

Kalām Allāh in Islam and in Christianity

The Gospel text which we are considering in this book begins with the words, “In the beginning (i.e. *fī al-azal*) was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. It was in the beginning (*fī al-azal*) with God. All things came into being through it, and apart from it nothing came into being which came into being. In it was life, and that life was the light of human beings.” (John 1:1-4)

The Gospel was revealed (*unzila*) in the ancient Greek language, and the Greek term “ὁ λόγος” (*ho logos*), which is often translated into Arabic as “*al-kalima*,” can equally well be translated “*al-kalām*.” From John 1:1-4 we understand that God’s *kalām* is not something which God has created or originated (*khalaqahū aw aḥdathahū*) in time, but rather God’s *kalām* is an eternal quality subsisting in God (*ṣifa azaliyya qā’ima bi-Allāh*). Indeed, God’s *kalām* cannot be created (*lā yumkinu an yakūna makhluq^{an}*), for everything which God has created has been created through his *kalām*. God says to a thing “Be!” and it is (*yaqūlu Allāh li-shay’ “Kun!” fa-yakūnu*).

This is precisely what Islamic doctrine also teaches about God’s *kalām*. In the second century A.H., and for some centuries after that, the Mu’tazilites denied (*naḥaw*) this. They claimed (*za’amū*) that *al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* was created. And they denied (*naḥaw*) that God’s *kalām* was a reality eternally subsistent in God’s essence (*qā’im azaliyy^{an} bi-dhāt Allāh*), just as they denied the rest of the pre-existent eternal *ṣifāt* which subsist in God (*kamā naḥaw sā’ir al-ṣifāt al-qadīma al-azaliyya allatī taqūmu bi-Allāh*), such as his life and his power (*mithla ḥayātihī wa-qudratihī*). Some claimed that God’s *kalām* was created, while others claimed that God’s *kalām* has no meaning and no reality (*za’amū anna kalām Allāh lā ma’nā la-hū wa-lā ḥaqīqa*), but that God is a Speaker by virtue of his essence, not by virtue of a *kalām* subsisting in him (*bal anna Allāh mutakallim bi-dhātihī, lā bi-kalām qā’im bihī*).

However, this doctrine of the Mu’tazilites is in contradiction with the Qur’ān, as well as with many *ḥadīths*. For this reason Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 A.H. / 855 A.D.) and the majority of Muslims rejected this Mu’tazilite doctrine. Ibn Ḥanbal affirmed (*athbata*) the uncreatedness of God’s *kalām* and the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the *ṣifāt*, even when doing so entailed going to prison under the Caliphs al-Ma’mūn and al-Mu’taṣim. The Caliph al-Mutawakkil reversed the policies of al-Ma’mūn and al-Mu’taṣim, and rejected the Mu’tazilite doctrine, considering it to be *bid’a*.

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324 A.H. / 935 A.D.) summarized lucidly the sound Islamic doctrine on this question and its basis in the Qur’ān in his book *al-Ibāna ‘an Uṣūl al-Diyāna*. He said:

We say that God’s word (*kalām*) is uncreated, and that He has not created anything without saying to it, “Be!” (*naqūlu inna kalām Allāh ghayr makhlūq, wa-innahū lam yakhluq shay’^{an} illā wa-qad qāla lahū “Kun!”*)¹

The proof is His saying (mighty and glorious is He) [Q 30:25], “Among His signs is that the heavens and the earth are established by His command.” The command (*amr*) of God is His word (*kalām*) and His utterance (*qawl*)... And He says [Q 7:54], “Do not the creation and the command belong to Him?” Everything that was created is included in “the creation”... So when He says, “Does not the creation belong to Him?” this is referring to all of creation. And when He says, “and the command,” He is referring to a command which is something other than all of creation. So what we have described proves that God’s command is not created. (*al-dalīl ‘alā dhālika qawluhū ‘azza wa-jalla: “wa-min āyātihī an taqūma al-samā’ wa-l-arḍ bi-amrihī.” [Sūrat al-Rūm 25] wa-amr Allāh huwa kalāmuhū wa-qawluhū... wa-qāla ‘azza wa-jalla: “a-lā lahū al-khalq wa-l-amr” [Sūrat al-A‘rāf 54], fa-l-khalq jamī’ mā khuliqa dākhil fihī... fa-lammā qāla “a-lā lahū al-khalq,” kāna hādhā fī jamī’ al-khalq, wa-lammā qāla “wa-l-amr,” dhakara amr^{an} ghayr jamī’ al-khalq, fa-dalla mā waṣafnā ‘alā anna amr Allāh ghayr makhlūq*)²

God’s command (*amr*) is his *kalām*, and this necessitates that God’s *kalām* is uncreated. (*amr Allāh kalāmuhū, wa-hādhā yūjibu anna kalām Allāh ghayr makhlūq.*)³

Another proof: Among the proofs from God’s Book that His word is uncreated is His saying (mighty and glorious is He) [Q 16:40], “Rather Our saying to a thing, if we want it, is to say, ‘Be!’, and it is.” So if the Qur’ān were created, then “Be!” would have to be said to it, and it would be. But if God (mighty and glorious is He) were saying “Be!” to His utterance (*qawl*), then the utterance would have an utterance. And... every utterance would occur by virtue of another utterance *ad infinitum*, and this is absurd. (*dalīl ākhar: mimmā yadullu min kitāb Allāh ‘alā*

¹ Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ismā‘īl al-Ash‘arī, *al-Ibāna ‘an Uṣūl al-Diyāna* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1418 A.H. / 1998 A.D.), p. 16, lines 7-8 – cf. Sūrat al-Naḥl 40.

² Ibid., p. 31, lines 1-8.

³ Ibid., p. 31, lines 15-16.

anna kalāmahū ghayr makhlūq qawluhū 'azza wa-jalla: “innamā qawlunā li-shay’ idhā aradnāhū an naqūla lahū kun fa-yakūnu” [Sūrat al-Naḥl 40], fa-law kāna al-Qur’ān makhlūq^{an}, la-wajaba an yakūna maqūl^{an} lahū: “kun” fa-yakūnu, wa-law kāna Allāh ‘azza wa-jalla qā’il^{an} li-l-qawl “kun,” kāna li-l-qawl qawl...[wa-kāna] kullu “qawl” wāqi^{an} bi-qawl lā ilā ghāya, wa-dhālika muḥāl.)⁴

In *Kitāb al-Luma’*, al-Ash‘arī says:

Another proof that God (exalted be he) is eternally Speaking is that the Word must be either eternal or temporally created. And if it is temporally created, then God would have had to create it in himself or subsisting in itself or in something else. And it is impossible that he should create it in himself, since he is not subject to change. And it is impossible that he should create it subsisting in itself, for it is an attribute, and attributes do not subsist in themselves. And it is impossible that he should create it in something other than himself since if he created it in something other than himself, then that substance in which was the Word would have to be separated from [the Speaker]... And if all of the possible interpretation-options for the Word, if it were created, are absurd, then it is correct that it is pre-eternal and that God (exalted be he) is eternally Speaking by virtue of it. – *Dalīl ākhar ‘alā anna Allāh ta’ālā lam yazal mutakallim^{an}: anna al-kalām lā yakhlū an yakūna qadīm^{an} aw ḥadīth^{an}. Fa-in kāna muḥdath^{an}, lam yakhlū an yuḥdithahū Allāh fī nafsihī aw qā’im^{an} fī nafsihī aw fī ghayrihī. Fa-yastahīlu an yuḥdithahū fī nafsihī li’annahū laysa bi-maḥall li-l-ḥawādith. Wa-yastahīlu an yuḥdithahū qā’im^{an} bi-nafsihī li’annahū ṣifa, wa-l-ṣifa lā taqūmu bi-nafsihā. Wa-yastahīlu an yuḥdithahū fī ghayrihī li’annahū law aḥdathahū fī ghayrihī la-wajaba an yashtaqqā dhālika al-jism alladhi fī-hī al-kalām min [al-mutakallim]... wa-idhā fasadat al-wujūh allatī lā yakhlū al-kalām minhā law kāna muḥdath^{an}, ṣaḥḥa annahū qadīm, wa-anna Allāh lam yazal bi-hī mutakallim^{an}.*⁵

⁴ Ibid., p. 31, lines 18ff. The Beirut edition contains a minor typographical error at this point, which is printed correctly in *Al-Rasā’il al-Sab’a fī al-‘Aqā’id* (Hayderabad, Deccan: Maṭba‘at Jam‘iyyat Dā’irat al-Ma‘ārif al-‘Uthmāniyya, 1948), p. 20, lines 2ff.

⁵ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī, *Kitāb al-Luma’ fī-l-Radd ‘alā Ahl al-Zaygh wa-l-Bida’*, edited by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ‘Azz al-Dīn al-Sīrwān (Beirut: Dār Lubnān li-l-Ṭibā‘a wa-l-Nashr, 1987), p. 99, lines 7-19.

Elsewhere al-Ash'arī said: “The word of God (exalted is He) is a preeternal *ṣifa* belonging to Him, eternally subsisting in his essence (*inna kalām Allāh ta'ālā ṣifa lahū qadīma lam yazal qā'im bi-dhātihī*).”⁶

Islamic doctrine asserts that one should not say (*lā yajūzu an yuqāla*, or *lā yajūzu al-qawl*) that God's uncreated *kalām* is something other than God (*ghayr Allāh*), for the Eternal (*al-azalī*) is one, i.e. God himself. If God's *kalām* were something other than God (*ghayr Allāh*), then since it is eternal, this would mean asserting (*ithbāt*) two separate eternal things (*shay'ayn mutafāriqayn azaliyyayn*), i.e. two gods, and this is absurd and rejected (*muḥāl wa-marfūḍ*).

This Islamic doctrine agrees with what the Gospel text says in John 1:1-3: “In the beginning (i.e. *fī al-azal*) was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. It was in the beginning (*fī al-azal*) with God. All things came into being through it, and apart from it nothing came into being which came into being.”

God's *kalām* is not created, but rather is a pre-existent reality (*ḥaqīqa qadīma*) subsisting eternally in God (*qā'ima azaliyy^{an} bi-Allāh*). In one sense it is “with God,” and in another sense it “is God.” It is not something other than God. Everything which God has created has been created through his *kalām*. As the *Zābūr* says, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.” (Psalm 33:6) Muslims and Christians agree on this.

What, exactly, is God's *kalām*? It is God's self-expression, or God's revelation of himself [perhaps translate: *kashf Allāh 'an nafsihī*?]. It is through his *kalām* that God makes himself known.

This is true of (*hādihā yaṣiḥḥu fī*) God's *kalām* in creating the universe, for when he created the universe – when he said “Be!” – God made himself known. As the *ḥadīth qudsī* says, “I was a hidden treasure, and I desired to be known, so I created the universe so that I might be known. (*laqad kuntu kanz^{an} makhfiyy^{an}, fa-aḥbabbtu an u'rafa, wa-khalaqtu al-kawn likay u'rafa*).” The Gospel says, “What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” (Rom. 1:19-20)

⁶ Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Hasan ibn Fūrak, Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Hasan al-Ash'arī, Daniel Gimaret, ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1987), p. 59, line 11.

This is also true of (*hādhā yaṣiḥḥu kadhālika fī*) God's *kalām* in the sacred Scriptures. The sacred Scriptures are God's revelation of himself. They are God's word heard and written (*kalām Allāh al-masmū' wa-l-maktūb*).

The Gospel asserts that God's *kalām*, i.e. God's self-revelation, which is manifest in creation and manifest in the sacred Scriptures, is also manifest in one other important way. For God did not reveal himself only to inanimate creatures, nor only through paper and ink. The Gospel asserts that since God, in his love, wanted to reveal himself to humankind (*al-bashariyya*), he determined that his *kalām* should be manifest in the form of human flesh (*bashar*).

The Gospel text which we are considering in this book, which begins with the words, "In the beginning was the Word," continues a few verses later, saying, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:14, 17) If the sacred Scriptures are God's word audible (*kalām Allāh al-masmū'*), then the Gospel here asserts that *al-Sayyid al-Masīh*, to him be glory (*lahū al-majd*), is God's Word visible (*kalām Allāh al-manzūr*).

So the Gospel asserts that God's *kalām* became manifest to us as flesh (*tajallā lanā bashar^{an}*) – i.e. that God revealed himself to humankind in the form of human flesh – in the person of the *al-Sayyid al-Masīh*, to him be glory (*lahū al-majd*).

The expression "became flesh" should not be understood as implying that God's *kalām* somehow changed or ceased to be one thing in order to be transformed into another. The original Greek word does not imply this. Rather, the divine *kalām*, which does not change, was manifested to humankind by its assuming (*ittikhādhihī*) human flesh. Christian doctrine speaks of the union (*ittiḥād*) between the divine *kalām* and Christ's human nature (*tabī'at al-Masīh al-bashariyya*) in one person as a union between "two natures without mixing, without change, without division and without separation."

Perhaps the Gospel contains a subtle linguistic allusion here. In the Aramaic/Syriac language, which is very close to Arabic and was spoken in Palestine in the time of *al-Sayyid al-Masīh*, the word *ethbassar* can mean both "became flesh" (*sāra bashar^{an}*) and "was proclaimed" (*bushshira bihī*). Thus, the Gospel is saying that God's *kalām*, which had been proclaimed (*bushshira bihī*) in the past in the Tōrah has now become manifest as flesh (*tajallā lanā bashar^{an}*) in the person of *al-Sayyid al-Masīh*, to him be glory (*lahū al-majd*).

Perhaps we hear an echo of this same linguistic wordplay in the Qur’ān, Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān 45: “The angels said, ‘O Mary! God proclaims to you good news of a word from him whose name is Christ Jesus, son of Mary, outstanding in this world and in the Hereafter, and among those brought near.’” (*qālat al-malā’ika yā Maryam inna Allāh yubashshiruki bi-kalima minhū ismuhū al-Masīh ‘Īsā ibn Maryam wajīh^{an} fī al-dunyā wa-l-ākhirā wa-min al-muqarrabīn*). Sūrat al-Nisā’ 171 also refers to *al-Sayyid al-Masīh* as “his word, which he cast into Mary, and a spirit from him.” (*kalimatuhū alqāhā ilā Maryam wa-rūh minhū*)

In summary, we see that both the Gospel and the Qur’ān indicate that (*yufīdu bi-anna*) God’s *kalām* is an eternal, uncreated reality subsisting in God’s essence (*qā’im bi-dhāt Allāh*). Both the Gospel and the Qur’ān indicate that (*yufīdu bi-anna*) God created all things by his *kalām*. And both the Gospel and the Qur’ān indicate that (*yufīdu bi-anna*) *al-Sayyid al-Masīh* is God’s *kalima* which he caused to be manifest in the womb of the Virgin Mary, may God be pleased with her (*raḍiya Allāh ‘anhā*). There is a great amount of common ground here, which we can explore together in friendship and love.