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Theological Independence of Hadith Scholars and the Chronological Problems of the Ash'ari and Maturidi: A Critical Analysis of Usamah Al-Azhari's Thought

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Abstract

Usamah Al-Azhari's claim that the Hadith scholars follow the Ash'ariyah and Maturidiyah aqidahs in the book *Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin Wa Wasbilatuhum Bi Al-Tasamwuf* has sparked academic controversy because it ignores significant chronological and methodological gaps. This study aims to test the validity of this claim by critically analyzing the theological independence of the Hadith scholars. Using a qualitative approach that integrates Krippendorff's content analysis and historical theology, this study evaluates the text of Usamah's claim. It compares it with classical documents from the Hadith scholars, the Ash'ariyah, and the Maturidiyah traditions. The research findings indicate that the Hadith scholars possess an epistemological independence that cannot be reduced to the Ash'ariyah or Maturidiyah framework. The chronological gap—where the Ash'ariyah and Maturidiyah emerged in the 3rd century AH, long after the initial generation of Hadith scholars—proves a historical anachronism in Usamah's mapping. Furthermore, despite both using the tafwidh method, the Hadith scholars apply it with a textual-traditionalist approach that is fundamentally different from the rationalistic Ash'ariyah ta'wil method and the rationalist-systematic Maturidiyah approach. The internal dialectics within the Hadith scholars' tradition—such as Al-Ghazali's critique of textual codification and Ibn Khuzaymah's ta'wil practices—further strengthen their methodological autonomy. This research contributes to the reconstruction of Sunni theological historiography by affirming the position of the Hadith scholars as an independent tradition, not merely followers of a posteriori theological school.

Keywords: *Usamah Al-Azhari claim, Hadith scholars, Historical theology*

INTRODUCTION

Understanding Aqidah, as a fundamental aspect of Islamic studies, is naturally the primary focus of Islamic da'wah. The Prophet (peace be upon him) taught Aqidah to his Companions through definitive evidence (dalil qath'i) derived from the Qur'an and Hadith, a tradition continued by the Companions through the Tabi'in generation, and onward to the

Tabi' al-Tabi'in.¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that as recipients and practitioners of hadith—commonly known as Hadith Scholars—they possess a well-established understanding of aqidah.²

However, recently, a statement has emerged that has sparked controversy, claiming that hadith scholars follow the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools of thought in matters of aqidah. These two schools of thought are the main pillars of Ahlusunnah wal Jamaah theological studies, with the Ash'ari school founded by Abu Hasan Al-Ash'ari (d. 936 CE) and the Maturidi school attributed to Abu Mansur Muhammad Al-Maturidi (d. 944 CE). In fact, both emerged in the 3rd century AH,³ long after the era of the Companions.

Usamah Al-Azhari made the statement in his book *Aqidah Al-Muhaddithin Wa Washilatuhum Bi Al-Tashawwuf*, which he presented at the International Sunni Islamic Congress held in Grozny, the capital of the Chechen Republic, on August 25–27, 2016.⁴ The conference focused on the topic 'Who Are the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah', and Usamah was one of the speakers there. The reason Usamah stated that the Hadith Scholars follow the Asharite and Maturidite aqidahs is because he considers that the Hadith Scholars also adopt the tafwidh approach in interpreting ambiguous verses, and sometimes also apply ta'wil when encountering verses that cannot be accepted by reason, which aligns with the thought of the Ash'ari and Maturidi doctrines.⁵ Usamah provided evidence by citing Hadith scholars who held Ash'ari and Maturidi beliefs, such as Al-Daruquthni, Al-Baihaqi, Al-Hakim, Al-Qadhi Iyadh, Ibn Shalah, Ibn Hajar, and even the majority of commentators on the books of Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, and other Sunan collections.⁶

The statement by Usamah was crucial to examine because there were clear chronological and methodological gaps, given that the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools emerged long after the golden age of the Hadith scholars. The debate regarding the theological identity of the Hadith scholars has, for the most part, been discussed within a normative-doctrinal framework that tends to be trapped in one-sided claims of truth. Despite this tendency, this study offers an intellectual-historical approach to critically examine the validity of Usamah Al-Azhari's mapping through chronological, epistemological, and genealogical analyses of the concepts of tafwidh and ta'wil. The contribution of this study thus lies both in the textual description of the figures' thought and in a deep historical reconstruction and academic evaluation of the construction of the Hadith scholars' theological identity. Therefore, it specifically aims to re-examine the degree of independence in the doctrinal views of the Hadith scholars to determine whether they merely followed the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools, as claimed by Usamah Al-Azhari, or whether they actually possessed an independent theological foundation.

¹ Syanando Adzikri dan Muhid Muhid, "Hadith Forgery and Zandaqah in Early Islamic History: Scholarly and Political Responses," *Jurnal Ulunnuha* 14, no. 2 (2025): 136–51, <https://doi.org/10.15548/ju.v14i2.11283>.

² Ibnu Jibrin, *P'tiqad Ahli Al-Sunah* (t.t.).

³ Nurul Ngazizah, *Sejarah Pemikiran Asy'ariyah dan Maturidiyah*, t.t., 10.

⁴ "Mu'tamar Al-Syaisyan Al-Tsani Li Ahli Al-Sunah Wa Al-Jama'ah," t.t.

⁵ Usamah Azhary, "Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin wa Washilatuhum bi Al-Tashawwuf," 2016.

⁶ Azhary, "Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin wa Washilatuhum bi Al-Tashawwuf," 6.

As well as conducting a more in-depth study of the book *Aqidah Al-Mubadditsin Wa Washilatubum Bi Al-Tashawwuf* by Sheikh Usamah, another source that can help address the issues in this research is the book by K.H. A. Fatih Syuhud titled “Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah: Islam Wasathiyah, Tasamuh, Cinta Damai,” which also includes the views of figures from the Chechnya Conference regarding the definition of Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah and their concepts of doctrine.⁷ Additionally, literature relevant to this study's analysis includes the book *Al-Aqidah Al-Thabawiyah* by Ibn Ja'far al-Thahawi⁸ and *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal* by al-Shahrastani, which discusses the doctrine of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah.⁹

Qualitative research integrates Klaus Krippendorff's (2004)¹⁰ content analysis method and historical-comparative linguistic analysis in a mixed approach.¹¹ The approach was employed to examine contemporary theological claims while systematically tracing the historical dynamics of ideas and the development of theological doctrine. Krippendorff's content analysis begins by defining units of analysis—such as words, phrases, and arguments—in Usamah Al-Azhari's *Aqidah Al-Mubadditsin Wa Washilatubum Bi Al-Tashawwuf*, which maps the doctrines of the Hadith scholars within the Ash'ari-Maturidi framework. Then, the coding process involved marking these key texts and synchronizing them with comparative classical texts, such as the works of Al-Baihaqi, Al-Dhahabi, and Al-Khomi. Data is classified into three categories of analysis: chronological aspects, epistemological methodology, and the conceptual genealogy of tafwidh and ta'wil. Then, an inference mechanism is applied to draw conceptual conclusions by connecting Usamah's text to its historical context in order to test the academic validity of that claim.

Krippendorff's analytical framework is further refined through the Historical-Comparative Analysis method. This method is crucial for conducting a longitudinal examination of the origins, shifts in meaning, and dynamism of the terms tafwidh and ta'wil from the Salaf-Mutaqaddimin to the Khalaf-Mutakhirin generations. The historical-comparative technique allows Usamah Al-Azhari's contemporary arguments to be critically examined against primary historical data and the internal dialectics of the Hadith scholars' tradition. Consequently, this entire methodological framework, constructed narratively, is not only capable of describing the surface content of the text but also of reconstructing the historical dynamics of Sunni Islamic theology in an objective, rigorous, and academically accountable manner.

DISCUSSION

Biography of Usamah Al-Azhari

Usamah Sayyid Mahmud Muhammad al-Azhari, more commonly known as Usamah Al-Azhari, was born in Alexandria on Friday, 18 Rajab 1396 AH. He completed his bachelor's

⁷ A. Fatih Syuhud, *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah: Islam Wasathiyah, Tasamuh, Cinta Damai* (CV. Literasi Nusantara Abadi, 2017).

⁸ Ibnu Ja'far Al-Tahawy, *al-Aqidah Al-Tabawiyah* (al-Maktabah al-Islami, Beirut, t.t.).

⁹ Al-Syahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* (Muasasah al-Halbi, t.t.).

¹⁰ M. Pd. Prof. Darmiyati Zuchdi, Ed.D., Wiwiek Afifah, *Analisis Konten Etnografi & Grounded Theory, dan Hermeneutika Dalam Penelitian* (Bumi Aksara, 2021).

¹¹ P. D. H. Soeparno, *Linguistik Historis Komparatif* (Penerbit K-Media, t.t.).

degree in 1999 and his master's degree in 2005.¹² His academic journey culminated in earning a Doctorate from the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Department of Hadith, with the distinction of Summa Cum Laude in 2011. His academic journey culminated in earning a Doctorate from the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Department of Hadith, with the distinction of Summa Cum Laude in 2011. To strengthen his intellectual credentials, he pursued formal education alongside the tradition of mulazamah. He obtained scholarly chains of transmission (sanad) from hundreds of prominent scholars at various centers of Islamic learning, including Syria, Yemen, and Morocco. Its academic position as a lecturer in the Hadith Department at Al-Azhar University grants it dual authority in integrating the study of hadith texts with the methodology of dialectical theology (ilm al-kalam).¹³

A leading Sunni intellectual, Usamah Al-Azhari's theological focus is on reconstructing the understanding of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah doctrine in the contemporary era,¹⁴ He has written extensively on the doctrine of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, such as *Mausu'ah Tashibi Al-Mafahimi Wa Al-Afkari Fi Qodoya Harot Fiha Al-Ummat Waqfan Limanbaji Ahli Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah*, which he co-authored with Ashraf Sa'd Azhari.¹⁵ Additionally, there is *Aqidah Al-Muhaddithin Wa Washilatuhum Bi Al-Tashawwuf*, which aims to refute the claim that the Hadith scholars have their own methodology in matters of doctrine. Usamah maintains that the doctrinal beliefs held by the Hadith scholars align with the Asharite and Maturidite schools of thought, both of which serve as the guiding principles for the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in matters of faith.¹⁶ He also frequently serves as a speaker at various institutions and international conferences, such as the International Sunni Islamic Congress held in Grozny, the capital of the Chechen Republic, on August 25–27, 2016, which delved deeply into the subject of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah.¹⁷

Usamah also studied various branches of knowledge under eminent scholars in other academic fields, including hadith, tafsir, usul al-fiqh, logic, and others. He received chains of transmission (ijazah sanad) from more than 300 scholars. He attended classes with scholars from Al-Azhar and from Syria, Yemen, and Morocco.¹⁸ No wonder, then, that he was able to produce a monumental work studied by many intellectuals, namely *Al-Haqq al-Mubin fi al-Radd 'ala Man Talaaba bi al-Din: al-Tayyarat al-Mutatarrifah min al-Ikhwan ila al-Da'ish fi Mizan al-Ilm*, in which he discusses radicalism within various Islamic movements, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to ISIS.¹⁹

¹² "Syekh Usamah Sayyid al-Azhari," Zawiyah Arraoudhah Ihsan Foundation, diakses 24 Oktober 2024, <https://zawiyah-arraoudhah.com/pengajar/usamah-sayyid-al-azhari>.

¹³ Zawiyah Arraoudhah Ihsan Found., "Syekh Usamah Sayyid al-Azhari."

¹⁴ "Sheikh Usama Al-Sayyid Al-Azhari," The muslim 500, diakses 24 Oktober 2024, <https://themuslim500.com/profiles/usama-al-sayyid-al-azhari/>.

¹⁵ Ashraf Sa'd Azhari dan Usamah al-Sayyid Azhari, *Mausu'ah tashibi Al-Mafahimi Wa Al-Afkari Fi Qodoya Harot Fiha Al-Ummat Waqfan Limanbaji Ahli Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah*, dalam (No Title) (t.t.).

¹⁶ Azhary, "Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin wa Washilatuhum bi Al-Tashawwuf," 4.

¹⁷ "Mu'tamar Al-Syaيسان Al-Tsani Li Ahli Al-Sunah Wa Al-Jama'ah."

¹⁸ Zawiyah Arraoudhah Ihsan Found., "Syekh Usamah Sayyid al-Azhari."

¹⁹ Usamah Sayyid Al-Azhari, "Al-Haqq al-Mubin fi al-Radd 'ala Man Talaaba bi al-Din: al-Tayyarat al-Mutatarrifah min al-Ikhwan ila al-Da'ish fi Mizan al-Ilm," preprint, Abu Dabi: Dar al-Faqih, 2016.

The Doctrine of Hadith Scholars: A Perspective by Usamah Al-Azhari

Ibn Jibrin states in his book *I'tiqad Ahli Al-Sunnah* that the correct doctrine is that which was conveyed by the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him), then passed down by his students, and transmitted through a continuous chain of transmission to the Tabi' al-Tabi'in and beyond—a chain that is directly connected to the Prophet's hadith as the source of the message.²⁰ It can therefore be concluded that the Hadith Scholars are the group closest to the correct ideology, for they are the ones who specialize in the field of hadith and possess an unbroken chain of transmission in their scholarly tradition. Regarding the issue of the chain of transmission, Hadith scholars pay attention to two things: first, the high chain, in the sense of the relationship and bond of transmission, which is considered close to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). This can be classified as a vertical chain of transmission. Second, it is referred to as a horizontal chain of transmission, meaning the extensive network of connections with narrators, scholars, and teachers from all corners of the world.²¹

In discussing the Hadith scholars' belief, it does not refer merely to anyone who practices the Prophet's hadith, for if that were the case, innovators would also fall into that category. Rather, what is meant here is anyone who follows the belief system presented by the Hadith scholars, even if they do not belong to the Hadith scholars' group themselves.²² Their beliefs are in the middle ground between the extremism of the Ra'y scholars and the negligence of the Dhohir scholars. However, the innovators insist that the Hadith scholars are Dhohir scholars (Hasyawiyah, Musyabihah, and Mubasyamah) to discredit the Hadith scholars in the eyes of the public, because they consider the Hadith scholars to view the textual evidence of ambiguous passages (musyabihat) merely in a literal sense.²³

Usamah Al-Azhari emphasized the position of the Hadith scholars regarding belief in his book, *Aqidah Al-Muhaddithin Wa Washilatuhum Bi Al-Tashawwuf*. He states that the notion that Hadith scholars belong to the categories of tajsim (ascribing a physical form to God) and tasybih (ascribing human-like attributes to God) is mistaken.²⁴ Usamah also adds that Hadith scholars do not interpret textual evidence literally; rather, they tend to adopt a stance of tafwidh (refraining from attempting to interpret and instead leaving the meaning of the text to Allah), and they also interpret verses that are considered open to contextual interpretation to make their meaning easier to understand. Based on this, Usamah asserts that Hadith scholars belong to the Ash'ari and Maturidi groups.

²⁰ Jibrin, *I'tiqad Ahli Al-Sunnah*, 10.

²¹ Fathurrochman Karyadi, "Biografi Intelektual Habib Salim Bin Jindan," *Nabawi* 1 (2021): 162–77.

²² Muhammad bin Abdurrahman Al-Khomis, *I'tiqad Aimat Al-Salaf Ahlu Al-Hadis*, 1 ed. (Dar Ilaf Al-Daulah, 1999), 220.

²³ Al-Khomis, *I'tiqad Aimat Al-Salaf Ahlu Al-Hadis*, 21.

²⁴ Azhary, "Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin wa Washilatuhum bi Al-Tashawwuf," 3.

*Lākin tataqqā labum ‘iddatu mafātīḥa wa qawā’ida fī fahmi tilka an-nuṣṣi wa al-āthāri, taj’alu mā al-amru ‘indahum fī al-i’tiqādi yu’ūlu ilā manhajī as-sādātī al-asyā’irah wa al-māturīdiyyah, wa annahum yaslukūna fihā maslaka at-tafwīḍi wa at-ta’wīl.*²⁵

Meaning: "But they still have several keys and rules in understanding these texts and texts, which makes their matters of belief tend to be based on the Ash‘ariyah and Maturidiyah methods, and they follow the tafwid (transmission of meaning) and ta’wil (interpretation) methods."

Usamah's choice of Aqidah Ahli Hadith as his topic is actually intended to refute the group that claims Ahli Hadith have their own distinct understanding of belief, and it also serves as the basis for the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jama‘ah in their practice of belief. As stated by Syamsuddin Al-Safarini (d. 1188 AH), he mentioned in his book that Ahlussunnah wal Jama‘ah consists of three groups, namely the Atsariyah (led by Ahmad bin Hanbal), the Asy'ariyah (led by Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari), and the Maturidiyah (led by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi).²⁶ There is also Murtadha al-Zubaidi, who stated that Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah comprises several groups, namely Ahlul Hadith, the Asy'ariyah, the Maturidiyah, and Ahlus Sufi.²⁷

Usamah Al-Azhari reinforced his statement by arguing that a number of prominent scholars among the Hadith scholars were adherents of Ash‘ari and Maturidi theology. He conducted an in-depth examination of the thought of these imams, placing prominent figures such as Imam Al-Daraqutni and Imam Al-Hakim, the author of the book Mustadrak, within that theological spectrum. Furthermore, Usamah highlights the significant contributions of Imam Al-Bayhaqi through his two works, *Al-Asma wa Al-Sifat* and *Kitab Al-I’tiqad*, which he positions as monumental and proud achievements of the Hadith scholars' tradition. This argument is further strengthened by including other figures such as Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi and Al-Hafizh Abu Al-Qasim Ibn Asakir, who, through his work *Tabyin Kidhb Al-Muftari*, is considered to have provided an important defense of Ash‘ari theology. By mapping these figures and their works, Usamah seeks to demonstrate that there is a close historical connection between the intellectual tradition of the Hadith scholars and the Ash‘ari and Maturidi doctrinal frameworks, reflecting the importance of doctrinal understanding within their circles.²⁸

Usamah Al-Azhari has created an ambitious intellectual framework by categorizing Hadith scholars within the theological traditions of Ash‘arism and Maturidism. He tried to rid Hadith scholars of negative labels such as Hashawiyah or Musyabihah and reconstruct them as a moderate group situated between the extremism of the Ra'y scholars and the negligence of the Dhohir scholars.²⁹ He did this by mapping the concept of tafwidh as a methodological meeting point, where the entrusting of textual meaning to Allah is positioned

²⁵ Azhary, "Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin wa Washilatuhum bi Al-Tashawwuf," 7.

²⁶ Syamsuddin Al-Safarini, *Lamami' al-Anwar al-Bahiyah*, 2 ed. (Muassasah al-Khafaqin, 1892), 73.

²⁷ Murtadha Al-Zubaidi, *Ithaf Sadah al-Mutqin*, 2 ed. (Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyah, t.t.), 10.

²⁸ Azhary, "Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin wa Washilatuhum bi Al-Tashawwuf," 5.

²⁹ Asrizal Mustofa, *Ibnu Taimiyah Bukan Seorang Mujassimah? Telaah Atas Ayat-Ayat Tajsim*, 5 (2023).

as the foundation uniting the currents of transmission (naql) and rationality (aql) within the Sunni tradition. Referring to historical figures such as Imam Al-Daraqutni, Imam Al-Hakim, and Al-Bayhaqi serves as a means of legitimizing this relationship.

However, this categorization faces serious challenges from an epistemological perspective because it often overlooks fundamental differences in the process of forming religious knowledge. As emphasized in studies on the methodology of the ulama, there is a crucial distinction between the tafwidh method practiced by hadith scholars—as if they were hearing directly from the Prophet (peace be upon him)—where they validate it without prioritizing their own opinions, thoughts, feelings, qiyas, or even reason, and the method developed by some scholars of kalam, including the Ash‘ari school, who tend to engage in interpretive reinterpretation (ta‘wil) of textual descriptions of divine attributes to avoid anthropomorphism. In the intellectual tradition, forcing these two practices into a single theological identity without considering their differing discursive genealogies constitutes a form of oversimplification that risks obscuring the epistemological autonomy of each tradition. Therefore, Usamah’s claim can be read as a form of historical rewriting that attempts to create a single “orthodoxy,” yet risks overlooking the plurality of theological rationalities that have historically shaped the dynamics of Islamic thought.

Timeline of Problems in Mapping Aqidah

Usamah Al-Azhari's statement that the Hadith scholars followed the Ash‘ari and Maturidi schools of thought raises a major issue in terms of chronology; after all, the figures Usamah mentioned were born around the 3rd century AH, whereas, upon closer examination, the Hadith scholars existed prior to that period.³⁰ If it is true that Hadith scholars indeed followed the Ash‘ari and Maturidi schools of thought, then what about the Hadith scholars from the period before them? For example, Abu Hurairah (d. 57 AH), who, upon receiving a hadith containing ambiguous elements, did not question the Prophet (peace be upon him) about it. As in the following hadith narrated by Bukhari, no. 1145:

Ḥaddathanā ‘Abdullāh ibn Maslamah, ‘an Mālik, ‘an Ibn Shihāb, ‘an Abī Salamah wa Abī ‘Abdillāh al-Agharr, ‘an Abī Hurairah raḍiyallāhu ‘anhu anna Rasūlallāh ṣallallāhu ‘alaihi wa sallama qāla: “*Yanzīlu Rabbunā tabāraka wa ta‘ālā kulla laylatin ilā al-samā’i al-dunyā ḥina yabqā thuluthu al-layli al-ākhir, yaqūlu: man yad‘unī fa-astajiba lah, man yas‘alunī fa-u‘ṭiyah, man yastaghfirunī fa-aghfirah lah.*”³¹

Meaning: “It was narrated to us by ‘Abdullah bin Maslamah from Malik from Ibn Shihab from Abu Salamah and Abu ‘Abdullah Al-Aghar from Abu Hurairah, may Allah be pleased with him, that the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said: 'Our Lord, Blessed and Exalted, descends every night to the lowest heaven during the last third of the

³⁰ Mohd Hamidi Ismail, “Metodologi Pengajian Akidah Ahli Sunnah Waljamaah: Methodology of Ahli Sunnah Waljamaah in Islamic Faith Studies,” *Journal of Ifta and Islamic Heritage* 3, no. 1 SE-Articles (2024): 137–68.

³¹ Abu Abdillah Muhammad bin Ismail bin Ibrahim bin al-Mughirah bin Bardizbah al-Ju‘fi al-Bukhari Bukhari, *Shahih al-Bukhari*, ed. oleh Habiburrahman Al-A‘zami (Dar Thouq al-Najah, 1994), 53.

night and says: “Whoever prays to Me, I will surely answer; whoever asks of Me, I will surely grant; and whoever seeks forgiveness from Me, I will surely forgive.”

Al-Baihaqi (384–458 AH), as mentioned in *Fath Al-Bari* by Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani (773–852 AH), is reported to have opted for tafwidh regarding the meaning of the word يَنْزِل in that hadith.³² Al-Baihaqi did not employ the method of takwil in interpreting this hadith. In fact, it is found that Al-Baihaqi rejected the Ash‘ari understanding, which often interprets ambiguous verses, in the introduction to his book *Al-Asma’ wa Al-Sifat*.³³ In fact, Usamah emphasized that Al-Baihaqi was one of the leading hadith scholars who adhered to the Ash‘ari and Maturidi schools of thought.

The other counter-argument to Usamah’s understanding is found in the book *I’tiqad A’imah Al-Salaf Ahlu Al-Hadith* by Muhammad bin Abdurrahman Al-Khomis (1341–1434 AH), which states that the Hadith scholars, when hearing the Prophet’s (peace be upon him) hadith, felt as though they were hearing it directly from the Prophet (peace be upon him), they affirm it without prioritizing their own opinions, thoughts, feelings, analogies, or even their reason.³⁴ In contrast to the Ash‘ari and Maturidi schools, which still employ the method of interpretation when encountering something that is difficult for the intellect to comprehend.

The differences between the various schools of thought—such as the Ash‘ari and Maturidi schools—are based on several key distinctions, including epistemological and methodological foundations, as well as the authority of revelation versus reason.³⁵ These differences are summarized in the table below:

Aspect	Hadith Scholar	Asy‘ariyah	Maturidiyah
Primary Methods	Itsbat and Tafwidh	Tafwidh and Ta’wil	Ta’wil (Tafwidh if necessary)
Reason's Role	Following the revelation	The instrument of protection from tasybih	logical meaning consistent with divine revelation
Epistemological Approach	Textual-Traditionalist	Textual-Rationalist	Rational and Systematic

Hadith scholars consistently adhere to a textual-traditionalist approach, using the methods of itsbat and tafwidh, in which reason is entirely subordinated to revelation. In contrast, the Ash‘ari school tends to use a textual-rationalist approach through the method of ta’wil, which positions reason as a safeguard against anthropomorphism. Meanwhile, the Maturidi school adopts a more rationalist, systematic approach, emphasizing ta’wil to seek logical meanings consistent with revelation.

The Epistemological Boundaries of the Tafwidh and Ta’wil Approaches

Differences in the methodology of interpreting the mutashabihat verses are a central issue that has led to a diversity of views among various theological schools within Islam. This debate focuses on the interpretations of metaphorical phrases in the Qur’an, such as “the

³² Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani, *Fath Al-Bari* (Dar Al-Ma’rifah, 1379), 30.

³³ Al-Baihaqi, *Al-Asma’ Wa Al-Sifat* (Dar Al-Syuhada’, t.t.), 34.

³⁴ Al-Khomis, *I’tiqad Aimat Al-Salaf Ahlu Al-Hadis*, 226.

³⁵ Sari Nur Khasanah dkk., *Asy‘ariyah Dan Maturidiyah: Sejarah, Pokok Ajaran, Dan Perbandingannya Dengan Mu’tazilah*, 1, no. 2 (2025).

hand of Allah,” “the face of Allah,” or “establishment upon the Throne.”³⁶ In responding to these verses, there are two primary methods recognized as valid: takwil and tafwidh.³⁷ Etymologically, the Arabic term tafwidh carries the basic meaning of delegating or entrusting a matter and granting authority to another party. In the context of theology or aqidah, this concept refers to the attitude of fully entrusting knowledge regarding the essence of Allah’s attributes to Allah.³⁸

Islamic scholars subsequently classified tafwidh into two main forms. First, tafwidh al-kaifiyyah, which is accompanied by the determination of meaning. This approach was adopted by the righteous early scholars (salaf saleh), who affirmed Allah’s attributes as explicitly stated, in accordance with His majesty, yet left the knowledge of the essence or technical nature (kaifiyah) of those attributes solely to Allah. Second, tafwidh of both meaning and kaifiyah. This method is adopted by some scholars of kalam (including the Ash’ariyyah), who argue that a literal understanding of the texts regarding the attributes risks containing elements of likening Allah to His creation (tasybih).³⁹

The term tafwidh is commonly used by both groups, particularly when discussing the khabariyyah attributes, to divert the literal meaning of a phrase without providing a specific explanation of the intended meaning.⁴⁰ This process culminates in the attitude of completely entrusting knowledge of the true meaning to Allah, as expressed in the commonly used phrase: “Allah knows the meaning better”. Some scholars employ the tafwidh method, which is associated with the al-mufawwidah school of thought. In this approach, they entrust the understanding of the true nature of the mutashabihat verses entirely to Allah, after first purifying Him of any attributes or phenomena that are impossible for His essence.⁴¹

Their argument, built on rational (aqli) grounds, is that attempts to determine the true meaning of the mutashabihat verses by referring to the methods and usage of the Arabic language will only yield conclusions that are of a speculative (zann) nature. Belief in the traits of Allah cannot be based on conjecture, but requires legal certainty (qat’i). Since it is

³⁶ Nahsyla Maharani Putri dkk., “Konsep Ketuhanan Dan Penafsiran Sifat-Sifat Allah Dalam Ilmu Kalam,” *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam dan Dinamika Sosial* 1, no. 2 (2025): 154–60.

³⁷ Siti Nurfadilah dan Fikri Hidayat El-Izat, “Metodologi Penafsiran Ayat Mutasyabih Dalam Perspektif Ulama Salaf Dan Khalaf,” *Al-Kalimantan: Jurnal Kajian Keislaman* 3, no. 3 (2026): 404–7.

³⁸ Ridwan Nur al-Salam, “(دراسة تطبيقية من خلال تفسيره) منهج الشيخ حسن بن مخلوف في تقرير صفات الله: صفوة البيان لمعاني القرآن: The Methodology of Shaykh Ḥusaynīn Makhlūf in Affirming the Divine Attributes (An Applied Study through His Tafsīr Ṣafwat al-Bayān li-Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān),” *NUKHBATUL’ULUM: Jurnal Bidang Kajian Islam* 11, no. 2 (2025): 271–302.

³⁹ al-Salam, “(دراسة تطبيقية من خلال تفسيره صفوة البيان) منهج الشيخ حسن بن مخلوف في تقرير صفات الله: صفوة البيان لمعاني القرآن: The Methodology of Shaykh Ḥusaynīn Makhlūf in Affirming the Divine Attributes (An Applied Study through His Tafsīr Ṣafwat al-Bayān li-Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān).”

⁴⁰ Nasron Yaacob, “Metode Akidah Golongan Mu’tadilah Berkenaan Sifat Khabariyyah: Suatu Pengenalan: The Method of Beliefs of The Mu’tadilah Regarding The Nature of Khabariyyah: An Introduction,” *RABBANICA - Journal of Revealed Knowledge* 4, no. 1 SE- (2023): 37–53.

⁴¹ Ajar Permono, “Kritik Metodologi Penafsiran Bucaillisme atas Ayat-ayat Sains,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-ilmu Al-Qur’an dan Hadis* 19, no. 1 (2019): 1–20.

considered impossible for humans to attain certain knowledge of this reality, the approach is to leave its essence entirely to Allah.⁴²

The tafwidh method can be observed in the response of Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal (d. 241 AH) when he addressed ‘Ali bin ‘Isa regarding the mutashabihat hadiths, such as the hadith about Allah’s descent to the lowest heaven at night, Allah’s appearance in the Hereafter, and the hadith concerning the placement of Allah’s foot in Hell. Imam Ahmad affirmed his stance with the statement, “We believe in it, we affirm it, and there is no form or essence to it.” This statement indicates that Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal chose to believe in these texts as they are, without providing an interpretation, a specific meaning, or engaging in further exegesis regarding the reality of the attributes mentioned.⁴³ The implication of the tafwidh method is to classify textual descriptions that have the potential to lead to misunderstandings into the category of mutashabihat verses. This does not imply that the early generations did not understand the meaning of these terms, but rather indicates that they did not definitively establish a single, specific meaning as their absolute essence.⁴⁴

On the other hand, the method of takwil also has similar implications, with one important caveat. Namely, takwil must not be treated as a definitive determination of the true meaning intended by the text. Takwil is permissible if it is supported by strong evidence or linguistic principles, with the primary aim of avoiding the concepts of tasybih and tajsīm regarding the essence of Allah SWT.⁴⁵

Usamah Al-Azhari claims that the mode of thought of the Hadith scholars automatically aligns with the Ash‘ari-Maturidi framework because they share the tafwidh method. However, a deeper analysis of the classical texts cited by Usamah himself reveals that this claim of unification is undermined by methodological tensions and internal dialectics within the Hadith scholars' theological tradition.

The epistemological debate regarding the limits of tafwidh can be examined through the criticism expressed by Imam Al-Ghazali in his book *Iljam al-Anwam*. Al-Ghazali strongly criticized the codification method used in some books of aqidah by Hadith scholars who compiled hadiths on the attributes of the Prophet in sequential order by body part (such as creating a "Chapter on the Hands" or a "Chapter on the Face"). According to Al-Ghazali, compiling hadiths originally uttered by the Prophet ﷺ at different times and in different contexts (qarinah) into such an anatomical structure creates an impression of anthropomorphism (tashbih) that is dangerous to laypeople's understanding. Interestingly, Usamah Al-Azhari labels this extreme textual codification model an anomaly or deviation (shudhudh) from the mainstream of Hadith scholarship. Usamah's move to label this method of text grouping as an "anomaly" actually indirectly acknowledges that Hadith scholars have,

⁴² B. Halimah, “Tafwid Method in Understanding Mutashabihat Verses,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-ilmu Al-Qur’an dan Hadis* 21, no. 2 (2020): 293–312.

⁴³ Abdul Ghofur dan Faiqotul Amiroh, “Telaah Konsep Tafwid dan Takwil pada Ayat-Ayat Mutashabihat dalam Al-Qur’an dan Terjemahannya Terbitan Kemenag RI Edisi Penyempurnaan Tahun 2019,” *AL ITQAN: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur’an* 7 (2021): 259–90.

⁴⁴ Khawla Almulla Ishraq Ali, “Philosophy versus theology in medieval Islamic thought,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 5, no. 79 (2023), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i5.9305>.

⁴⁵ Fahru Reza Hakim dkk., “Makna Lafaz Yad Yang Disematkan Kepada Allah Dalam Al-Qur’an,” *Multidisciplinary Indonesian Center Journal (MICJO)* 1, no. 2 (2024): 876–86.

from the outset, possessed independent writing methods and approaches to textual analysis that are distinct from the methodological structure of dialectical theology (ilm al-kalam).

The independence and dynamism of the Hadith scholars' methodology within the framework of tafwidh are also clearly evident in the debate surrounding Ibn Khuzaymah's *Kitab al-Tawhid*. Usamah quotes Al-Dhahabi's critical commentary in *Siyar A'lam al-Nubala'*, which assesses that Ibn Khuzaymah's theological arguments in defining the wording of divine attributes appear rigid and crude (fajj), making them difficult for the linguistic sensibilities of later generations of scholars to comprehend. Nevertheless, Al-Dhahabi offers a defense, along with an important note: Ibn Khuzaymah, known to be very textualist, actually engaged in ta'wil when interpreting the hadith regarding the form (hadith al-surah).⁴⁶

The facts reveal an important reality: even within the inner circle of Hadith scholars, the boundary between establishing the wording and interpreting the meaning is not rigid. However, it is applied dynamically to safeguard the aqidah without seeking formal legitimacy from either the Ash'ari or Maturidi schools of thought. The methodological tension between Ibn Khuzaymah's literalist approach, Al-Ghazali's structural criticism, and Al-Dhahabi's defense confirms that Hadith scholars' theology is an independent tradition with its own internal dialectic. They do not merely follow the theoretical concepts of the Ash'ari-Maturidi groups; rather, they interpret the texts independently.

Internal dialectics gave rise to the subsequent development of Islamic theological methodology, in which the method of takwil emerged as an effort to explain the inner or metaphorical meanings of scriptural texts regarding divine attributes that the laity found difficult to understand literally. The emergence of takwil is viewed as an effort to interpret religious texts so that they remain in line with the sacred tenets of aqidah and free from anthropomorphism. Provided that sound Arabic linguistic principles support such interpretations and harmonize with other textual evidence, takwil gradually gained acceptance as a legitimate method within the Islamic scholarly tradition, particularly to distinguish itself from extremist views that insist on absolute rational interpretation.⁴⁷

Linguistically, takwil is understood as a synonym for interpretation. Arabic dictionaries explain that the phrase awwala al-kalām ta'wīlan wa ta'awwalahu means to reflect upon, explain, and interpret a statement. Terminologically, takwil is the process of diverting a word from its apparent meaning to another meaning supported by strong (qat'i) evidence, because the apparent meaning is considered inconsistent with the intended purpose.⁴⁸ Thus, the purpose of takwil is to shift the literal meaning of a phrase to a more appropriate meaning based on the presence of a qarīnah or an enabling indicator. For example, the phrase yad Allāh (the hand of Allah) is not understood literally as a body part but rather as a metaphor for Allah's power.

⁴⁶ Azhary, "Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin wa Washilatuhum bi Al-Tashawwuf."

⁴⁷ D. R. Mohd Khafidz B. I. N. Soroni, *Keutuhan Metodologi Ilmuwan Hadis Abli Sunnah Wal Jamaah Dalam Bidang Akidah*, t.t.

⁴⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Esoteric Interpretation of the Quran in 'The Study Quran': A New Translation and Commentary (2015)," *Al-Bayān—Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 21 (2023): 243–70.

In Surah Ṭāhā/20:5, which is frequently discussed in Islamic theological discourse. According to later scholars, the term *istawā* in that verse is not to be understood literally as “to settle,” as its apparent meaning suggests, but rather as “to have power” or “to reign.” The entire verse is understood to mean “The Most Merciful reigns over the ‘Arsh.”⁴⁹ This interpretation is adopted to avoid an understanding that might liken Allah to His creation, since the concept of “residing” in a physical sense is considered incompatible with Allah’s transcendence and holiness.

An esoteric interpretation is acceptable (*maqbul*) only if it does not contradict the literal meaning of the Qur'an. An esoteric interpretation must also be supported by sharia-based evidence that reinforces it. Esoteric interpretation is also required not to contradict sound reason (*'aqlī*). In other words, inner interpretation must still acknowledge the literal meaning and make it the primary foundation before turning to the inner meaning.⁵⁰ This entire dynamic demonstrates that the epistemological boundary between *tafwidh* and *ta'wil* in the Hadith scholars' tradition stands on its own, shifting as it relies on the text's epistemological foundations and its own independent interpretive principles.

Differences in the methodologies of interpreting *mutashabihat* verses are a manifestation of the epistemological struggle regarding the boundaries of religious knowledge. From a religious epistemological perspective, the choice between *takwil* and *tafwidh* reflects how religious authorities construct the framework of rationality for their communities.⁵¹ According to Alasdair MacIntyre’s thought, the intellectual tradition in Islam can be understood as “an argument that continues over time,” in which the use of *tafwidh* functions as an epistemic defense mechanism to preserve the integrity of the tradition from the threat of anthropomorphism (*tasybih*).⁵² Whether it is *tafwidh al-kaifiyyah*, which establishes the meaning but defers the manner, or the total *tafwidh* of both meaning and manner, this practice affirms the community’s efforts to define the boundaries of legitimate rationality.

In line with Talal Asad’s concept of “discursive tradition,”⁵³ *tafwidh* is not merely a passive method, but a discursive instrument that shapes theological identity. By surrendering the essence of meaning entirely to God, as expressed in the phrase “God knows better, His will be done,” the religious subject is disciplined to place absolute knowledge beyond the reach of human cognition. Thus, this method shapes a construction of knowledge that is no

⁴⁹ A. S. Al-Asri, “The Position of Early Sunni Scholars (as-Salaf) on the Interpretation of Ambiguous Sacred Texts and Imam al-Nawawi’s View on It,” *Minbar. Islamic Studies* 1, no. 17 (2024): 97–111, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31162/2618-9569-2024-17-1-97-111>.

⁵⁰ Arrasyid Arrasyid dkk., “Concepts of Translation of Takwil, Tafsir, and Hermeneutics in the Science of the Al-Qur’an,” *Jurnal Kawakib* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–12.

⁵¹ Subhan Subhan, “Epistemology of Knowledge in the Perspective of the Quran,” *Journal of Social Research* 5, no. 1 (2025): 34–45, <https://doi.org/10.55324/josr.v5i1.2929>.

⁵² Simo Frestadius, “The Elim Tradition: ‘An Argument Extended through Time’ (Alasdair MacIntyre),” *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 36, no. 1 (2016): 57–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18124461.2015.1132573>.

⁵³ Ovamir Anjum, “Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 656–72, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-2007-041>.

longer universal-abstract, but rather deeply bound to practices of power and discursive histories recognized by specific theological authorities.

CONCLUSION

This study critically demonstrates that Usamah Al-Azhari's claim in *Aqidah Al-Muhadditsin Wa Washilatuhum Bi Al-Tashawwuf* regarding the theological identity of Hadith scholars as followers of the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools cannot be fully sustained. Theoretically, this study contributes by reaffirming the epistemological autonomy of the Hadith scholars, which cannot be reduced to any particular theological identity. The chronological gaps identified indicate that attempts to impose such affiliations constitute a form of historical anachronism.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates that the shared use of the concept of *tafwidh* in addressing *mutashabihat* texts between Hadith scholars and the Ash'ari-Maturidi groups does not automatically imply a shared theological identity. Through Krippendorff's content analysis and historical theology approaches, this study successfully reveals that the Hadith Scholars possess a unique methodological independence.

The implications of these findings are highly significant for the historiography of Sunni theology, where the intellectual genealogy of the Hadith scholars must now be understood as an independent tradition that holds a fundamental position regarding the development of Ash'ari and Maturidi theology, rather than the reverse.

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