate and abide by these sacred texts. He also asserted: '[w]hoever interprets them based on his lust or rejects them, he is a Jahmite (the follower of Jahm ibn Ṣafwān)' (al-Barbahārī 1993:81–83). Claiming to be the defenders of Sunnah and the exterminators of heresy [*bid'ah*], the Hanbalis showed hostile attitudes against anyone who disagreed with their theological stance, including some prominent jurists and traditionalists [*muhaddiths*] (Hoover 2014). Some of these traditionalists even held to a vulgar anthropomorphism

claiming that the creed represents Salaf and Ibn Hanbal's theology. On this phenomenon, Abū Ḥafṣ Ibn Shāhīn (d. 385/995) noted: '[t]wo righteous men were attested with evil followers: Ja'far ibn Muḥammad (al-Ṣādiq) and Ahmad ibn Hanbal' (Ibn 'Asākir 1927).

Bold literalism became the reason behind the emergence of a new religious trend in the 3/9 century that sought to restore a moderate path in dealing with theological issues. After leaving Mu'tazilism to become the best defender of Sunnism, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936) and his disciples promoted a balanced combination of textual rigour and rational argumentation in theological discourses, especially when discussing the meaning of *Ṣifāt* verses (Elmasry 2010). Emphasising God's transcendence and uniqueness, they interpreted ambiguous religious texts that could lead to anthropomorphism by applying figurative reading, which, later, is famously known as *ta'wīl*. The rise of Ash'arism in the 5/11th century posed an intense rivalry for Hanbalites in their claim to be the defender of Sunnism. They criticised every sect deviating from Sunnism, including the Hanbalis, whose creed was often associated with anthropomorphism. As a result, the Hanbalis and the Ash'arites were involved in numerous polemics, followed by riots (Ibn Khaldūn 1988).

By the end of the 6/12th century, Ash'arism had become a mainstream theology in most Islamic countries (al-Maqrīzī n.d.). Under Ash'arī's dominance, *ta'wīl* was anonymously accepted as one of the valid methods in interpreting *Ṣifāt* verses (al-Bājūrī 2002; al-Nawawī 1995; al-Ramlī n.d.; Ibn al-Athīr 2008; Kaykaldī al-'Alā'ī 2010). At the same time, throughout the reign of the Ayyubids, the Mamluks and the Ottomans, the Hanbalites and their anti-*ta'wīl* sentiment became a minority and were often viewed negatively (Abū Zahrah 1997). The resurgence initiated by Hanbalite figures like Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) failed to break the Ash'arite hegemony. After centuries of conflict, some Hanbalis in Syria and Egypt in the 10/16th century turned sympathetic towards the Ash'arites. Later known as the late Hanbalis (al-Ḥanābilah al-Muta'akhirīn), this group no longer viewed the Ash'arites as heresies. They instead considered them partners in the same faith but held different opinions in triviality subjects. Efforts to close up the gap, for example, are seen in the statement of the Palestinian Hanbali 'Abd Allah al-Qaddūmī (d. 1331/1912) who stipulated that the term *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* encompasses three major groups, namely, the Ash'arites, Māturidites and the proponent of *athar* or the Hanbalis (al-Qaddūmī 2008).

Meanwhile, a more radical neo-Hanbali movement emerged in Najd in the 12/18th century led by Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Tamīmī (d. 1206/1791). Born in 'Uyayna in 1115/1703, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb studied Islamic knowledge in Mecca, Medina and Basrah. In 1152/1739, he published his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* [Book of Monotheism], in which he harshly criticised various popular practices, such as grave visits and intermediation [*tawāṣṣul*], and introduced the unity [*tawḥīd*] trilogy, namely, the *ulūhiyyah*, *rubūbiyyah* and *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* as the basis of his ideology. In 1157/1744, Ibn 'Abd

al-Wahhāb's movement grew with the support of Dar'iyyah ruler Muḥammad ibn Sa'ūd (d. 1179/1765) through a series of jihad expeditions to expand their political influence. The expedition reached its golden times under the reign of 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Muḥammad (d. 1229/1814), who successfully invaded the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1803 and 1804, followed by the destruction of every dome built on the tombs and the prohibition of what was deemed as heretic practices. He also sent letters to the Islamic rulers in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Morocco to accept the Wahhabi's creed (al-Rādisī & Nuwayrah 2008).

The rise of Wahhabi politics was undoubtedly a threat to Turkish sovereignty in the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, Sultan Salim III ordered Ali Pashā and his Egyptian army to destroy the Wahhābī forces, which was carried out successfully. Pasha managed to recapture cities taken by the Wahhabis and eventually devastated their capital city in 1233/1818. The Wahhabi king 'Abd Allah ibn Sa'ūd was captured and then executed alongside many Wahhabi leaders. Nevertheless, the Wahhabis managed to regain power many years later under the leadership of Turķī ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Sa'ūd. They invaded Riyadh and made it their capital city before it collapsed owing to internal conflicts in 1309/1891. Ten years later, 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Sa'ūd succeeded in consolidating the Wahhabi forces, then conquering the Arabian Peninsula with the support of the British. Subsequently, he established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiyya al-Sa'ūdiyya) in 1932, which survives up to this day (Nahouza 2018).

Under Saudi rule, Wahhabism revived its anti-*ta'wīl* approach in dealing with all religious texts on divine attributes. The texts should be construed as their apparent meaning ('*alā zāhirihā*) and should not be interpreted figuratively nor assert that only God knows their meanings. The Wahhabis argued aggressively that this *bilā kayfa* solution is the only acceptable method of interpretation. Anything other than this should be denounced as heresy and misguided (Halverson 2010).

According to Nahouza (2018), *ta'wīl* rejection can be traced back to the founding fathers of Wahhabism. In his treaties, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb expressed his opposition to interpret the texts on divine attributes but not in detail. Subsequently, his son 'Abd Allah (d. 1828) and grandson 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥasan (d. 1869) explicitly condemned the *ta'wīl* approach in countless occasions. In addition, the Grand Mufti Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Syeikh (d. 1389/1969) stated that *tafwīd* solution is also a deviation from the way of the *Salaf* calling its beholder as 'the vilest and worst of all sects [*shar al-madhāhib wa akhbathihā*]' (Qāsim 1979). Following his extreme anti-*ta'wīl* approach, the Grand Mufti of Najd [*Muftī al-Diyār al-Najdiyyah*] 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bā Buṭayn (d. 1282/1865) explicitly excluded the Ash'arites from the *Ahl al-Sunnah* [the proponent of *Sunna*] terminology and put them alongside with heretic sects, such as the Jahmites and Mu'tazilites. He, therefore, directs strong criticism to the late Hanbalis, whom he argued committed a grave mistake by accepting the Ash'arites as part of *Ahl al-Sunnah* (al-'Āsimī 1996).

Al-Bantānī's theological affiliation

Muḥammad al-Nawawī ibn 'Umar ibn 'Arabī is known as al-Bantānī because he was born in Banten (Indonesia) in 1230/1813 (Hijras 2013). His father was a highly respected *Penghulu* (religious leader) in his hometown. It is said that his lineage connects him to Maulana Hasanuddin, son of Maulana Syarif Hidayatullah who is famously known as Sunan Gunung Jati (Rahman 1996). Upon completing study from his father, al-Bantānī pursued his studies at various *Pesantren* (traditional institutions for Islamic education) across Java and Madura. He studied under the tutelage of prominent scholars, including Kyai Sahal of Banten and Kyai Yusuf of Purwakarta. In 1830, al-Bantānī, who was then 16 years old, departed for Mecca to perform hajj and then remained in the holy city to learn from distinguished scholars. In 1248/1831, al-Bantānī returned to Banten and taught students in his father's institution for 25 years. In 1271/1855, al-Bantānī decided to return to Mecca and spent the rest of his intellectual life in the holy city. He passed away in 1314/1897 and was buried at the Ma'lā cemetery after being known as one of the prominent scholars in Hijaz, which carries various titles including the leader of Hijaz scholars (Sayyid 'Ulamā' Hijāz) (Azra 1997; Johns 1995).

Observing al-Bantānī's biography shows his total dedication to Islamic knowledge. Since setting foot in the holy city of Mecca, he never missed attending lectures conveyed by Southeast Asian scholars, famously known as the Jawi scholars, who resided in the sacred city (Liow 2010). Three of them were Aḥmad Khaṭīb Sambas (c. 1289/1872), Abdul Ghani Bima and Sheikh Aḥmad ibn Zayd (Zarif 2007). He also studied under scholars who taught at the Masjid al-Haram such as two Egyptians Yūsuf al-Sumbulāwaynī (d. 1285/1868) and Aḥmad Naḥrāwī (d. 1291/1874), as well as Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (d.1304/1886) who is said to be the 'rector of the Meccan ulama' (Zarif 2007). Al-Bantānī read *Tuḥfa al-Muḥtāj*, one of the most referred legal books in the Shafii school, under the supervision of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Dāghistānī (d. 1301/1884), the author of *Ḥashiyah al-Sharawānī alā Tuḥfa al-Muḥtāj*. Besides the prominent names above, some scholars are also among his list of teachers, namely, Muḥammad Khaṭīb Dumā al-Ḥanbalī and Sayyid Aḥmad ibn Marṣafī al-Miṣrī. Both conferred al-Bantānī with an *ijāza* (formal authorisation) to transmit prophetic hadith (Mulyati 1992; Wahyono & Gamon 2020).

Al-Bantānī's name became increasingly popular after he opened his house to instruct students in 1276/1860. At that time, he was 46 years old and reached the maturity of mind. The students flocked to his lectures until they reached up to 200 students at a time. Some sources say that he offered lectures at Masjid al-Haram, but most authoritative sources denied this report (Zarif 2007). Many of his students eventually became respected scholars and religious activists in their home countries, such as Kyai Khalil of Bangkalan (d. 1321/1904), Hasan Mustafa of Garut (d. 1348/1930), and the founder of Nahdatul Ulama, Kyai Hashim Asya'ari (d. 1366/1947). In addition to Jawi students, al-Bantānī's lectures were also attended by students from different

nationalities. One of the scholars who had learnt from him was 'Abd al-Sattār al-Dihlawī (d.1355/1936), an Indian scholar and renowned historian in Mecca (Zarif 2007).

In addition to his teaching activity, al-Bantānī is known for his proclivity in book authoring. According to Zarif (2007), from 1870 until his death, al-Bantānī stopped almost all his teaching sessions to focus on writing. During this period, he produced 37 books on diverse topics encompassing Arabic grammar, Quranic exegesis, hadith, theology, law and Sufism. Most of them were published and printed during his life time. According to Sarkis (1928), various publishers have circulated at least 38 of his books in the Middle East. All al-Bantānī's works are written in simple Arabic to assist non-Arabic students in comprehending basic concepts to prepare them for the higher level. Therefore, his books are prevalent among Malay scholars and are included in the integrated curriculum in various Islamic institutions in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. According to Bruinessen (1999), several of his works are among the 100 most used textbooks in Indonesia's *Pesantren*.

Coinciding with Bantānī's decision to reside in Mecca, the Saudi-supported Wahhabis regained prominence under the leadership of *al-Amīr* Turkī ibn 'Abdullah. In 1240/1824, they successfully conquered Riyadh and extended his influence on other states but failed to seize Mecca until the death of al-Bantānī. Thus, during Bantānī's residency in the holy land, traditionalism made of both Ash'arism and Sufism dominated the general intellectual climate of Mecca. Nevertheless, Wahhabism was undoubtedly one of the controversial topics among the Meccan scholars. Aḥmad ibn Zaynī Daḥlān (d. 1304/1886), al-Bantānī's teacher and the most prominent scholar in the city, authored at least two books on this matter. In his *Fitna al-Wahhābiyya [The Tribulation of Wahhabism]*, Daḥlān reports the chronology of Wahhābism and the threat they pose to the politico-religious state in the Arabian Peninsula. He clearly stated that Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and his proponents were innovators who rebelled against legitimate rulers. He also said: 'The chaos they have created is one of the biggest mishaps to befall upon the Muslims because they shed so much blood and destroyed so much property'. In his other book, namely *al-Durar al-Saniyyah fi al-Rad 'alā al-Wahhābiyyah*, Daḥlān exposed numerous Wahhābī creeds that violate the ruling established by most Muslims on visiting the Prophet's tomb, intercession [*tawaṣṣul*] and bless seeking [*tabarruk*]. Concerning the Wahhabis concept on unity [*tawḥīd*], Daḥlān (1978) claims that the idea was explicitly created to justify their deviant act of excommunicating Muslims.

We believe that al-Bantānī was aware of the challenge of Wahhabism despite no explicit statements being found in any of his works. This absence is not unusual since he always refrained from commenting on contemporary issues in his publications. In addition to avoiding unwanted sociopolitical effects, this approach presents himself as a universal scholar (Zarif 2007). However, it seems plausible to establish that al-Bantānī's conception of Wahhabism does not differ from Daḥlān's notion. As part of the scholarly community at that

time, al-Bantānī shared traditionalism with his fellow Meccan scholars (Rahman 1996; Zarif 2007). His scholarship was deeply influenced by Ash'arism as can be seen in his theological works, such as *Dhariyat al-Yaqīn fī Umm al-Barāhīn*, *Qaṭr al-Ghayth fī Sharḥ Masā'il Abī al-Layth*, *Sharḥ Trjān al-Darārī 'alā Risālat al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī fī al-Tawḥīd*, *Faṭḥ al-Majīd Sharḥ Dur al-Farīd fī 'Aqā'id Ahl al-Tawḥīd*, *Qāmi' al-Ṭughyān*, *Manzūma fī al-Tawāṣṣul bi Asmā Allāh al-Ḥusnā*, *Nahjat al-Jayyida li Ḥall Naqāwāt al-'Aqīda* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Madaniyya fī al-Shu'ab al-Imāniyya*.

In his exposition regarding the concept of divinity, al-Bantānī (2012) established that God should be conceived as totally different from any of his creations [*mukhālafah li al-ḥawādith*]. He, therefore, is neither an atom [*jawhar*] nor an attribute [*araḍ*]. He cannot be said to be *kullī* [whole] nor *juz'ī* [partial]. Al-Bantānī (2012) said:

Should the Satan whispers in your heart a question: *If God is not an atom and an attribute, and He is not a whole and partial, then what is He?* you must reply by saying that no one knows God but God. None is like Him, and He is the all-hearing and all-seeing. al-Bantānī (2012:3)

Since God is not a body, al-Bantānī said, '[h]e has no organs and limbs. Therefore, He has no hands, eyes, ears, or other human attributes'. Al-Bantānī also stated that God is not limited in a place and contained in a specific direction, yet he is closer to his servants than their jugular vein. Based on the famous Ash'arī maxim, al-Bantānī asserted that God existed long before creating place and time. And he remains unchanged in his former existence after he created them.

Al-Bantānī realises that the aforementioned stand would face semantic problems with certain hadiths that explicitly ascribe anthropomorphic features to God. For example, his notion of the formless God contradicts the prophetic exposition that God created Adam on his form [*'alā ṣūratih*]. Another hadith, known as *ḥadīth al-ru'ya* (hadith on beatific vision), stated that God appears on Judgment Day to the believers in the unrecognised form before he reappears for the second time in his actual form. In dealing with these ambiguous texts, Bantānī refuses to interpret the word *ṣūrah* [form] with its literal meaning to avoid anthropomorphism. He instead uses the Ash'arī approach, which applies figurative reading to reconcile the prophetic expression with accepted theological concepts. Regarding hadith on Adam's creation, al-Bantānī states that the word 'form' refers to 'abstract form (*ṣūrah ma'nawiyah*)', which means that God gives Adam and his children qualities that are similar to God attributes, for example, knowledge and life with huge differences between the reality of two attributes. About *ḥadīth al-ru'ya*, al-Bantānī explained that the form mentioned in the hadith should be interpreted as manifestation. In the first appearance, God 'manifests Himself in a distorted condition by creating vagueness in their vision'. In the second time, he shows himself in a clear vision.

Despite his denunciation of anthropomorphism, al-Bantānī painstakingly differentiates between *tajsīm* [corporealism]

and *tashbīh* (anthropomorphism). *Tajsīm* is a theological concept that associates the body to God. Despite its apparent contradiction to the Islamic faith, a corporealism cannot be accused disbeliever [*kāfir*] unless he states that God is 'body like other bodies (*jism ka al-ajsām*)'. It is because the statement explicitly pictures God in a set of mortal attributes [*ḥudūth*], composition [*tarkīb*] and colour [*alwān*]. If he said that 'God is a body' or 'body unlike other bodies', al-Bantānī is of the view that the person is not a disbeliever even though he has committed a grave mistake. To sum this perspective up, al-Bantānī (al-Bantānī n.d.:10) said that 'a corporealism (*mujassim*) should not be labelled as a disbeliever unless he explicitly likens God with creation. So, the label is put on because of *tashbīh* position, not the *tajsīm*'.

Ṣifāt verses in Marāḥ Labīd

Muḥammad al-Nawawī al-Bantānī completed his exegete work titled *Marāḥ Labīd li Kashf Ma'nā al-Qur'an al-Majīd* (also known as *al-Tafsīr al-Munīr li Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl al-Musfir 'an Wujūh Maḥāsīn al-Ta'wīl*) on 5 Rabiul Akhir 1305/1887. This book is considered the perpetuation of the Jawi scholarship in the production of exegetical work literature that has stopped since the 17th century (Zarif 2007). In comparison to the first exegete work published by Jawi scholar, namely *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd* by Abd al-Ra'ūf Singkel, al-Bantānī's *Marāḥ Labīd* has advantages. Firstly, the book was written in Arabic because it reached a wider audience. On the other hand, *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd* was written in Malay. Therefore its circulation was relatively limited within the scholars of this lingua franca. Secondly, *Marāḥ Labīd* is an original work whereas *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd* is actually a translation of al-Bayḍāwī's *tafsīr* work. Thirdly, *Marāḥ Labīd* applied a method of interpretation that covered various materials and interdisciplinary discourse compared with *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd* (Bahary 2015).

However, it seems that the publication of *Marāḥ Labīd* was not to provide a new perspective, let alone a new interpretation of the divine message contained in the Quran. Instead, the book can be considered part of al-Bantānī's larger intellectual project, which aims to prepare beginners for a higher level. Therefore, his work comprises a summary of previous exegesis works provided by prominent scholars of *tafsīr* in an easy-to-understand language. In the introduction, al-Bantānī lists down his primary reference, namely *al-Futūḥāt al-Ilāhiyyah* by the Azhari scholar Sulayman ibn 'Umar al-Jamal (d. 1204/1790), *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), *al-Sirāj al-Munīr* by the Azhari scholar al-Khaṭīb al-Shirbīnī (d. 977/1570), *Tanwīr al-Miqbās* by Majd al-Dīn al-Fayrūz-abādī (d. 817/1415), and *Tafsīr Abū al-Su'ūd* or *Irshād al-'Aql al-Salīm ilā Mazāyā al-Kitāb al-Karīm* by the Turkish scholar Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muṣṭafā who is also known by the name of Abū al-Su'ūd (d. 982/1574). These authors are Shafiite-Ash'arite scholars except Abu al-Su'ūd, who comes from the Hanafi-Maturīdī school of thought. Both of Ash'arī and Maturīdī creed is essentially

alike, especially when it comes to their method in interpreting the *āyāt al-ṣifāt* (Abī 'Adhbah 1902).

As an Ash'ari theologian, al-Bantānī did not use the *Ṣifāt* verses in the Quran to associate human attributes to God. Instead, he explicitly considered anthropomorphism as un-Islamic and associated it with Judaism. This conception is in line with the rulings of the previous Ashā'irah scholars. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī stated that 'the Jews are mostly *Mushabbihah*' and their creed was inserted into Islamic theology through Shia-Rāfiḍa extremists (al-Saqqār 2015: 67–69). Explaining the reasons for the acceptance of the anthropomorphism among the Jews, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153/548) explained that the Torah is full of verses that describe God in physical forms and actions. He, for instance, has been said to appear to humans, comes down from Mount Sinai, sits on his throne, etc. (al-Shahrastānī 2005). In a more radical notion, some Ash'aris even equate anthropomorphism with idolatry. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111/505) in his *Ijām al-'Azwām* asserts that:

[W]hoever has even a little conception in his mind that God is a body composed of several limbs then he is an idolater. That is because the body is created. Therefore, worshipping a created being is infidelity (kufr). (al-Ghazālī 2020:52)

In commenting on the ambiguous verses related to divine attributes, al-Bantānī (1997:519) adheres to a moderate approach that lies between likening God with creations [*tashbih*] and ignoring its intended meaning [*ta'tīl*]. He considers the two approaches as unorthodox. In his elaboration on the meaning and importance of steadfast [*istiqāmah*] mentioned in Quranic verse (11:112), he wrote: '[i]ndeed, to be steadfast in the faith is to keep distance from *tashbih* and *ta'tīl*'. al-Bantānī (1997:111–112) further explains that the accurate approach is not by establishing the apparent meaning that is done by the Ḥanbalites and the Wahhabis. Instead, the verses should be put in the *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous) category whose meaning must be appropriated with other verses which carry clear and distinctive meanings [*muḥkamāt*]. As far as the divine attributes are concerned, the *muḥkamāt* is a group of verses that explicitly assert God's transcendence [*tanzīh*], such as the Quranic statement: 'there is none like Him (42:11)'. Regarding this verse, al-Bantānī (1997) interprets it by 'no essence (dhāt) is resembling His essence, and no attribute is like His attributes'.

Al-Bantānī's comprehensive elaboration on this matter can be seen in his interpretation of the Sura al-Ikhlāṣ (The Chapter of Sincerity). According to al-Rāzī (2011), the chapter contains only the *muḥkamāt* verses. Hence, any creeds that violate the theological statements contained in this chapter must be denounced as misguided. al-Bantānī begins his exposition by explaining that God's attributes are divided into two categories, namely *idāfiyya* and *salbiyya*. The *idāfiyya* category comprises all descriptions that describe the attributes of perfection to God, such as All-Knowing, All-Powerful, All-Willing and All-Creating. On the other hand, the *salbiyya* category negates any association of unworthy attributes to God, such as body and accident. al-Bantānī (1997:679) goes

on to say that the term 'Allah (God)' has amalgamated all the *idāfiyya* attributes. Subsequently, the word 'one [*ahad*]' in verse 'God is one' (112:1) represented the negation of all the *salbiyya* attributes for the term implies the absence of any complexity [*tarākīb*] in God's essence. Finally, the last verse in the chapter states that: 'there is none like Him' (112:4), so al-Bantānī (1997) said, is to establish that:

[T]here is not a single thing that resembles Him in the form of partner or such. Therefore, it is unconceivable that there is a thing that resembles God in His majesty and greatness. al-Bantānī (1997:679)

He also stated that this verse is intended to invalidate polytheism which perceives idols as the associates of God.

Observing al-Bantānī's interpretation, it is prevalent that transcendence [*tanzīh*] is his primary basis in elaborating the meaning of *Ṣifāt* verses. He consistently applied figurative reading to offer alternatives for their literal meanings. It is seen, for instance, in al-Bantānī's commentary on 15 Quranic verses which mentions 'the hand of God' in singular, dual and plural forms (yad- yadayn-aydī). Contrary to the Hanbali-Wahhābi literalism that uses these verses as proof to establish divine hand which, unlike human hands, al-Bantānī (1997:425) interprets the word figuratively. When the word 'hand' is mentioned in singular form, he often translates it with power [*qudrah*] or patronage [*nuṣrah*]. When the word is mentioned in the dual or plural forms, al-Bantānī always interprets them as a combination of 'power (qudrah) and will (irādah)' or 'grace (ni'mah)'. Commenting on the verse which said: 'O Iblis, what prevents you from prostrating to what I have created with both of My hands?' (38:75), al-Bantānī (1997:295) interprets *both of My hands* as 'My power and will without the intercession of a father and mother'. The same is also seen in his interpretation of the verse that mentions the creation of various animals 'with Our hands' (36:71). According to al-Bantānī (1997:295), the passage means 'Our power and will'.

In line with Ash'arī's theological principle, which negates the ascription of spatiality to God, al-Bantānī actively offers a figurative interpretation to avoid the misleading conception that God is up in heaven. When interpreting the verse which states: 'O 'Isā, verily I will cause you to die and raise you to Me' (3:55), al-Bantānī avoids the conception that God is in the upper direction. Instead, he interprets the word 'raise you to Me' as 'to the place of My glory and the place of your reward'. Similarly, al-Bantānī interpreted the verse: 'The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him' (70:4) by saying that these creatures ascend 'to the end of the place of God's glory, which is a place where there is no law that governs it other than Allah'. In addition, al-Bantānī interpreted the word 'above [*fa'wq*]' in 16:50 with 'compelling power [*qahr*]' . Regarding the Quranic verse, which says, '[d]o you feel secure from the One in the sky' (67:16), al-Bantānī explains that this rhetorical question is not initially meant to establish divine attribute. Instead, it merely uses the belief adhered by the people of Mecca to be turned against them. The verse means, 'do you feel safe, O people of Mecca, from those whom you believe to be in heaven, and you acknowledge having the power to do what He wills?'

The abovementioned verses are considered the primary proofs in the Hanbali-Wahhabi creed to establish the elevation of God [*al-'uluw*] (al-Farrā' 1974; Ibn Qudāmah 1975). Several books have been authored to deal with this topic specifically (al-Albānī 1981; al-Dhahabī 1995). Alongside discussion on the meaning of *al-istiwā'* (equal value), this topic has become one of bitter contention since the 3/9th century. Some hadith scholars and Hanbali figures interpret *istiwā'* as sitting [*julūs/qu'ūd*] on the throne (al-Dashtī 2010; al-Farrā' 1999). The Ash'arites, especially those who come after Imām al-Haramayn (d. 478/1085), understand *istiwā'* as God's complete domination [*al-qahr wa al-ghalabah*] over the whole universe (al-Bayhaqī 2002; Ibn Jamā'ah 2005).

Al-Bantānī discusses the meaning of *istiwā'* in seven different surahs, namely *al-A'rāf*, *Yūnus*, *al-Ra'd*, *Ṭāhā*, *al-Furqān*, *al-Sajdah* and *al-Ḥadīd*. Like his fellow Ash'arites, al-Bantānī consistently interprets *istiwā'* with 'superiority over 'Arash with protection and control [*istawlā' alā al-'arash bi al-ḥifẓ wa al-tadbīr*]', and 'complete reign [*tašarraḥ tašarrufan tāman*]'. He explained that the original meaning of 'Arash in Arabic lexicography is 'throne where the kings sit (sarīr yajlisu' alayh al-mulūk). It was then used metaphorically to describe absolute rule and power. When someone says that 'the king's throne has been seized', he means that the king has lost his power. When it says that 'the king ascended the throne', it means that he has claimed power over a country. Therefore, the verse 'The Merciful sits on His throne (al-rahmān 'alā al-'arsh istawā)' implies God's ultimate will to create and govern all creations [*ta'alluq irādatuhu ta'ālā bi Ijād al-kā'ināt wa tadbīr amrihā*].

In this method of interpretation dominated by *ta'wīl*, we found only one *ṣifat* verse upon which al-Bantānī refrains from the interpretation and applies *tafwīd* (i.e. accepting the word without trying to specify its exact meaning) instead. The verse is 2:210 in which Allah speaks of the people of Mecca: '[a]re they waiting until Allah comes to them in the shade of clouds along with the angels?' al-Bantānī (1997) stipulates that Allah will come [*ya'tī*], without specifying how [*bilā kayfa*], on the Day of Judgment. Interestingly, he does not perform the same approach when dealing with another verse whose content is reasonably alike, which is 89:22 that says, '[a]nd your Lord comes (to judge) with angels rank upon rank'. Instead, he said that on that day '(jā'a) His manifestation and power should come so doubt, and ambiguity will be cleared up'.

This attitude proves that al-Bantānī approved the usage of both *ta'wīl* and *tafwīd* approaches. This is not peculiar as the acceptance of both approaches is the stand held by the Ash'arī authorities in the Ottoman era. The Egyptian Burhān al-Dīn al-Laqqānī (d. 1041/1631) in his famous *Jawharah al-Tawhīd* states: '[o]n every (religious) text that implied anthropomorphism, perform *ta'wīl* or *tafwīd*, and establish God transcendence [*tanzīh*]'. Commenting on this formula, Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī (d. 1277/1860) justifies *tafwīd* as the *Salaf* approach and *ta'wīl* as the *Khalaf*. However, to avoid misconceptions for the masses, al-Bājūrī (2002) suggests preferring *ta'wīl* as the most appropriate choice stating that the way of *Khalaf* is more accurate while the way *Salaf* is safer.

We can see in al-Bājūrī's exposition a strong justification for al-Bantānī's excessive application of *ta'wīl*. The confusion insinuated by Wahhabi's literalism at his time may become his motive in interpreting almost all the *Sifāt* verses figuratively in his work.

Conclusion

Al-Nawawī al-Bantānī's *Marāḥ Labīd li Kashf Ma'nā al-Qur'ān al-Majīd* is a monumental work of *tafsir* produced by a Jawī scholar amidst the changing political landscape of the Hijaz. The work seeks to maintain a traditional scholarship that is faithful to mainstream Islamic theology. Although it was not meant to provide a new approach and understanding for the revealed words, this book records an essential episode in the history of traditionalism among Jawī scholars who lived in Mecca in the late 13th/19th century. As Bruinessen (1999) points out, all modern *Kyai* consider al-Bantānī their intellectual ancestor. This position certainly made al-Bantānī's thought significantly contribute to the formation of Islamic thought in Indonesia and Nusantara (Malay world) in general. Although he never explicitly mentions Wahhabism in any of his books, his *ta'wīl* and *tafwīd* application in dealing with ambiguous Quranic verses on divine attributes clearly opposes their literal and anti-*ta'wīl* position. In addition, the combination of *ta'wīl* and *tafwīd* in his exegetical work lays the foundation for a balanced *wasafī* Islamic thought, which later on becomes the significant pattern of Islamic tradition in Nusantara to this day.

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