

Introduction

A. Differences in Religion

A faith in the beginning is always simple and uncomplicated. As time goes on, people start elaborating those simple beliefs and that is the point when disputes arise and different sects are established. It had happened in all previous religions and Islam was not an exception. Islam in the beginning was a call to believe in the Oneness of God, in the Messengership of Prophet Muhammad and in the Day of Judgement.

These basic principles are beyond any dispute. Also, there is no shadow of doubt that the religion of God is Islam, that the only way to know Islam is through the Book of God and the *sunnah* of the Prophet, and that the Book of God is what is known as the Qur'an without any addition or subtraction.

The differences occur in interpretation of some of the verses of the Qur'an, and the authenticity or otherwise of some ahadith of the Prophet, and in their interpretation and implication. These differences have given rise to many questions which have divided the Muslim world apart.

There are many differences about the person of God and His attributes: Does God have a body? Will He be seen? Is God just? Is man compelled by God in his actions or is he free?

As far as the existence, the person and Oneness of God is concerned, it comes under the first root of religion (*usulu 'd-din*) known as *tawhid*, and has been discussed in our previous book '*God of Islam*.' ¹ As for the actions of God, they come under the second root of religion known as '*adl*—justice.

According to the Shi'ah Ithna-'Ashari faith, '*adl*' is one of the most important attributes of God; and that is why it is dealt with separately. The reason why the second root of religion dealing with the actions of God has been named '*adl*' is because the differences amongst the Muslims concerning the justice of God are vast and manifold.

Since some of the differences amongst the various Muslim sects are of very fine theological points, it is essential to study the following chapters very carefully. Remember that every term and phrase in these

chapters has a significance, and if the reader tries to change any terminology or any phrase, he would put himself in a mess of contradictions and irrelevancies.

A Note on the Meaning of 'adl

The word '*adl*' was originally coined to convey the idea of making two things equal, and distributing equally. The same is the case with *insaf* which literally means dividing in two halves. The idea of equal distribution naturally leads to equity and justice.

And, as a result, '*adl*' came to denote justice, equity, to be on straight path, straight forwardness, to be of exact standard neither less nor more, and to keep everything in its proper place.

The opposite words are *jawr* and *zulm*. *Jawr* means to be inclined to one side, which consequently means not to be impartial in justice, to be biased for or against one party. *Zulm* means to put a thing in a wrong place. As an unjust judge misplaces his judgement by not giving the aggrieved party its due, he is called *zalim*.

The Muslim Sects Frequently Mentioned in this Book

The reader will come across the following sects again and again:

Shi'ah Ithna-'Ashari: Those Muslims who believe in the imamat of twelve Imams beginning with Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib, Imam Hasan, Imam Husayn and his nine descendents. The twelfth Imam is Muhammad al-Mahdi, the awaited saviour. This group is also known as Imamiyyah.

Asha'irah: All the Sunni Muslims of the present time are Asha'irah in their beliefs. They follow Abu I-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 324 A.H./936 C.E.).

Mu'tazilah: Before Abu I-Hasan al-Ash'ari, many Sunnis were Mu'tazilah in their beliefs. They followed the beliefs of Wasil bin 'Ata' (d. 131 A.H. /748 O.E.). However, the Mu'tazilah sect became almost extinct in the fourth *hijrah* century.

B. The Place of Reason in Religion

The first and most important difference among the Muslims is concerning the role of human reason and intellect (*'aql*) in religion. The Asha'irah are on one side of the issue whereas the Shi'ah Ithna'Ashariyyah and the Mu'tazilah are on the other side.

The Shi'ahs say that irrespective of religious commandments, there is a rational merit and demerit in different courses of action, and that God orders a certain action because it is rationally good and He forbids another action because it is rationally bad. The Asha'irah deny this concept. They say that nothing is good or bad in se. Only what God has ordered us to do is good and what He has forbidden us

is bad. [2](#)

In other words, the Shi'ahs, for example, say that God has forbidden us to tell a lie because lying is bad; whereas the Asha'irah says that lying has become bad because God forbade it. Abu 'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari writes, "Question: Then lying is evil only because God has declared it to be evil? Answer: Certainly. And if He declared it to be good, it would be good; and if He commanded it, no one could gainsay Him. [3](#)

Another difference in regard to the place of reason in religion is about the relationship between natural cause and effect. The Shi'ah and the Mu'tazilah recognize the relationship between cause and effect. But the Asha'irah deny it. They say that there is no cause except Allah, and it is just a habit (*'adah*) of God that whenever, for example, we drink water, He quenches our thirst.' [4](#)

'Allamah al-Hilli says:

"The gist of the argument of the Asha'irah ... is that according to them things come into being by the Will of [God] and His Power which is the sufficient cause of the existence of things. So, as the power (of God) is the sufficient cause, therefore, it is not necessary that a thing should come into being when its physical causes come into being; or that it should cease to exist when its physical cause ceases to exist

And there is no relationship of any kind between those happenings which happen one after another except that it is the habit (of God) that He creates one thing after another; for example, burning after touching the fire, and quenching of thirst after drinking water; because touching fire and drinking water has nothing to do with burning and quenching of thirst, but all this comes into being by His Power and His Will; and He can create touching without burning and burning without touching, and the same is the case with all actions. " [5](#)

As *you* will see in the discussions of this book, most differences between the Shi'ahs and the Asha'irah Sunnis stem from their diverse outlooks concerning the place of reason in religion and the relationship between natural cause and effect.

[1.](#) First published in 1969 by Bilal Muslim Mission, and subsequently published more than ten times in Tehran by WOFIS for world wide distribution. Its new edition was published in 1978.

[2.](#) McCarthy, R.J. "Two Creeds of al-Ash'ari" (Maqalatu -l Islamiyyin and al-Ibanah 'an Usuli 'd-Diyanah) p. 238-9; 241.

[3.](#) Ibid.,.

[4.](#) ash-Shahristani, al-Milal wa 'n-Nihal, pp.124- 125.

[5.](#) al-Hilli, Kashfu 'l-Haqq