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Debating the Qur'ānic Argument for Monotheism: Philosophical Theology in Some Sunnī Kalām and Exegetical Works

If cosmic order implies the unity of God, does the corrosion of heaven and earth imply the plurality of gods? Although most people would readily give an affirmative answer to this question, the 8th/14th century Māturīdī theologian Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī's (d. 792/1390) explicit deliberation on the Qur'ān chapter 21 verse 22 ("If there were other gods [in heaven and earth] besides Allāh, they would both dissolve into chaos) has sparked a heated debate among fellow Sunnīthinkers and continued to trigger controversy in later scholarship down to Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854) and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1332/1914). His statement that the Qur'ānic verse in question does not provide a conclusive proof for God's unity and merely counts as a kind of rhetorical argument (*ḥujja iqnā'iyya*) touches upon the very heart of Islamic doctrine of monotheism. So serious was the issue at stake that some of his contemporaries such as 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Kirmānī had levelled the charge of unbelief against him. This paper will discuss and analyze the arguments which al-Taftāzānī put forward in his widely acclaimed commentary on the Nasafī creed (*Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafīyya*) and other relevant works (i.e. *al-Maqāṣid* and *al-Muṭawwal*) and as well those of both his critics and defenders (e.g. 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Bukhārī) in order to attempt a definitive assessment of their respective positions and see the whole question in a somewhat new light. What is revealed in this controversy is a typical, intra-denominational disagreement that complicates any effort to declare a single official Sunnī stance on various theological issues.



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