

## Asha'irah

From the preceding lecture it became clear that the ideas and notions which led to the emergence of the Mu'tazilite school took birth during the latter half of the first century of Hijrah. The approach of the Mu'tazilah, in fact, consisted of the use of a kind of logical and rational method for understanding the basic doctrines of the Islamic faith. Obviously, the first condition for such an approach is belief in the freedom, independence, and validity of reason.

It is also evident that the common people at large are not used to ratiocination and intellectual analysis, and always tend to equate "religiosity" with "credulity" and intellectual submission to the apparent meanings of the Qur'anic verses and in particular of the *ahadith*.

They tend to consider every attempt at independent and original interpretation as a kind of rebellion against religion, specially if the dominant politics deem it in their interests to support this attitude, and more specially if some religious scholars propagate such an outlook, and particularly so when such scholars really believe in their literalist outlook and are inflexible and fanatical in practice.

The attacks of the Akhbaris on the *Usuliyyun* and the *mujtahidun*, and the attacks of some *fuqaha'* and *muhaddithun* against philosophers in the Islamic world had their roots in such an approach<sup>1</sup>.

The Mu'tazilah had a deep-rooted interest in understanding Islam and its propagation and defence against the atheists, the Jews, the Christians, the Magians, the Sabaeans, the Manichaeans, and others. They even trained missionaries and dispatched them to various regions. Nevertheless, their existence was threatened by the literalists, who called themselves "Ahl al-Hadith" or "Ahl al-Sunnah." They were ultimately stabbed in the back, weakened and gradually became extinct.

Despite it all, in the beginning, that is until the end of the 3rd/9th century and the beginning of the 4th/10th, there existed no rival school of *kalam* – as was later to emerge – that could challenge the Mu'tazilah. All opposition occurred under the claim that the views of the Mu'tazilah were against the externals of the *hadith* and the *Sunnah*. The leaders of the Ahl al-Hadith, such as Malik ibn Anas and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, basically considered any debate, inquiry or argument connected with the matters of faith as unlawful (*haram*). Therefore, the Ahl al-Sunnah not only did not have any system of *kalam*

challenging the Mu'tazilah, but also they were opposed to *kalam* itself.

About the late 3rd/9th century and the early 4th/10th, a new phenomenon took place. That was the appearance of a distinguished thinker who had received instruction in Mu'tazilite teachings under Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, and had mastered them. He rejected Mu'tazilite tenets and inclined towards the doctrines of the Ahl al-Sunnah.

Since, on the one hand, he was not a man devoid of genius, and on the other was equipped with the tools used by the Mu'tazilah, he established all the doctrines of the Ahl al-Sunnah on a rational basis, and gave them the form of a relatively closely-knit intellectual system. That distinguished person was Abu al-Hasan al-'Ash'ari (d. *circa* 330/941–42). Al-'Ash'ari – as against the view of his predecessors among Ahl al-Hadith, like Ahmad ibn Hanbal – considered debate and argument, and use of the tools of logic in the matter of the doctrines of the faith as permissible, citing evidence from the Qur'an and the Sunnah to support his claim. He wrote a treatise entitled "*Risalah fi istihsan al-khawd fi 'ilm al-kalam*" ("A Treatise on Appropriateness of Inquiry in 'Ilm al-Kalam")[2](#). . .

It was at this point that the Ahl al-Hadith were divided into two groups: the Asha'irah, or the followers of Abu al-Hasan al-'Ash'ari, who considered *kalam* as permissible; and the Hanbalis, or the followers of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who considered it unlawful. In our lectures on logic we have already mentioned that Ibn Taymiyyah, a Hanbali, wrote a book on unlawfulness of logic and *kalam*[3](#).

There was another reason why the Mu'tazilah became detestable in the eyes of the people. It was the period of calamity or "*mihnah*," and the Mu'tazilah under the patronage of the caliph al-Ma'mun, wanted to coerce the people into accepting their belief in the createdness of the Qur'an. This regimentation brought in its wake bloodshed, imprisonment, torture and exile, which shook the Muslim society. The common people considered the Mu'tazilah responsible for that havoc, and this earned them greater disfavour with the public.

These two causes contributed to the public welcome at the emergence of the school of Ash'arism. After Abu al-Hasan al-'Ash'ari, other distinguished personalities appeared in this school, who strengthened its foundations. Among them following can be mentioned: Qadi Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (a contemporary of al-Shaykh al-Mufid), who died in the year 403/1012–13; Abu Ishaq al-'Asfara'ini (who is considered as belonging to the generation after al-Baqillani and al-Sayyid al-Murtadha 'Alam al-Huda); Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni, the teacher of al-Ghazali; Imam Muhammad al-Ghazali, the author of *Ihya' 'ulum al-Din* himself (d. 505/1111–12); and Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi.

Of course, the Ash'arite school underwent gradual changes, and particularly in the hands of al-Ghazali *kalam* somewhat lost its characteristic colour and took on the hue of *'irfan* (Sufism). Imam al-Razi brought it close to philosophy. After Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi wrote his book *Tajrid al-'itiqad* more than ninety per cent of *kalam* assumed the colour of philosophy. After the publication of the *Tajrid*, all *mutakallimun* – including the Mu'tazilah and the Asha'irah – followed the same road which was trodden

by that great philosopher and Shi'ah *mutakallim*.

For instance, the latter works of *kalam* such as *al-Mawaqif* and *Maqasid* and the commentaries written upon them – all took on the colour of the *Tajrid*. It may be said that, in fact, the more time has elapsed since Abu al-Hasan al-'Ash'ari, the more the leading Ash'arites have moved away from him, bringing his doctrines closer to the views of the Mu'tazilah or those of the philosophers.

Now we shall list the main doctrines of al-'Ash'ari, which are aimed at defending the basic principles of the Ahl al-Sunnah, or attempting a rational justification of their beliefs.

- (i) The Divine Attributes, contrary to the belief of the Mu'tazilah and the philosophers, are not identical with the Divine Essence.
- (ii) The Divine Will is all embracing. The Divine providence and predestination encompass all events (this belief, too, is contrary to the view held by the Mu'tazilah, though in agreement with those of the philosophers).
- (iii) All evil, like good, is from God (of course, this view is a logical corollary, in al-'Ash'ari's view of the above belief).
- (iv) Man is not free in his acts, which are created by God (this belief, too, in al-'Ash'ari's view, necessarily follows from the doctrine of all embracing nature of the Divine Will).
- (v) Acts are not intrinsically good or evil, i.e. *husn* or *qubh* of deeds is not intrinsic, but determined by the *Shari'ah*. The same is true of justice. What is 'just', is determined by the *Shari'ah* not by reason (contrary to the belief of the Mu'tazilah).
- (vi) Grace (*lutf*) and selection of the best for creation (*al-'aslah*) are not incumbent upon God (contrary to the belief of the Mu'tazilah).
- (vii) Man's power over his actions does not precede them [there is no *istita'ah qabl al-fi'l*], but is commensurate and concurrent with the acts themselves (contrary to the belief of the Muslim philosophers and the Mu'tazilah).
- (viii) Absolute deanthropomorphism (*tanzih mutlaq*), or absolute absence of similarity between God and others, does not hold (contrary to the Mu'tazilite view).
- (ix) Doctrine of acquisition: Man does not 'create' his own acts; rather he 'acquires' or 'earns' them (this is in justification of the Ahl al-Sunnah's belief in the creation of human acts by God).
- (x) Possibility of the beatific vision: God shall be visible to the eyes on the Day of Resurrection (contrary to the view of the Mu'tazilah and the philosophers).
- (xi) The *fasiq* is a believer (*mu'min*) (contrary to the view of the Khawarij, who consider him *kafir*, and

contrary to the Mu'tazilite doctrine of *manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*).

(xii) There is nothing wrong about God's pardoning someone without repentance. Similarly, nothing is wrong about God's subjecting a believer to chastisement (contrary to the Mu'tazilite position).

(xiii) Intercession (*shafa'ah*) is justifiable (contrary to the Mu'tazilite position).

(xiv) To tell a lie or break a promise is not possible for God.

(xv) The world is created in time (*hadith*) (contrary to the view of the philosophers).

(xvi) The Qur'an is pre al-ternal (*qadim*); however, this is true of *al-kalam al-nafsi* (meaning of the Qur'an), not *al-kalam al-lafzi* – the spoken word (this is in justification of the Ahl al-Sunnah's belief in the pre al-ternity of the Qur'an).

(xvii) The Divine Acts do not follow any purpose or aim (contrary to the view of the philosophers and the Mu'tazilah)

(xviii) It is possible that God may saddle a person with a duty beyond his power (contrary to the belief of the philosophers and the Mu'tazilah).

Abu al-Hasan al-'Ash'ari was a prolific writer, and as reported had compiled more than two hundred books. As many as a hundred are mentioned in his biographical accounts, though, apparently, most of those works have perished. The most famous of his works is *Maqalat al-'Islamiyyin*, which has been published. It is a very disorderly and confused work. Another one printed is *al-Luma'*, and perhaps other of his works may have also appeared in print.

Abu al-Hasan al-'Ash'ari is one of those individuals whose ideas, regrettably, exercised a great influence on the Islamic world. Nevertheless, later, his works have been put to severe criticism by philosophers and the Mu'tazilah. Ibn Sina, in *al-Shifa*; has refuted many of his ideas without mentioning his name. Even some of his followers, such as Qadi Abu Bakr al-Baqillani and Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni revised and modified his views about predestination and createdness of (human) acts.

Imam Muhammad al-Ghazali, although an Ash'arite who has to a great extent established and strengthened the Ash'arite doctrines, has put them on a different foundation. Through al-Ghazali, *kalam* was brought closer to *'irfan* and Sufism. Mawlana Muhammad al-Rumi, the author of the *Mathnawi*, is, in his own way, an Ash'arite; but his deep Sufi inclinations gave a different colour to all the issues of *kalam*. Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, who was familiar with philosophic thought, transformed al-'Ash'ari's *kalam*, further strengthening it.

The triumph of the Ash'arite school cost the Muslim world dearly. Its triumph was the victory of the forces of stagnation over freedom of thought. Despite the fact that the battle between Ash'arism and Mu'tazilism is related to the Sunni world, even the Shi'ite world could not remain unaffected from some of the

stultifying effects of Ash'arism. This triumph has particular historical and social reasons behind it, and certain political events effectively contributed to it.

As mentioned earlier, during the 3rd/9th century, the caliph al-Ma'mun, himself an intellectual and a man of learning, rose to the support of the Mu'tazilah. After him al-Mu'tasim and al-Wathiq also followed him – until al-Mutawakkil assumed caliphate. Al-Mutawakkil played a basic role in the victory of the Ahl al-Sunnah's doctrines, which acquired dialectic foundations after one hundred years at the hands of al-'Ash'ari. To be sure, had al-Mutawakkil's way of thinking been similar to that of his predecessors, Mu'tazilism would have had a different fate.

The rise of the Seljuq Turks to power in Iran was another effective factor in the triumph and propagation of the Ash'arite ideas. The Seljuqs did not believe in the freedom of thought. They were the antithesis of the Buyids, some of whom were men of scholarship and literary merit. Shi'ism and Mu'tazilism flourished in the Buyid court. Ibn al-'Amid and al-Sahib ibn 'Abbad, the two learned ministers of the Buyids, were both anti-Ash'arites.

Here we do not intend to support Mu'tazilite doctrines, and later we shall expose the feebleness of many of their beliefs. However, that which deserves appreciation in the Mu'tazilah is their rational approach – something which also became extinct with them. As we know, a religion so rich and resourceful as Islam needs a *kalam* which has an unshakeable faith in the freedom of reason.

1. Translator's Note: Akhbarism is a movement which started within the Shi'i world about four hundred years ago. Its originator was Mulla Muhammad Amin ibn Muhammad Sharif al-'Astarabadi (d. 1033/1623–24). He openly attacked the Shi'ah mujtahidun in his work al-Fawa'id al-madaniyyah, vehemently contesting the Usuliyyun's claim that reason is one of the sources of fiqh. The Uuliyyun hold the Qur'an, the Sunnah, reason, and ijma' (consensus) as valid sources for deduction of the rules of the Shari'ah. The Akhbaris accepted the validity only of the Sunnah and rejected the rest. Understanding the Qur'an, they claimed, is beyond the capacity of a commoner, being restricted exclusively to the Ahl al-Bayt (A)

Regarding ijma', they said that it was an innovation (bid'ah) of the Ahl al-Sunnah. Reason, they held, is only valid in empirical sciences. Its applicability cannot be extended to the realm of the Shari'ah. Accordingly, they rejected ijthad, considering the taqlid (following the authority, imitation in legal matters) of a non-Ma'sum as forbidden. However, they considered the reliability of all the ahadith of the four books, viz. al-Kafi, al-Tahdhib, al-'Istibsar, and Man la yahduruhu al-faqih as being authentic and undisputable. They held that it was the duty of the people to directly refer to the hadith texts in order to discover the commands of the Shari'ah. There was no need of the mujtahid as an intermediary. The Usuliyyun, and in particular such scholars as Aqa Muhammad Baqir al-Bahbahani (1118/1706–1205/1788) and Shaykh Murtadha al-Ansari (d. 1281/1865–66) refuted the Akhbari position and effectively repulsed the threat posed by them to the Shi'i institution of ijthad. Some prominent Akhbaris among Shi'ah scholars were Sayyid Ni'mat Allah al-Jaza'iri (d. 1050/1640) Muhammad ibn Murtadha Mulla Muhsin Fayd al-Kashani (d. 1091/1680) Shaykh Yusuf ibn Ahmad al Bahrani al Ha'iri (1107/1695–1186/1772) and Sadr al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad Baqir al-Hamadani (d. after 1151/1738–39)

2. This treatise has been published as an appendix to his al-Lum'ah, and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Badawi has included it in the first volume of Madhahib al-Islamiyyin, pp. 15–26.

3. See Muhammad Abu Zuhrah, Ibn Taymiyyah

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