

THE PRESENTATION OF NON-ISLAMIC DOCTRINAL BELIEFS IN MUHAMMAD
IBN ABDULKARIM AL-SHAHRASTANI'S NIHĀYAT AL-IQDĀM

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Abstract: In this article, information is given about “Nihayat al-Iqdam” by the great scientist Imam Abul Fath Shahrastani (1076-1153), who lived and created in the “The Great Seljuk Empire” (1037-1194), and the analysis of the beliefs of the religions included in the work is given.
Keywords: Shahrastani, ‘Aqīdah (Creed), Belief, Philosophy, Christianity, Judaism, al-Milal wa’l-Niḥal, Huduth (Origination), Universe, Creation.

Imam al-Shahrastani, who held an exceptional place in the intellectual and scholarly landscape of medieval Central Asia, was born in 1076 in the city of Shahrastan, located between the cities of Merv and Khwarazm. The scholar devoted the core of his academic activity to the study of the history and doctrines of religions. In this regard, he authored his famous work al-Milal wa’l-Niḥal (Religions and Sects).

Nevertheless, he also engaged deeply with the science of kalām (Islamic theology). His work Nihāyat al-Iqdām is considered one of the significant sources on ‘aqīdah (creed) and kalām. The full title of the book is Nihāyat al-Iqdām fī ‘Ilm al-Kalām ("The Ultimate Steps in the Science of Kalām"), and it is regarded as Shahrastani’s second major and well-known work after al-Milal wa’l-Niḥal. This book is also referred to as Nihāyat al-Iqdām fī al-Uṣūl. It covers various issues related to Islamic creed, primarily relying on rational (‘aql-based) arguments.

The scholar explains the purpose of writing his work as follows:

“In this book, I have not committed myself to merely reporting the subjects of kalām. Rather, I have committed myself to addressing the problems related to rational matters, and to clarifying the levels of the kalām scholars in their knowledge of rational—rather than transmitted—sciences” [1:277].

The primary feature that distinguishes this work from other theological treatises is that the author included only those topics that he personally encountered most frequently and debated during his life.

The Turkish researcher Hakan Coşar, in his study, concludes that Nihāyat al-Iqdām was written from a philosophical perspective. He states:

“The work was composed with philosophical reflection, in which the views of Aristotle, al-Fārābī, al-Kindī, and Ibn Sīnā on existence, divinity, necessary being (wājib al-wujūd), and origination (ḥudūth) are criticized” [2].

The researcher attributes this critical stance to the fact that, during Shahrastani’s time, philosophy had reached its peak under the influence of Mu‘tazilite thought.

The researcher’s views are quite convincing, as the scholar devoted much of his life to philosophy. He regarded Imam al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā as his intellectual mentors. Moreover, he authored a philosophical treatise titled Muṣāra‘at al-Falāsifa (The Struggle with the Philosophers). In Nihāyat al-Iqdām, he also included key philosophical issues of his time and responded to them using rational arguments.

Today, several manuscript copies of Nihāyat al-Iqdām are preserved. The majority of these are located in the Republic of Turkey, including:

- Bayezid State Library (Ms. No. 2154 and No. 1192),

- Hacı Selim Ağa Library (Ms. No. 666 and No. 964),
- Köprülü (Hoca Ragıp Pasha) Library (Ms. No. 1169),
- Süleymaniye Library (Ms. No. 3164, No. 14698, and No. 35168),
- Topkapı Palace Museum Library (Ms. No. 1845),
- Istanbul University Library (Ms. No. 5225 and No. 5224).

Additionally, copies are held in several European libraries, including:

- The National Library of France (Ms. No. 1246),
- The Bodleian Library at Oxford (Ms. No. 356), and
- The Prussian State Library in Berlin (Ms. No. 579).

Based on three of these European manuscripts, the first modern edition of the work was published in 1934 by the British orientalist Alfred Guillaume (1888–1965).

The work consists of twenty chapters and incorporates the methodologies of the classical Sunni kalām tradition. In each chapter, the author provides a distinct title and begins by presenting the views of philosophers, the Mu‘tazilites, and other theological schools on the topic under discussion. He then outlines the perspectives of Sunni scholars.

In this book, written after *al-Milal wa’l-Niḥāl*, the author adopts a comparative approach to the doctrinal views of Islamic sects—distinct from the method used in his earlier work—and defends Sunni ‘aqīdah from the standpoint of Ash‘arite theology. He responds to sectarian theological concepts with rational arguments.

In many sections of *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, the opinions of key Ash‘arite figures such as Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (873–936), Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (940–1013), Abū Ishāq al-Isfarā‘īnī (949–1047), and Imām al-Juwaynī (1028–1085) are introduced with the phrase “The People of Truth say...”.

In various parts of the work, the reference to “our master” (ustādh) is understood to mean Abū Ishāq al-Isfarā‘īnī; “our shaykh” refers to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī; and “the judge” (qāḍī) points to Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī. Imām al-Juwaynī is frequently mentioned as Imām al-Ḥaramayn.

Beyond the beliefs of Islamic sects, the work also addresses the doctrines of philosophers as well as religious and theological systems such as Brahmanism, Sabianism, and Zoroastrian dualism (Sanawiyyah).

The first chapter of *Nihāyat al-Iqdām* deals with the creation of the universe (ḥudūth), discussing whether the world is “eternal” (qadīm) or “created” (muḥdath). Presenting the views of various schools, the scholar states:

“According to the doctrine of the People of Truth (ahl al-ḥaqq), the universe is created. It was created by Allah, the Exalted. At the moment of its creation, nothing existed except Allah. Ancient philosophers such as Thales, Anaxagoras, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Empedocles held divergent views on this issue. We explained this in detail in *al-Milal wa’l-Niḥāl*. Later thinkers like Proclus, Aphrodisius, Themistius, as well as Muslim philosophers such as Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī and Abū ‘Alī Ḥusayn ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā, also believed the world to be eternal” [1:3].

Shahrastānī argues against the eternity of the universe:

“Allah, the Exalted, is eternally wājib al-wujūd (Necessary Being). Reason accepts that a being who is eternal cannot perish. The world, on the other hand, is composed of substances (jawāhir) and is muḥdath (created), meaning it is perishable. If the universe were eternal, then reason would reject the idea of two eternal beings existing simultaneously” [1:3].

The second chapter of the work is dedicated to the belief that the entire cosmos was created by Allah. At the beginning of this chapter, the author writes:

“This chapter contains refutations against the Mu‘tazilites, philosophers, and the Magians (Zoroastrian dualists). According to the belief of the People of Truth and the People of Islam, the entire existing universe was created by Allah, the Exalted. Nothing exists without Him” [1:49].

Regarding the cosmological beliefs of the Magians, he states:

“In their doctrine, the creation of the universe is explained in detail. According to the Magians, the emergence of the universe was caused by the intermingling of light and darkness. When light becomes separated from darkness, the universe ceases to exist” [1:50].

In *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥāl*, the cosmological beliefs of the Magians (Zoroastrians) are elaborated in detail. The scholar presents their views as follows:

“According to the Magian belief, light (nūr) and darkness (ẓulumāt) are two opposing primordial elements. Yazdān and Ahriman are likewise opposing entities and are the origin of all that exists. From the merging of light and darkness, compositions (arkān) arose, and from these various compositions, forms (ṣuwar) emerged. God is the creator of both light and darkness. He is One, having neither partner, nor rival, nor likeness. Good and evil, righteousness and corruption, purity and impurity — all arise from the intermingling of light and darkness. If light and darkness had not merged, the universe would not exist. There is a constant struggle and opposition between the two until light overcomes darkness, good triumphs over evil, and each returns to its own realm — this is the cause of salvation. God, having observed wisdom in these compositions, caused light and darkness to mix and made light the essence. The existence of light is true existence, while darkness is like a man’s shadow — it appears to exist but is not real. Once light was created, darkness followed it and became subject to it. For opposition is necessary to existence. Therefore, the presence of darkness among creation is, like a man and his shadow, a necessary reality” [3:283].

In the third chapter of *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, titled *Tawḥīd* (Divine Unity), the dualist beliefs of the Sanawiyya are discussed. These dualists believe in the eternal existence of light and darkness, considering them both to be primordial and uncreated. The Magians, however, oppose this idea, claiming that “darkness appeared only later.”

The scholar refutes these claims, stating:

“Our scholars say: ‘Divine unity (tawḥīd) is an indivisible oneness. Allah, the Exalted, is unique in His essence — He is not composed of parts. He is unique in His attributes — none is like Him. He is unique in His actions — none is equal to Him’” [1:85].

In *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥāl*, the author further classifies the Sanawiyya into four sects: the Manichaeans, the Mazdakites, the Daysāniyya, and the Marqūniyya. He writes:

“They unanimously agreed on the equal eternity of both light and darkness. However, they differed in their views concerning the essence, nature, actions, location, types, appearances, and spirits of these elements” [3:290].

The fourth chapter of *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, titled *Rejection of Anthropomorphism* (*Tashbīh*), addresses the doctrines of the Jahmiyya and the Karrāmiyya. The scholar asserts:

“According to the People of Truth, Allah does not resemble any of His creation, and none of the creation resembles Him. As the Qur’an states: ‘There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing’ (Qur’an 42:11). Allah is neither a body nor an accident (‘araḍ). He is not confined to any place or time” [1:97].

The chapter also critiques the extremist (ghulāt) Shi‘i sects such as the Mughiriyya, Bayāniyya, and Hishāmiyya, who likened Allah’s attributes to those of created beings. These groups often cite the prophetic tradition:

“Indeed, Allah created Adam in the image of al-Raḥmān (the Merciful).”

This ḥadīth is narrated by Abū Hurayra (ra) and recorded by al-Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* (ḥadīth no. 6227). ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar (ra) interpreted the phrase “in the image of al-Raḥmān” as referring to divine attributes such as knowledge and understanding that are also found, in limited form, in humans [5].

Furthermore, the chapter discusses the Karrāmiyya's belief that Allah has a body (jism), and it records the rebuttals of Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī against their views.

Chapters five and six of *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, titled *The Falsehood of the Ta'ṭīl Doctrine* and *States (Aḥwāl)* respectively, contain critical refutations of the theory of aḥwāl advanced by Abū Ḥāshim al-Jubbā'ī, a key Mu'tazilī thinker. The theory was proposed as an attempt to avoid both anthropomorphism (tashbīh) and negation of divine attributes (ta'ṭīl), but the scholar dismantles it thoroughly [1:97–127].

The seventh chapter, titled *Does the Non-Existent Exist?*, addresses the debate over the existence of non-being (ma'dūm) — a central issue for certain Mu'tazilīs and Greek-influenced philosophers such as Aristotle. It compares the views of the Ahl al-Sunna, Mu'tazilīs, and the philosophers on the concept of primordial substance [1:146–166].

Chapters eight and nine are devoted to *The Affirmation of Knowledge*, while chapter ten discusses *The Eternal Nature of God's Knowledge*. These chapters counter the views of figures like Jahm ibn Ṣafwān and Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam, who claimed that God does not have knowledge of temporal events. Al-Shahrastānī responds:

“God is pre-eternal and singular. He has complete knowledge of all things — both universal and particular. Ibn Sīnā states: ‘The Lord, exalted be He, knows everything in a universal and particular manner through His own essence’” [1:206].

The eleventh chapter tackles a long-standing point of theological divergence among Islamic sects: the nature of Divine Will (irāda) and Speech (kalām). The twelfth chapter continues with a discussion on *The Eternality of God's Speech*, and chapter thirteen focuses on *The Divine Attribute of Speech*. Chapter fourteen explores *The Reality of Human Speech and Expression*.

Chapter fifteen, titled *The Presence of Knowledge within the Names al-Baṣīr (the All-Seeing) and al-Samī' (the All-Hearing)*, rejects the Mu'tazilī claim that these attributes are merely aspects of God's name al-'Alīm (the All-Knowing). The scholar reports:

“Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (may Allah have mercy on him) opposed Ka'bī and his group, asserting: ‘Allah is Samī' in His essence. His attributes of seeing and hearing are distinct from the attribute of knowledge’” [1:330].

Chapter sixteen, titled *The Possibility of Seeing God According to Reason and Revelation*, presents both rational and textual proofs affirming the Ahl al-Sunna view that God can be seen in the Hereafter. These arguments are posed as responses to Mu'tazilī denials of such a possibility.

Chapter seventeen addresses the question of taḥsīn (moral approval) and taqḥīḥ (moral condemnation). Al-Shahrastānī summarizes the Ahl al-Ḥaqq (People of Truth) position:

“According to us, the intellect alone cannot determine the goodness or evil of actions in matters of divine obligation. Human reason needs the guidance of revelation (sharī'a) to distinguish right from wrong.”

He notes that this position is contested by Sanawiyya, transmigratonists (tanāsukhiyya), Brahmins, Khārijites, Karrāmiyya, and Mu'tazilīs, who hold that:

“Reason alone, even without revelation, can discern what is good and what is evil — and that reward or punishment should follow accordingly.”

To support the Sunni position, the scholar cites Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, who said:

“All knowledge is acquired through reason, but acting on that knowledge depends on the guidance of revelation” [1:365].

The Brāhmaṇs' doctrine — namely, “We do not need divine revelation (sharī'a) in order to know anything. The intellect may accept or reject what a prophet commands via the sharī'a. If the intellect accepts it, then the prophet is unnecessary, because the intellect alone can attain the truth of the matter. If the intellect rejects it, the matter itself must be rejected” — is also presented and examined in this chapter [3:370].

This section likewise addresses the theological claim that before the arrival of revelation, no servant of God can be held accountable, and that no reward or punishment is recorded for their actions.

The eighteenth chapter is titled *There Is No Causal Motive Behind God's Acts*, and affirms the Sunni theological position that God's actions are not compelled by causes, motives, or purposes comprehensible to human reason.

Chapters eighteen and nineteen of *Nihāyat al-Iqdām* are further devoted to the concept of Prophethood and the Proof of the Messengerhood of Muḥammad (peace be upon him). In these chapters, al-Shahrastānī briefly notes that the Brāhmaṇs reject the concept of prophethood altogether, stating succinctly: "They deny the reality of prophethood."

However, in his other work *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, the scholar elaborates on their doctrines in greater detail. He identifies Brāhmaṇism as the most prominent creed among the Indian traditions and remarks:

"One of the great doctrines of the Indians is Brāhmaṇism. They categorically reject prophethood. Some of them incline toward atheism (*dahriyya*). Among them are also those who worship idols and statues. Certain people have attempted to associate the name 'Brāhmaṇa' with the prophet Abraham (*Ibrāhīm*, peace be upon him), but this is absolutely false. How can a group that denies prophethood be named after a prophet?" [3:601].

Al-Shahrastānī also mentions sects that have branched off from Brāhmaṇism. Among them, he includes Buddhism. Concerning the name "Buddha," he writes:

"According to the Indians, this name signifies one who was never born, never married, never ate voluntarily, and never died. The first Buddha in the world, according to them, was Shākyamuni. There are five thousand years between him and the Hijra. The highest spiritual rank in Buddhism is *Bodhisattva*, which means 'one who seeks the true path.' They adhere to ten fundamental prohibitions" [3:603–604].

Al-Shahrastānī appears to have erred in his estimation of the chronological gap between Buddha and the Hijra. Historically, Siddhartha Gautama was a real figure born between 567 and 488 BCE in the region of Kapilavastu, located near the present-day border of India and Nepal, into the royal Shākya clan. At the age of thirty-five, Siddhartha sat beneath a tree in deep meditation (Latin: *meditatio* – to think, reflect, or concentrate with the aim of reaching higher truth), vowing not to rise until he had attained the ultimate reality — which he eventually did [4:144]. From this, it is evident that over a millennium separates Buddha's lifetime from the advent of Islam.

Interestingly, al-Shahrastānī likens Buddha to the figure of Khidr (peace be upon him) as described in Muslim tradition. In addition to classifying Buddhists among the offshoots of Brahmanism, he also mentions groups such as the *ashāb al-fīkr wa-l-fahm* ("people of thought and understanding") and *tanasukhiyyūn* (those who believe in transmigration of souls).

The twentieth and final chapter of *Nihāyat al-Iqdām* begins by presenting proofs for the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him), emphasizing that the Qur'an itself is the greatest of such proofs. It then proceeds to address eschatological matters such as the grave, resurrection, the balance (*mīzān*), the cistern (*ḥawḍ*), intercession (*shafā'a*), the definition of faith (*īmān*), the distinction between faith and deeds, and the legal status of one who commits a major sin.

This chapter also devotes special attention to the doctrine of *imāma*, critically assessing and rejecting the Shī'ī understanding of it, presenting arguments against their theological claims. Other subjects covered include the miracles (*karāmāt*) of saints (*awliyā'*), the abrogation of previous religions by Islam, and related issues [1:410–504].

In the conclusion of his work, al-Shahrastānī defends the necessity of *kalām* (theology) as a discipline. He criticizes philosophers for their approach and refers to them as "imaginative

speculators” (ahl al-khayāl) due to what he sees as their excessive reliance on abstract speculation over revealed knowledge.

In his edition of *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, Alfred Guillaume included an appendix containing another of al-Shahrastānī’s treatises: *Baḥṭh fī al-Jawhar al-Fard* (“A Treatise on the Simple Substance”). This work compares and critiques the views of philosophers, Mu‘tazilites, and theologians on the nature of “substance” (jawhar) and “atom”.

Although *Nihāyat al-Iqdām* is considered one of the authoritative sources in Islamic theological discourse, it has not yet been fully studied or critically edited in modern scholarship. The theological and doctrinal material it contains often surpasses what is presented in his earlier work *al-Milal wa-l-Niḥāl*, thus increasing its scholarly value and importance.

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