

Chapter 11: Ash'arism

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Al-Ashari's Life and Work

Asharism is the name of a philosophico-religious school of thought in Islam that developed during the fourth and fifth/tenth and eleventh centuries. This movement was “an attempt not only to purge Islam of all non-Islamic elements which had quietly crept into it but also to harmonize the religious consciousness with the religious thought of Islam.”

It laid the foundation of an orthodox Islamic theology or orthodox *Kalam*, as opposed to the rationalist *Kalam* of the Mu'tazilites; and in opposition to the extreme orthodox class, it made use of the dialectical method for the defence of the authority of divine revelation as applied to theological subjects.

The position at the end of the third/ninth century was such that the development of such a movement as orthodox Kalam was inevitable. The rationalization of faith, which developed, at the beginning of the second century of the Hijrah as a systematic movement of thought, in the name of rationalism in Islam or Mu'tazilite movement, was, in its original stage, simply an attempt to put Islam and its basic principles on a rational foundation, by giving a consistent rational interpretation to the different dogmas and doctrines of Islam.

But when the Mu'tazilite rationalists began to study the Arabic translations of the works of Greek physicists and philosophers made available to them by the early 'Abbasid Caliphs, particularly by al-Mansur and al-Mamun, they began to apply the Greek philosophical methods and ideas to the interpretation of the basic principles of Islam as well.

Some of the early 'Abbasid Caliphs, particularly al-Mamun, began to patronize the rationalism of the Mu'tazilites in public. The Mu'tazilite speculation, in the hands of the later Mu'tazilites, those of the second and third generations, under the influence of Greek philosophy and with the active support and

patronage of the Caliphs, tended to be purely speculative and “absolutely unfettered, and in some cases led to a merely negative attitude of thought.”¹

They made reason the sole basis of truth and reality and thus identified the sphere of philosophy with that of religion. They tried to interpret faith in terms of pure thought. They ignored the fact that the basic principles of religion are, by their very nature, incapable of logical demonstration or rational proof. The basic principles of Islam deal with supersensible realities and, as such, they must first be accepted on the authority of revelation.

The Mu'tazilites, in their zeal to judge everything by reason alone, destroyed the personality of God and reduced Him to a bare indefinable universality or to an abstract unity. This idea of an abstract, impersonal, absolute God could not appeal to the ordinary Muslims. The orthodox section of the people reacted strongly against the Mu'tazilite rationalism and began to consider the Mu'tazilites to be heretics.

The extreme rationalistic attitude of the later Mu'tazilites was followed by powerful reaction from the orthodox section of the people. This reaction was greatly aggravated by the unfortunate attempt of the Caliph al-Mamun to force Mu'tazilism (rationalist *Kalam*) on his subjects by introducing *mihnah* (a compulsory test of faith) in the Mu'tazilite doctrines, particularly in their doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an. The whole of the third/ninth century was a time of reaction.

The orthodox Muslims (and among them were the Traditionists [the Muhaddithin]), the Zahirites (the followers of Dawud ibn 'Ali), and the Muslim jurists (*fujaha'*) adhered strictly to Tradition and literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah,² and refused to admit any “innovation” (*bid'ah*) in the Shari'ah (the Islamic Code). Any theological discussion was considered an “innovation” and was as such a cause of displeasure to them.³ The reactionary influence of Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal and his Zahirite followers was very strong at that period and the orthodox Muslims kept themselves safely aloof from the Mu'tazilites and the philosophers.

The reaction against the rationalist *Kalam* went to such an extreme that even the anthropomorphic verses of the Qur'an were interpreted by them in a purely literal sense. Malik bin Anas said: “God's settling Himself firmly upon His Throne is known, the how of it is unknown; belief in it is obligatory; and questioning about it is an innovation.”⁴ Any speculation about sacred things was considered an innovation. Every dogma was to be believed in without raising the question how or why (*bila kaifa*).

But such an attitude of blind faith could not be maintained for any length of time. Islam, as a universal religion and as a living force, had to adapt itself to new thoughts and to new surroundings. So, as time went on, there arose gradually a party, from amongst the orthodox section of the Muslims, who realized the necessity of putting Islam on a solid ground by advancing “reasons” for the traditional beliefs, of defending these beliefs against all sorts of attacks internal and external, and thus purging their faith of all the non-Islamic elements that had crept into it.

They founded the orthodox theology of Islam by using *Kalam* or the philosophical method in order to

meet the dialectical reasoning of the Mu'tazilites. These theologians who employed *Kalam* for the defence of their faith were, therefore, known as the Mutakallimun (orthodox theologians).⁵

But, although these thinkers used philosophical method in their discussions, they obtained the primary materials from revelation. They developed a rival science of reasoning to meet the Mu'tazilites on their own ground. In the beginning this new orthodox theological movement developed privately and secretly. It was at first a gradual unconscious drift. It could not come to the open for fear of public criticism.

Al-Junaid, for instance, had to discuss the unity of God behind closed doors. Al-Shafi'i held that some trained people might defend and purify the faith but that should not be done in public. Al-Muhasibi and other contemporaries of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal incurred his displeasure for defending the faith with arguments or reason. But gradually the movement gathered strength and began to be openly preached almost at the same time in different places of the Muslim world—in Mesopotamia by Abu al-Hasan `Ali bin Isma`il al-Ashari (d. 330 or 334/941 or 945), in Egypt by al-Tahawi (d. 331/942), and in Samarkand by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333/ 944).

But of these three, al-Ash'ari became the most popular hero, before whom the Mu'tazilite system (the rationalist *Kalam*) went down, and he came to be known as the founder of the orthodox philosophical theology, and the school founded by him was named after him as Ash`arism.

Al-Ash'ari was born at Basrah. Regarding his date of birth there is difference of opinion. Ibn Khallikan, in his discussion of the life of al-Ash'ari, mentions that he was born in 260 or 270/873 or 883 and died at Baghdad in 330/941 or some time after that.⁶

According to Shibli Nu'mani and Ibn `Asakir (the author of *Tabyin Kidhb al-Muftari*, on the life and teachings of al-Ash'ari), he was born in 270/873 and died in 330/941.⁷ He was buried between Karkh and Bab al-Basrah (the gate of Basrah). He was a descendant of Abu Musa al-Ash'ari, one, of the famous Companions of the Prophet.

Al-Ash'ari, in his early youth, came under the care of the great Mu'tazilite scholar of the Basrite school, Abu 'Ali Muhammad bin `Abd al-Wahhab al-Jubba'i, and, as a disciple of his, became an adherent of the Mu'tazilite school and continued to support its doctrines up to the age of forty. After that there happened a sudden change in his mind and one day he went to the Mosque of Basrah and declared: "He who knows me, knows who I am, and he who does not know me, let him know that I am Abu al-Hasan 'Ali al-Ash'ari, that I used to maintain that the Qur'an is created, that eyes of men shall not see God, and that the creatures create their actions. Lo! I repent that I have been a Mu'tazilite. I renounce these opinions and I take the engagement to refute the Mu'tazilites and expose their infamy and turpitude."

What brought about this sudden change in al-Ash'ari is not definitely known to us. Shibli in his *Ilm al-Kalam* says that "the change came to him due to some directions which he had obtained in a dream...".⁸ Ibn Khallikan mentions in this connection the story of a public discussion in which al-Ashari

met his old Mu'tazilite teacher, al-Jubba'i, on the problem of *salah wa'l aslah*, i. e., the problem whether God's actions are to be based on rational consideration and whether He is bound to do what is best for His creatures.

Al-Ash'ari came to al-Jubba'i and presented the case of three brothers, one being God-fearing, another godless, and a third having died as a child, and asked him as to what would be their positions in the next world. Al-Jubba'i could not give a satisfactory and consistent reply to that question and, on his having failed to justify rationally the Mu'tazilite doctrine of *salah wa'l aslah*, al-Ash'ari abandoned the Mu'tazilite camp.⁹

But whatever might have been the cause of this change, when he changed he was terribly in earnest. After the change he wrote a number of books and Ibn Furak says that the number amounted to three hundred. Ibn 'Asakir Dimashqi has given the titles of ninety-three of them, but only a few have been preserved and are enumerated by Brockelmann.

His work *al-Ibanah 'an Usul al-Diyanah* was printed at Hyderabad, Deccan (India), in 1321/1903 and a small treatise *Risalah fi Istihsan al-Khaud fi al-Kalam* was printed in 1323/1905 and reprinted at Hyderabad in 1344/1925. Al-Ash'ari's other famous works are *al-Maqalat al-Islamiyyin* (published in Istanbul in 1348/1929), *Kitab al-Sharh wal-Tafsil*, *al-Luma'*, *Mujaz, I'adah al-Burhan*, and *Tab'in*.

Of these books the *Maqalat al-Islamiyyin wa Ikhtilaf al-Musalliyyin* is the most authentic book on the views of different schools about religious dogmas and doctrines. *Al-Maqalat* was written much earlier than the other books on the same subject, such as Shahrastani's *Kitab al-Milal wal-Nihal*, or Ibn Hazm's *al-Fasl fi al-Milal wal-Ahma' wal-Nihal*.

Ibn Taimiyyah said in his *Minhaj al-Sunnah* that the most comprehensive of the books he went through on the views of different people on the basic principles of Islam was al-Ash'ari's *al-Maqalat al-Islamiyyin* and that he (al-Ash'ari) discussed many of such views in details as were not even mentioned by others. Ibn al-Qayyim also spoke very highly of this work. In his *Hadi al-Arwah* and *Ijtima` al-Juyush al-Islamiyyah*, he said, "Shahrastani, 'Abd al-Qahir Baghdadi, and other later writers on the subject simply copied from al-Ash'ari's book and did not discuss the views in details."

Al-Ash'ari's other famous book *al-Ibanah 'an Usul al-Diyanah* seems to have been written by him just after his abandoning the Mu'tazilite views. In this book we find he is almost a Zahirite. The reaction against the Mu'tazilite speculation might have been very strong in his mind at that period. *Al-Maqalat* seems to be a later work. The *Risalah fi Istihsan al-Khaud* deals with the objections raised by the extremely orthodox against the use of *Kalam*, and the replies given by al-Ash'ari, justifying its use in matters of faith.

Al-Ash'ari's theology has been discussed mainly in these books. He had a good number of pupils who passed as famous theologians and who spread and developed his doctrines and dogmas. Some of those older Ash'arites were abu Sahl Saluqi, Abu Quffal, Abu Zaid Maruzi, Zahir bin Ahmad, Hafiz Abu

Bakr Jurjani, Shaikh Abu Muhammad Tabari, and Abu al-Hasan Bahili. Some of the pupils of these older Ash'arites became still more famous and the best known among them are Qadi Abu Bakr Baqillani, Abu Bakr bin Furak, Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi and abu Ishaq Isfra'ini and his pupil Abu al-Ma'ali al-Juwaini, known as Imam al-Haramain.[10](#)

Ash'arite Theology

Al-Ash'ari maintains an intermediary position between the two diametrically opposed schools of thought prevailing at the time. He had to fight against both the opposing parties. At the one extreme were the Mu'tazilites who made reason in preference to revelation the sole criterion of truth and reality and, thus, passed slowly into comparatively innocuous heretics. At the other extreme were the orthodox groups, particularly the Zahirites, the Mujassimites (anthropomorphists), the Muhibbin (Traditionists), and the Jurists, all of which were wholly opposed to the use of reason or *Kalam* in defending or explaining religious dogmas and condemned any discussion about them as innovation. Al-Ash'ari wrote his *Istihsan al-Khaud* mainly to meet the objections raised by the orthodox school against the use of reason in matters of faith.

In that treatise he says: "A section of the people (i.e., the Zahirites and other orthodox people) made capital out of their own ignorance; discussions and rational thinking about matters of faith became a heavy burden for them, and, therefore, they became inclined to blind faith and blind following (*taqlid*). They condemned those who tried to rationalize the principles of religion as 'innovators.'

They considered discussion about motion, rest, body, accident, colour, space, atom, the leaping of atoms, and attributes of God, to be an innovation and a sin. They said that had such discussions been the right thing, the Prophet and his Companions would have definitely done so; they further pointed out that the Prophet, before his death, discussed and fully explained all those matters which were necessary from the religious point of view, leaving none of them to be discussed by his followers; and since he did not discuss the problems mentioned above, it was evident that to discuss them must be regarded as an innovation."

They further contended that these so-called theological problems were either known to the Prophet and his Companions and yet they kept silent and did not discuss them or they were not known to them. If they knew them and yet did not discuss them, we are also to follow them in keeping silent, and if they could remain unaware of them we can also do so. In both cases discussion about them would be an "innovation." These were, in brief, their objections against the use of *Kalam* in matters of faith.

Al-Ash'ari, then, proceeds to justify theological discussions about matters of faith. He tries to meet these objections in three ways. First, by turning the objections of the orthodox against themselves by pointing out to them that the Prophet had not said that those who would discuss these problems were to be condemned and charged as innovators. Hence, their charging or condemning others as innovators was itself an innovation, for it amounted to discussion about matters which the Prophet did not discuss, and

condemn the action of those whom the Prophet did not condemn.

Secondly, “the Prophet was not unaware of all these problems of body, accident, motion, rest, atoms, etc., though he did not discuss each of them separately. The general principles (*usul*) underlying these problems are present in general, not in details, in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.” Al-Ash'ari then proceeds to prove his contention by citing verses from the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet, and thereby showing that the principles underlying the problems of *harakah*, *sukun*, *tawhid*, etc., are, as a matter of fact, present in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.¹¹

Thirdly, “the Prophet was not unaware of these matters and knew them in detail, but as problems about them did not arise during his life-time, there was no question of his discussing or not discussing them.” The Companions of the Prophet discussed and argued about many religious matters which appeared during their life-time, although there was no direct and explicit “saying” of the Prophet about them, and because of the absence of any explicit injunction from the Prophet they differed in their judgments about them.

Had the question, for instance, of the creation of the Qur'an, or of atoms or substance, been raised in so many words in the life of the Prophet, he would have definitely discussed and explained it as he did in the case of all those problems which were then raised. “There is no direct verdict (*nass*) from the Prophet, for instance, as to whether the Qur'an is created or uncreated. If to call the Qur'an created is an ‘innovation,’ then, on the same ground, to call it uncreated must also be an ‘innovation.’” Al-Ash'ari then concludes that Islam is not opposed to the use of reason; on the other hand, rationalization of faith is a necessity in Islam.

Al-Ash'ari discussed the main theological problems in his *Maqalat al-Islamiyyin* and *al-Ibanah 'an Usul al-Diyah*. In these books al-Ash'ari selects a few principles which distinguish the Ash'arites from the Mu'tazilite school of thought. Later on al-Ghazali put them in a consolidated form in his *Ihya* ¹² as the “Principles of Faith” or *Qawa'id al-'Aqa'id*, and Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi explained them more elaborately. The main problems about which the Ash'arites differed from the Mu'tazilites are:

- (1) The conception of God and the nature of His attributes.
- (2) Freedom of the human will.
- (3) The criterion of truth and the standard of good and evil.
- (4) The vision (*ru'yah*) of God.
- (5) Createdness of the Qur'an.
- (6) Possibility of burdening the creatures with impossible tasks.
- (7) Promise of reward and threat of punishment.

(8) The rational or non-rational basis of God's actions.

(9) Whether God is bound to do what is best for His creatures.[13](#)

The problems discussed by the Ash'arites in their system may be broadly classified into two categories:

(i) theological, and (ii) metaphysical.

Fundamental Principles Of The Ash'arite Theology

1. Conception of God and the Nature of His Attributes

According to the Ash'arites, God is one, unique, eternal, existent Being; He is not a substance, not a body, not an accident, not limited to any direction, and not in any space. He possesses attributes such as knowledge, power, life, will; He is hearing and seeing and has speech.

About the nature of divine attributes two extreme views were held before the Ash'arites. On the one hand, there were the extreme Attributists (*Sifatis*), the Anthropomorphists (*Mujassimin*), and the Comparers (*Mushabbihin*), who maintained that God possesses all the attributes mentioned in the Qur'an and that all such attributes as God's having hands, legs, ears, eyes, and His sitting firmly (*istiwa*) on His Throne must be taken in their literal sense.

Such a view of the attributes of God is pure anthropomorphism, implying God's bodily existence. On the other hand, there were the Mu'tazilites who held that God is one, eternal, unique, absolute Being, having no touch of dualism in Him. His essence is self-contained. He does not possess any attributes apart from His essence. His essence is, for instance, knowing, powerful, seeing, willing, etc. They denied the attributes of God as anything other than and addition to His essence.

The Ash'arites maintained a view which was, so to say, a reconciliation between the two extreme views. In agreement with the Sifatis and in opposition to the Mu'tazilites and the "philosophers" (those who were under Greek influence), the Ash'arites held that God possesses attributes in general. They classified the attributes of God into two main groups: (i) *sifat-i salbiyyah*, or negative attributes, and (ii) *sifat-i wujudiyyah* or existential or positive attributes. According to them, the *sifat-i wujudiyyah*, which they also called *sifat-i 'aqliyyah* or rational attributes, were seven: knowledge, power, will, life, hearing, seeing, and speech.

The extreme Sifatis asserted that even those attributes of God which imply His bodily existence are also to be taken in their true literal sense. As against them, the Ash'arites maintained that God possesses the apparently anthropomorphic attributes no doubt, but these should be understood not in their literal sense. They are to be believed in *bila kaifa*, without asking "how," and *bila tashbih*, without drawing any comparison.[14](#)

The Ash'arites here introduced a principle that the attributes of God are unique and fundamentally

different from those of the created beings and as such should not be compared to them. This is known as the doctrine of *mukhalafah*, or absolute difference. This doctrine signifies that if any quality or term is applied to God, it must be understood in a unique sense and never taken in the sense in which it is normally used when applied to created beings. Because of the doctrine of *mukhalafah*, the Ash'arites held that we are not allowed to ascribe any attribute to God unless it is expressly so applied in the Qur'an. God's attributes differ from those of the creatures, not in degree but in kind, i. e., in their whole nature.

The Ash'arites, as against the Mu'tazilites, held that "God has attributes which inhere eternally in Him and are in addition to His essence."¹⁵ These attributes are eternal, but they are neither identical with His essence, nor are they quite different from or other than His essence. God is knowing, for instance, means that God possesses knowledge as an attribute, which is inherent in God, and although it is not exactly the same as His essence, yet it is not something quite different from and other than His essence. The Ash'arites, here, maintained a very difficult position. They were between the two horns of a dilemma. They could neither assert the eternal attributes of God to be identical with nor wholly different from the essence of God.

They could not agree to the Mu'tazilite view and assert the identity of the attributes with the essence of God, because that would be a virtual denial of the attributes. They could not also assert that these eternal attributes are something absolutely different, or other than and separate, from God, as that would lead to multiplicity of eternals, and go against divine unity.

They, therefore, maintained that these attributes are, in one sense, included in and, in another sense, excluded from, the essence of God.¹⁶ It is common knowledge that the Asharites contended that essence (*mahiyyah*), and attributes (*sifat*) are two different things and they cannot be otherwise in the case of God, the Supreme Being.

The Ash'arites made a distinction between the meaning or connotation (*mafhum*) of a thing and its reality (*haqiqah*). So far as their meaning is concerned, the attributes and the essence of God are not the same and as such the attributes are in addition to the essence of God, i.e., they have different meanings. The meaning of *dhat* (essence) is different from the meanings of different attributes.

God's essence, for instance, is not knowing or powerful or wise, but so far as their ultimate *haqiqah* (reality or application) is concerned, the attributes are inherent in the divine essence, and hence are not something quite different from or other than the essence of God.¹⁷

In support of the above view of theirs, the Ash'arites advanced the following arguments:

The analogical argument of the Ash'arites of the older generation: God's actions prove that He is knowing, powerful, and willing; so they also prove that He possesses knowledge, power, will, etc., because the ground of inference cannot differ in different things. What is true in the case of a created being must also be true in the case of the Divine Being.¹⁸ In the case of a human being, by "knowing"

we mean one who possesses knowledge and even common sense and draws a line of demarcation between an essence and its attributes.

On the same analogy, distinction must be drawn between the essence of God and His attributes. The essence and the attributes should not be supposed to be blended in the Divine Being. Hence the attributes of God cannot be identical with His essence, as the Mu'tazilites held. But this analogical reasoning is very weak, for what is true of a finite being need not necessarily be true of an infinite being. But, according to the doctrine of *mukhalafah*, God's knowledge or power or will and, as a matter of fact, all His rational attributes signify quite different meanings when applied to created beings.

Secondly, they argued that if all the attributes of God are identical with His essence, the divine essence must be a homogeneous combination of contradictory qualities. For instance, God is merciful (*rahim*) and also revengeful (*qahhar*); both the contradictory attributes would constitute the essence of God, which is one, unique, and indivisible (*ahad*), and that is absurd.

Further, if the attributes are identical with God's essence, and if, for instance, His being knowing, powerful, and living is His essence itself, no useful purpose will be served by ascribing them to Him, for that would ultimately be the virtual application of His essence to itself, which is useless. Hence the divine attributes cannot be identical with the divine essence.

Thirdly, if the attributes of God are not distinct from His essence, the meanings of the different attributes will be exactly the same, for God's essence is a simple and indivisible unity. The meanings of knowing, willing, and living, for instance, will be exactly the same, and thus knowledge will mean power, or power will mean life, and so on.^{[19](#)}

This also is an absurdity. These different attributes imply different meanings and hence they cannot be identical with God's essence. His essence is one and He possesses many attributes which eternally inhere in Him and, though not identical with His essence, yet they are not absolutely different from His essence.

2. Free will

On the question of free-will or on the ability of man to choose and produce actions, the Ash'arites took up again an intermediary position between the libertarian and fatalistic views, held by the Mu'tazilites and the Jabrites respectively. The orthodox people and the Jabrites maintained a pure fatalistic view. They held that human actions are predetermined and predestined by God.

Man has no power to produce any action. "Everything," they contended, "is from God." God has absolute power over everything including human will and human actions. The Mu'tazilites and the Qadarites, on the other hand, held that man has full power to produce an action and has complete freedom in his choice, though the power was created in him by God.

The Ash'arites struck a middle path. They made a distinction between creation (*khalq*) and acquisition (*kasb*) of an action. God, according to the Ash'arites, is the creator (*khaliq*) of human actions and man is the acquisitor (*muktasib*). “Actions of human beings are created (*makhlūq*) by God, the creatures are not capable of creating any action.”²⁰ “There is no creator except God and the actions of man are, therefore, His creation.”²¹ Power (*qudrāh*), according to them, is either (i) original (*qadāmah*) or (ii) derived (*hadīthah*). The original power alone is effective. Derived power can create nothing. The power possessed by man is given by God and as such it is derived.²²

Al Ash'ari said, “The true meaning of acquisition is the occurrence of a thing or event due to derived power, and it is an acquisition for the person by whose derived power it takes place.”²³ God is, thus, the creator of human actions and man is the acquisitor. Man cannot create anything; he cannot initiate work. God alone can create, because absolute creation is His prerogative. God creates in man the power and the ability to perform an act. He also creates in him the power to make a free choice (*ikhtiyār*) between two alternatives – between right and wrong.

This free choice of man is not effective in producing the action. It is the habit or nature of God to create the action corresponding to the choice and power created by Himself in man. Thus, the action of man is created by God, both as to initiative and as to production or completion. Man is free only in making the choice between alternatives and also in intending to do the particular action freely chosen: Man, in making this choice and intending to do the act, acquires (*iktisab*) either the merit of appreciation and reward from God if he makes the right choice, or the demerit of condemnation and punishment if he makes the wrong choice.

The Ash`arites, thus, in order to avoid the fatalistic position, introduced the doctrine of acquisition by which, they thought, they could account for man's free-will and lay responsibility upon him. Man has no free-will in the Mu'tazilite sense; he has no real and effective power, but has some derived power by which he acquires a share in the production of the act: In the case of voluntary actions of human beings, there are, so to say, two causes.

The action is the combined effect of the real cause, God, and the choice and intention of man, the acquisitor, the possessor of ineffective power because of its being derived power. God creates in two ways: either with a locus (*mahall*) or without a locus. Human actions are His creation with a locus.²⁴

“God creates, in man, the power, ability, choice, and will to perform an act, and man, endowed with this derived power, chooses freely one of the alternatives and intends or wills to do the action and, corresponding to this intention, God creates and completes the action.”²⁵

It is this intention on the part of man which makes him responsible for his deeds. Man cannot take the initiative in any matter, nor can he originate any action. But the completion of the act is partially due to his intention: He, thus, acquires the merit or demerit of the action because of his intending to do a good or bad action. Man's free choice is, so to say, an occasion for God's causing the action corresponding to

that choice.

In this the Ash`arites come very close to the occasionalism of Malebranche which was expounded in Europe eight centuries and a half later. This correspondence and harmony between the choice of man and God's creation, according to the Ash'arites, is not due to a harmony established by God previously, but because of His habit or nature to create the harmony whenever human action is done.

This, in short, is the solution of the problem of free-will offered by the Ash'arites. The Ashh'arite view on this problem is not free from logical and ethical difficulties. It was really very difficult for them to reconcile the absolute determination of all events by God with man's accountability and responsibility for his deeds. Some, of the later Ash'arites, particularly Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, discarded the veil of acquisition in order to escape the charge of fatalism, and advocated naked determinism.[26](#)

3. The Problem of Reason and Revelation and the Criterion of Good and Evil

The Ash`arites differ from the Mu'tazilites on the question whether reason or revelation should be the basis or source of truth and reality: Both the schools admit the necessity of reason for the rational understanding of faith, but they differ with regard to the question whether revelation or reason is more fundamental and, in case of a conflict, whether reason or revelation is to get preference.

The Mu'tazilites held that reason is more fundamental than revelation and is to be preferred to revelation. Revelation merely confirms what is accepted by reason and, if there be a conflict between the two, reason is to be preferred and revelation must be so interpreted as to be in conformity with the dictates of reason.

The Ash`arites, on the other hand, held that revelation is more fundamental as the source of ultimate truth and reality, and reason should merely confirm what is given by revelation. The Ash`arites prefer revelation to reason in case of a conflict between the two. As a matter of fact, this is one of the fundamental principles in which the rational *Kalam* of the Mu'tazilites differs from the orthodox *Kalam* of the Ash'arites.

If pure reason is made the sole basis or source of truth and reality, including the truth and reality of the most fundamental principles or concepts on which Islam is based, it would be a pure speculative philosophy or at best a rational theology in general and not a doctrinal theology of a particular historic religion, i. e., that of Islam in particular. Islam is based on certain fundamental principles or concepts which, being suprasensible in nature, are incapable of rational proof. These principles, first, must be believed in on the basis of revelation.

Revelation, thus, is the real basis of the truth and reality of these basic doctrines of Islam. This faith, based on revelation, must be rationalized. Islam as a religion, no doubt, admits the necessity of rationalizing its faith. But to admit the necessity of rationalizing faith is not to admit pure reason or analytic thought to be the sole source or basis of Islam as a religion. Reason, no doubt, has the right to

judge Islam and its basic principles, but what is to be judged is of such a nature that it cannot submit to the judgment of reason except on its own terms.

Reason must, therefore, be subordinated to revelation. Its function is to rationalize faith in the basic principles of Islam and not to question the validity or truth of the principles established on the basis of revelation as embodied in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The problem of the criterion of good and evil follows as a corollary to the problem of reason and revelation. The problem of good and evil is one of the most controversial problems of Islamic theology.

The Mu'tazilites held that reason, and not revelation, is the criterion or standard of moral judgment, i.e., of the goodness and badness of an action. The truth and moral value of things and human actions must be determined by reason. They contended that moral qualities of good and evil are objective; they are inherent in the very nature of things or actions and as such can be known by reason and decided to be good or bad.

The Ash'arites, as against the Mu'tazilites, held that revelation and not reason is the real authority or criterion to determine what is good and what is bad. Goodness and badness of actions (*husn wa qubh*) are not qualities inhering in them; these are mere accidents (*a'rad*). Actions-in-themselves are neither good nor bad. Divine Law makes them good or bad.

In order to make the ground of controversy between the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites clearer, we may explain here the three different senses in which these two terms, good and evil, are used.[27](#)

- (i) Good and evil are sometimes used in the sense of perfection and defect respectively. When we say that a certain thing or action is good or bad (for instance, knowledge is good and ignorance is bad), we mean that it is a quality which makes its possessor perfect or implies a defect in him.
- (ii) These terms are also used in a utilitarian sense meaning gain and loss in worldly affairs. Whatever is useful or has utility in our experience is good, and the opposite of it is bad. So whatever is neither useful nor harmful is neither good nor bad.

Both the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites agree that in the two senses, mentioned above, reason is the criterion or standard of good and evil. There is no difference of opinion in the above two senses. But good and bad in the second sense may vary from time to time, from individual to individual, and from place to place.

In this sense there will be nothing permanently or universally good or bad; what is good to one may be bad to others and vice versa. This implies that good and evil are subjective and not objective and real. Hence actions are neither good nor bad, but experience or workability would make them so and, therefore, they can be known by reason without the help of revelation.

- (iii) Good and evil are also used in a third sense of commendable and praiseworthy or condemnable in

this world and rewardable or punishable, as the case may be, in the other world.

The Ash'arites maintained that good and evil in their third sense must be known through revelation, not by reason as the Mu'tazilites had held. According to the Ash'arites, revelation alone decides whether an action is good or bad. What is commanded by *Shar'* is good, and what is prohibited is bad. *Shar'* can convert previously declared good into bad and vice versa.

As actions by themselves are neither good nor bad, there is nothing in them which would make them rewardable (good) or punishable (bad). They are made rewardable or punishable by revelation or *Shar'*. As there is no quality of good or evil seated in the very nature of an act, there can be no question of knowing it by reason.

4. The Problem of the Eternity of the Qur'an

There was a great controversy over the question whether the Qur'an is created or uncreated and eternal. This question is bound up with another question whether speech is one of God's attributes or not. The orthodox section of the Muslims, including the Ash'arites, held that God has it as one of His seven rational attributes, and as His attributes are eternal, divine speech, i.e., the Qur'an, is also eternal.

As regards the eternity of the Qur'an, the Ash'arites adopted again an intermediary position between the extreme views of the Zahirites and the Mu'tazilites. The Hanbalites and other Zahirites (extreme orthodox schools) held that the speech of God, i. e., the Qur'an, is composed of letters, words, and sounds which inhere in the essence of God and is, therefore, eternal. Some of the Hanbalites went to the extreme and asserted that even the cover and the binding of the Qur'an are eternal.[28](#)

The Mu'tazilites and a section of the Rafidites went to the other extreme and maintained that the Qur'an was created. They denied all attributes of God, including the attribute of speech, on the ground that if it be an eternal attribute of God, there would be multiplicity of eternals, to believe which is polytheism and contrary to the basic principles of Islam. They further argued that "the Qur'an is composed of parts, successively arranged parts, and whatever is composed of such parts must be temporal."[29](#)

Hence the Qur'an must be created. The Ash'arites maintained that the Qur'an is composed of words and sounds, but these do not inhere in the essence of God. They made a distinction between the outward and concrete expression of the Qur'an in language, and the real, self-subsistent meaning of it, and held that the Qur'an, as expressed in words and sounds, is, no doubt, temporal (*hadath*); but against the Mu'tazilites they asserted that the Qur'an in its meanings is uncreated and eternal.

The "self-subsisting meaning" eternally inheres in the essence of God. These meanings are expressed; their expression in language is temporal and created. It is so because the same meaning, while remaining the same, might be expressed differently at different times, in different places by different persons or nations. They further maintained that this meaning is an attribute other than knowledge and will and, as such, inheres eternally in the essence of God and is, therefore, eternal.[30](#)

In support of this contention the Ash`arites advanced the following arguments:[31](#)

- (i) The Qur'an is "knowledge from God"; it is, therefore, inseparable from God's attribute of knowledge which is eternal and uncreated. Hence it is also eternal and uncreated.
- (ii) God created everything by His word *kun* (be) and this word, which is in the Qur'an, could not have been a created one, otherwise a created word would be a creator, which is absurd. Hence God's word is uncreated, i. e.. eternal.
- (iii) The Qur'an makes a distinction between creation (*khalq*) and command (*amr*) when it says, "***Are not the creation and command His alone?***" Hence God's Command, His word or *Kalam*, which is definitely something other than created things (*makhluq*), must be uncreated and eternal.
- (iv) Further, God says to Moses, "***I have chosen thee over mankind with My apostolate and My word.***" This verse signifies that God has speech. Again, Moses is addressed by God with the words: "***Lo, I am thy Lord.***" Now, if the word which addresses Moses is a created thing, it would mean that a created thing asserts that it is Moses Lord (God), which is absurd. God's word, therefore, must be eternal.

The Ash'arites further pointed out that all the different arguments advanced by the Mu'tazilites (and in ***Sharh-i Mawaqif*** as many as eight such arguments have been mentioned), in support of their view that the Qur'an is created, would apply only to the expressed Qur'an and not to the real Qur'an, the latter being the "meanings of the Qur'an."[32](#)

5. The Problem of the Beatific Vision

On the question of the beatific vision, the Ash`arites, true to their attitude of reconciliation, again tried to adopt a course lying midway between the extreme anthropomorphic view of the Zahirites and other orthodox Muslims on the one hand and the view of the Mu'tazilites and the "philosophers" on the other.

The extreme orthodox Muslims and the Zahirites, in particular, held that it is possible to see God and the righteous persons would actually have His vision as the chief reward for their good actions. They further held that God is settled firmly on His Throne, He exists in different directions, and is capable of being pointed out. The Mu'tazilites and the "philosophers" denied the possibility of seeing God with eyes, as that would imply His bodily existence, which is absurd.

The Ash'arites, as against the Mu'tazilites and the "philosophers," and in agreement with the orthodox class, held that it is possible to see God;[33](#) but they could not agree to their view that God is extended and can be shown by pointing out. They accepted the philosophical principle that whatever is extended or spatial must be contingent and temporal, and God is not an extended and temporal being.

This admission landed them into a difficulty, for if God is not extended and only extended things can be

seen, God cannot be seen;³⁴ but this conclusion conflicts with their position that beatific vision is possible. So, in order to get out of this difficulty, they asserted the possibility of seeing an object even if it is not present before the perceiver.³⁵ This was a very peculiar and untenable position, for it repudiated all the principles of optics.

It is possible to see God even though our sense of vision does not receive the corresponding “impression” of the object on it. Besides, it is possible for God to create in human beings the capacity to see Him without the necessary conditions of vision, such as the presence, in concrete form, of the object itself in space and time, normal condition of the appropriate sense-organ, absence of hindrance or obstruction to perception, and so on; and though God is unextended and does not exist in space and time, “yet He may make Himself visible to His creature like the full moon.”

They further contended that the vision of God is possible without any impression on our sense-organ for another reason. There is practically no difference between a “sensation” and an “after image” except that the sensation possesses an additional quality over and above the common qualities present in both, and this additional quality, i.e, impression on the sense-organ produced by the external object, does not make any difference in the perception of an object.

Hence, though this impression is missing in the case of seeing God, it may still be called “seeing.” The weakness of this argument is apparent to any student of psychology, because an after-image is possible only when it is preceded by an actual impression of the object on the sense-organ. The actual impression of the object is, therefore, a precondition of an after-image in the case of beatific vision too.

The Ash'arites were faced with another difficulty. The Mu'tazilites had pointed out that if seeing of God is possible, it must be possible under all circumstances and at all times, for this possibility is due either to His essence or to an inseparable attribute in Him. In either case, it should be possible at all times. And if it is possible at all times, it must be possible now; and if it is possible to see Him now, we must see Him now, for when all the conditions of “vision” are present, the actual seeing must take place. The Ash`arites met this objection in a very naive manner by saying, “We do not admit the necessity of actual seeing taking place, even when all its eight conditions are present.”

The Ash'arites supported their views on the basis of revelation. According to the Qur'an, Moses asked of God, ***“O, my Lord, show Thyself to me so that I can see Thee.”*** Had seeing been impossible, Moses would not have said so, for, otherwise, it must be assumed that either he knew its impossibility or did not, and both the alternatives are absurd, because an intelligent person like him could not have been ignorant of this impossibility and could not have asked for what he knew was impossible.

Again, according to the Qur'an, God said to Moses, ***“If the mountain remains fixed in its place, you can see Me,”*** and if the antecedent is possible the consequent must be possible. Here, evidently, the antecedent, fixity of the mountain, is in itself a possible thing. Therefore, the consequent, the vision of God, must also be possible. Some other verses also support the conclusion.³⁶

There are a few more controversial problems of secondary importance, in which the Ash`arites differed from the Mu'tazilites. These are, for example, promise of reward and threat of punishment by God; whether God can make His creatures responsible for the actions for which they have no ability; whether God's actions are bound to be based on rational considerations and on purpose; whether He is bound to do what is best for His creatures; and whether the knowledge of God or recognition of His existence is based on reason or revelation.

These theological problems of secondary importance are more or less the corollaries of the main principles in which the Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites differed.

The Ash'arites held that God is the only real cause of everything; He alone possesses real and effective power and this power is unlimited; His will is absolutely free – not determined by anything. Whatever power human beings apparently possess is given by God. Man does not possess any real and effective power. God, being absolutely free in His action, is not bound to act on rational purpose. He does not act teleologically for, otherwise, His actions would be determined by something external to and other than Himself and He would not remain absolutely free. External purpose would put a limit to God's omnipotence.

Like Spinoza, al-Ash'ari held that there is no purpose in the mind of God which would determine His activity. From thus anti-teleological view it follows that as God's action is not teleological, He is not bound to do what is best for His creatures. He does whatever He wills. But as He is an absolutely intelligent and just being, His actions, as a matter of fact, are all full of wisdom.[37](#)

As against the Mu'tazilites, the Ash'arites held that God can make us responsible for the actions which we have no power to do. The Mu'tazilites held that God cannot do so, because that would be an irrational and unjust act on His part. It is admitted by all schools of thought in Islam that power or ability of men to do a thing is given by God. But opinions differ on the question whether this power or ability is really effective in producing any action. The Mu'tazilites and the Qadarites held that man's power is fully effective and can produce an action. But the Ash'arites maintained that, being derivative, it can have no effective force. Similar are their respective positions with regard to the ability to act.

This ability is no doubt given by God as an accident, but the Mu'tazilites, particularly Abu al-Hudhayl 'Allaf, held that this ability is given to man simultaneously with the performance of the act. But the Ash'arites maintained that it is given before the actual performance of the act;[38](#) but being a mere accident in man, it has only a momentary existence and is of no practical use to man in performing the act.

As a matter of fact, it ceases to exist when the actual action takes place. Man, therefore, does the act, practically without having the power and the ability to do so. He is held responsible for his actions because of his choosing freely one of the two alternative actions and intending to do the action so chosen. But neither his choice nor his intention can produce the action. It is God who creates the action

and is thus its effective and real cause.[39](#)

There is an almost similar controversy over the question of God's promise of reward to the virtuous and His threat of punishment to the wrong-doer. This was one of the five main problems with which the Mu'tazilite movement started.[40](#)

The Mu'tazilites held that God is bound to fulfil His promises of reward and punishment. Every action, good or bad, must take its own course and be followed by its logical and normal consequence. A right action, therefore, must be followed by its reward and a wrong one by punishment. God has made promises in the Qu'ran and He, being a just being, cannot do otherwise, i.e., He cannot punish the virtuous and forgive the wrong-doer.

On the other hand, the Ash'arites maintained that, being all-powerful and absolutely free in His will, God can punish His creatures even if they have not committed any sins or reward His creatures even though they have done no virtuous deeds. There is nothing binding on God; His will is not subject to teleological considerations.

It is by the inner necessity of His own nature that He fulfils His promises of reward to the virtuous and does not do otherwise. And it is in His infinite mercy that He may forgive any wrongdoer or vicious person, in spite of the threats of punishment for his vicious acts. This act of forgiveness will also be in accordance with His nature as the most generous and gracious being.

Ash'arite Metaphysics

Al-Ash'ari's interest was purely theological and his discussions did not contain much metaphysics.[41](#) But the subsequent Ash'arites found it impossible to achieve their main object of defending the faith and harmonizing reason with revelation without making reference to the ultimate nature of reality.

Al-Ash'ari's theological system was, thus, considered to be incomplete without a support from metaphysics. The system was fully developed by the later Ash'arites, particularly by Qadi Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Tayyyib al-Baqillani who was one of the greatest among them. He was a Basrite, but he made Baghdad his permanent residence and died there in 403/1013. He was a great original thinker and wrote many valuable books on theology and various other subjects.

He made use of some purely metaphysical propositions in his theological investigations, such as substance is an individual unity, accident has only a momentary existence and cannot exist in quality, and perfect vacuum is possible, and thus gave the school a metaphysical foundation.

About him a Western scholar has remarked: "It is his glory to have contributed most important elements to, and put into fixed form what is, perhaps, the most daring metaphysical scheme, and almost certainly the most thorough theological scheme, ever thought out. On the one hand, the Lucretian atoms raining down through the empty void, the self-developing monads and pre-established harmony of Leibniz; and

all the Kantian “things-in-themselves” are lame and impotent in their consistency beside the parallel Ash'arite doctrines; and, on the other, not even the rigours of Calvin; as developed in Dutch confessions, can compete with the unflinching exactitude of the Muslim conclusions”.⁴²

The Ash'arites, being primarily interested in theological problems, kept their philosophical discussions mainly confined only to those questions which they thought had a direct or indirect bearing on these problems.⁴³ Willingly or unwillingly, they had to philosophize “in order to meet the contemporary philosophers on their own ground.” But when they began philosophizing, they were very earnest and became great metaphysicians.

In dealing with the most important basic principles of Islam: (i) the existence of God, as the creator of the universe, and His unity and oneness, and (ii) the belief in the prophethood of Muhammad, they had to use certain proofs which necessitated some metaphysical and epistemological discussions. Hence they had to develop a theory of knowledge and a theory of reality, which were peculiarly their own. God, the ultimate principle, is, according to the Ash'arites, a necessary existent; His existence is identical with His essence.

In proving God's existence the Ash'arites used three arguments. Their argument from the contingent nature of motion is not of much importance to our discussion. The other two are:

(i) All bodies, they argued, are ultimately one in so far as their essence is concerned. But, in spite of this basic unity, their characteristics are different. Hence there must be an ultimate cause for these divergent characteristic, and that ultimate cause is God.

(ii) The world is contingent. Every contingent thing must have a cause; therefore, the world must have a cause, and as no contingent thing can be the cause, that cause must be God. The major premise (i.e., every event must have a cause) does not require a proof. The minor premise – the world is contingent – they proved in the following manner: Everything that exists in the world is either a substance or a quality. The contingent character of a quality is evident, and the contingency of substance follows from the fact that no substance could exist apart from qualities. The contingency of quality necessitates the contingency of substance; otherwise, the eternity of substance would necessitate the eternity of quality.⁴⁴

The Ash'arites believed in miracles which were considered to be the basis of the proof of prophethood and, in order to defend this view, they had to deny the laws of nature. They also denied causality in nature and made God the only cause of everything.

Now, in order to explain the full implication of the above arguments, it was necessary for them to develop a theory of knowledge and a metaphysics.

The world consists of things. Now, the question arises: What is meant by a thing, what is its nature, and how far do we know it?

Al-Baqillani defined knowledge as the cognition of a thing as it is in itself.⁴⁵ A thing is defined by the Ash'arites as “that which is existent.” Everything is an existent and every existent is a thing.⁴⁶ So, according to the Ash'arites, existence, whether necessary or contingent, is the thing or the essence of the thing-in-itself and not a quality in addition to it, as the Mu'tazilites held.

Al-Jahiz, al-Jubba'i, and some other Mu'tazilites of the Basrite school defined a “thing” as that which is known,⁴⁷ and held that existence is a quality of it, added to its essence. The Ash'arites, as against these Mu'tazilites, contended that if existence is an additional quality, the essence-in-itself would be a non-existent and hence a non-entity and the subsequent-addition of the quality of “existence” to it would involve a clear contradiction in so far as it would make the non-existent existent.⁴⁸

This is an absurdity. The thing-in-itself which is the object of knowledge according to the Ash'arites, is, therefore, an existent thing or a body. Everything that exists in the world has a contingent existence and is either substance or quality. In this sense God is not a thing.

The Aristotelian categories of thought were subjected by the Ash'arites to a searching criticism. Only two of those categories, substance and quality, were retained by them. The other categories, quality, place, time, etc., are nothing but relative characteristics (*i'tibarat*) that exist subjectively in the mind of the knower, having no corresponding objective reality.

Like Berkeley, the Irish philosopher, they also did not make any distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of objects. The world, therefore, consists of substance, on which the mind reflects, and qualities, which are not in the thing-in-itself but only in the mind of the knower. The qualities are mere accidents which are fleeting, transitory, and subjective relations, having only a momentary existence. A quality or accident cannot exist in another accident but only in a substance. No substance could ever exist apart from a quality. The substance, being inseparable from its accidents, must also be transitory, having only a moment's duration, just as the accidents are. Everything that exists, therefore, consists of mere transitory units (subjective), having only a moment's duration.

The Ash'arites, thus, rejected the Aristotelian view of matter as “a permanent potentiality (*hayula*) of suffering the impress of form (*surah*),” because a possibility is neither an entity nor a non-entity but purely a subjectivity. With inert matter, the active form and all causes must also go. They, too, are mere subjectivities. This led them straight to the atomists and, as a matter of fact, they did become atomists after their own fashion.

In this connection we may observe that the object of the Ash'arites was, like that of Kant, to fix the relation of knowledge to the thing-in-itself; and they showed here a great originality in their thought. On this question they not only anticipated Kant but, in reaching the thing-in-itself, they were much more thorough than Kant. “In his examination of human knowledge regarded as a product and not merely a process, Kant stopped at the idea of ‘Ding an sich’ [thing-in-itself], but the Ash'arite endeavoured to penetrate further, and maintained, against the contemporary Agnostic-Realism, that the so-called

underlying essence existed only so far as it was brought in relation to the knowing subject.”⁴⁹

Ash'arite Atomism

The substances perceived by us are atoms which come into existence from vacuity and drop out of existence again. The world is made up of such atoms. The Ash'arite atoms are fundamentally different from those of Democritus and Lucretius. The Ash`arite atoms are not material; they are not permanent; they have only a momentary existence; they are not eternal but every moment brought into being, and then allowed to go out of existence by the Supreme Being, God, the only cause of everything in the universe. These atoms are not only of space but of time also. They are non-material or ideal in character. They resemble the monads of Leibniz.

But the Ash'arite monads differ from those of Leibniz in having no possibility of self-development along certain lines. Each monad has certain qualities but has extension neither in space nor in time. They have simply position, not bulk, and are isolated from and independent of one another. There is absolute void between any two monads. Space and time are subjective. All changes in the world are produced by their entering into existence and dropping out again, but not by any change in themselves.

The Ash'arite ontology necessitated the existence of God. Their monads must have a cause, without which they could not have come into being, nor could there be any harmony or connection between them. This cause must be a *cause sui*; otherwise there would be an infinite regress of the causal nexus. The Ash'arites found this cause in the free-will of God. It creates and annihilates the atoms and their qualities and, thus, brings to pass all motion and change in the world.

The Ash'arites were, thus, thoroughgoing metaphysicians. Being was all important in their ontology. The will of that Being or God must, therefore, be the ground of all things. Hence they did not find any difficulty, as Leibniz did, in explaining the harmony and coherence among the isolated, windowless, and independent monads, constituting the one orderly world.

Leibniz had to bring in, in his monadology, a Monad of monads or God, and fall back upon the Theory of Pre-established Harmony to bring his monads into harmonious and orderly relations with one another, and this he could do only at the cost of his monadology, and by abandoning his pluralistic and individualistic metaphysics.

But the Ash'arites, consistently with their ontology, fell straight back upon God, and found in His will the ground of orderliness and harmony in the universe. They were, thus, more thorough and consistent than Leibniz in their theory of monads. The Ash'arite atomism approaches that of Lotze's, who in spite of his desire to save external reality, ended in its Complete reduction to ideality. But, like Lotze, they could not believe their atoms to be the inner working of the infinite Primal Being.

The necessary consequence of their analysis is a thorough going idealism like that of Berkeley. Their

theory of knowledge reduced the universe to a mere show of ordered subjectivities which, as they maintained like Berkeley, found their ultimate explanation in the will of God. Their interest, as we have already pointed out, was mainly theological. Interest in pure monotheism was very strong with them. Their metaphysical and epistemological discussions were actuated by a pious desire to defend the idea of divine creations, to drive men back to God and His revelation and compel them to see in Him the one grand fact of the universe.

The Ash'arites are here more consistent than Berkeley. God, according to them, is the only cause in the true sense of the term. No created thing, having created power, could be the cause of anything.

The attitude of the Ash'arites towards the law of causation was sceptical. They denied objective validity of causality in nature. No created thing or being can be the cause of anything. Things or beings in nature do not possess any power or quality which could produce any effect. The so-called power which men and objects of nature seem to possess is not an effective power, for it is a derived power, not an original power which alone can produce effect.⁵⁰ Whatever power the creatures might possess must have been given by God, who alone possesses all real power. Being (God) is the only Ultimate Reality.

The things of the world are composed of indivisible units monads which, every moment, are created and annihilated; and it is God who creates and annihilates them and their qualities, thereby bringing about all the motion and change in the world. There is, thus, no such thing as a law of nature and the world is sustained by a constant, ever repeated activity of God.

There is no such thing as a secondary cause; when there is the appearance of such a cause, it is only illusionary. God produces the appearance of the effect as well as the effect. Things of the world do not possess any permanent nature. Fire, for instance, does not possess the nature or quality of burning; it does not burn. God creates in a substance "a being burned" when fire touches it.

The Ash'arites thus denied power in the cause as well as the necessary connection between the so-called cause and effect. Shibli mentions that the Ash'arites rejected the idea of causation with a view to defending the possibility of miracles on the manifestation of which, according to them, prophethood depended. The orthodox school believed in miracles as well as in the universal law of causation; but they also maintained that, at the time of manifesting a miracle, God suspends the operation of this law and thus brings about an exception.

Asha`ari, however, maintained that a cause must have always the same effect (i.e., the effect of one and the cause cause could not be different at different times). Having accepted this principle as formulated by their leader, the Ash'arites could not agree to the orthodox view and, therefore, to prove the possibility of miracles they rejected the law of causation altogether. According to them, there is no power in the antecedent to produce the consequent. "We know nothing but floating impressions, the phenomenal order of which is determined by God."⁵¹

Objection might be raised against the Ash'arite metaphysics that it establishes in effect a relationship

between God and the atoms, but relationships, according to the Ash'arites, are subjective illusions. In reply to this objection it may be pointed out that all relationship applies only to contingent beings or things perceived by the senses. It would not hold in the case of the Necessary Being, God, who is suprasensible. And according to their principle of *mukhalafah*, nothing which is applied to created things or beings can be applied to God in the same sense. God is not a natural cause but a free cause.

This is the Ash'arite system as completed by Qadi Abu Bakr al-Baqillani. It faced a strong opposition from the orthodox, particularly from the followers of Abmad bin Hanbal. Al-Ashari's opinions did not get much recognition outside the Shafi'i group to which he belonged. The Hanafites preferred the doctrines of his contemporary al-Maturidi who differed from al-Ash'ari in certain minor controversial points. Shibli has mentioned nine such points.⁵²

In Spain, Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1063) opposed the Ash'arite doctrines. The Saljuq Sultan Tughril Beg, who was an adherent of the Hanbalite school, treated the Ash'arites very badly, but his successor Sultan Alp Arsalan and especially his famous vizier, Nizam al-Mulk supported the Ash`arites and put an end to the persecution to which they had been exposed. Nizam al-Mulk founded the Nizamite Academy at Baghdad in 459/1066 for the defence of Ash'arite doctrines. It is under his patronage that Abu al-Ma'ali `Abd al-Malik al-Juwaini got the chance of preaching the Ash'arite doctrine freely.⁵³

The Ash'arite system could not obtain widespread acceptance until it was popularized by al-Juwaini and al-Ghazali in the East and by Ibn Tumart in the West. It was al-Juwaini who could legitimately claim the credit of making the Ash'arites' doctrines popular. His vast learning and erudite scholarship brought him the title of *Dia' al-Din* (the light of religion).

Al-Juwaini received his early education from his father, Shaikh Abu Muhammad `Abd Allah, and after the death of his father, he got further education from his teacher, abu Ishaq al-Isfara'ini, a great Ash'arite scholar. Al-Juwaini, in course of time, was recognized by the scholars of the time to be Shaikh al-Islam (the chief leader of Islam) and Imam al-Haramain (the religious leader of Makkah and Madinah). For thirty years, he continued teaching and preaching the Ash'arite doctrines.

Al-Juwaini was the teacher of al-Ghazali. He wrote many books on various subjects. Some of these are: *al-Shamil*, on the principles of religion; *al-Burhan*, on the principles of jurisprudence; *al-'Aqidat al-Nizamiyyah*; and *Irshad*, on theology. He was born in 419/1028 and died at Nishapur in 478/1085.53 Being the Shaikh al-Islam and the Imam of Makkah and Madinah, al-Juwaini's *Fatawa* (judgments on religious matters) used to be respected by people in general throughout the Muslim world; and for this reason, his writings got the widest circulation and, through these writings, Ash'arite doctrines became known everywhere.

One great theological result of the Ash'arite system was that it checked the growth of free thought which tended to dissolve the solidarity of the Islamic Shari'ah. The Ash`arite mode of thought had its intellectual results also.

It led to an independent criticism of Greek philosophy and prepared the ground for philosophies propounded by men like al-Ghazali and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. Al-Ghazali is generally included among the Ash'arites and it is he who maybe said to have completed the Ash'arite metaphysics. It was he who, by giving a systematic refutation of Greek philosophy in his famous work, *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, completely annihilated the dread of intellectualism which had characterized the minds of the orthodox. It was chiefly through his influence that people began to study dogma and metaphysics together.⁵⁴

Strictly speaking, al-Ghazali was not an Ash'arite, though he admitted that the Ash'arite mode of thought was excellent for the masses. "He held that the secret of faith could not be revealed to the masses; for this reason he encouraged exposition of the Ash`arite theology, and took care in persuading his disciples not to publish the results of his private reflection."⁵⁵

Al-Ghazali made the Ash'arite theology so popular that it became practically the theology of the Muslim community in general and has continued to remain so up to the present time.

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1. Iqbal, The Development of Metaphysics in Persia, p. 53.

2. Ahmad Amin, Duha al-Islam, p. 36.

3. Al-Ash'ari, Istihsan al-Khaud, p. 4.

4. Al-Shahrastani, al-Milal wal-Nihal, p. 50.

5. The subject originally was not called `Ilm al-Kalam. This name was given afterwards, during al-Mamun's time. See Shibli, `Ilm al-Kalam, p. 31.

6. Ibn Khallikan, Wafayat al-A'yan, p. 454.

7. Shibli, op. cit., p. 56.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibn Khallikan, op. cit., p. 55.

10. Shibli, op. cit., pp. 56. 57.

11. Al-Ash'ari, op. cit., pp. 4-9

12. Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, p. 53.

13. Shibli, op. cit., p. 59.
14. Al-Ash'ari, al-Ibanah, p. 47.
15. Idem., al-Maqalat, p. 291.
16. Abu al-'Ala, Sharh-i Mawaqif, p. 571.
17. Ibid., .pp. 581–82.
18. Al-Shahrastani, op. cit., p. 51.
19. Al-Ash'ari, al-Maqalat, p. 484.
20. Ibid., .p. 291.
21. Al-Ash'ari, al-Ibanah, p. 9.
22. Idem, al-Maqalat,, pp. 539–54:
23. Ibid., p. 542.
24. Abu al-'Ala, op. cit., p. 625.
25. Al-Shahrastani, op. cit., p. 53.
26. Shibli, op. cit., p. 72.
27. Qadi 'Add and Sayyid Sharif, Mawaqif, vol. IV, p. 182; Musallam al-Thubut, p. 114.
28. Baihaqi, Kitab al-Asma' wal-Sifat, p. 198.
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31. Al-Maqalat, p. 292.
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33. Al-Ibanah, p. 9.
34. Shibli, op. cit., p. 63.
35. Sharh-i Mawaqif, pp. 610–24.
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37. Al-Maqalat, p. 252; Shibli, 'Ilm al-Kalam, p. 59.
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39. Al-Shahrastani, op. cit., p. 53.
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42. Macdonald, Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory, pp. 200–201.
43. Sharh-i Mawaqif, p. 15.
44. Shibli, op. cit., pp. 87, 88.
45. Sharh-i Mawaqif, p. 15.
46. Ibid., p. 128.
47. Al-Maqamat, p. 520.
48. Sharh-i Mawaqif, p. 109.
49. Iqbal; op. cit., p. 57.
50. Sharh-i Mawaqif, p. 262; al-Maqalat, p. 539
51. Shibli, op. cit., p. 64.
52. Ibid.. p. 92.
53. Ibn Khallikan, vol. I, p. 312.
54. Iqbal, op. cit., p. 59.
55. Shibli, op. cit., p. 66.

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