



AŠ'ARĪ, ABU'L-ḤASAN

AŠ'ARĪ, ABU'L-ḤASAN 'ALĪ B. ESMĀ'ĪL B. ESHĀQ, scholastic theologian (*motakallem*) and founder of the theological school of the *Aš'arīya* or *Ašā'era* (ca. 260/874 to 324/936).

He was born in Baṣra, a descendant of the famous companion of the Prophet and arbitrator at Šeffīn for 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb, *Abū Mūsā Aš'arī*, and for the first forty years of his life he was a zealous supporter of the Mu'tazilites (q.v.) and the favored pupil of their leader in Baṣra, Abū 'Alī Moḥammad Jobbā'ī (d. 303/915-16), whom he might well have succeeded as head of the seat there. However, at about the age of forty (i.e., in ca. 300/912-13—unless this date has been selected by Aš'arī's later biographers to fit the idea expressed by Ebn 'Asāker that Aš'arī was the *mojadded* or “reviver of religion” for the 4th/10th century) he abandoned the doctrines of the Mu'tazilites for a much more conservative theological position akin to that of the *Ahl al-ḥadīṯ wa'l-sonna* and the imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. It has been suggested by Montgomery Watt (*Islamic Philosophy*, p. 82) that a certain rivalry with Jobbā'ī's son (and eventual successor in Baṣra) Abū Hāšem may conceivably have been a factor in Aš'arī's decision to seek fame and influence in another theological school, but the basic reason seems to have been a genuine change and evolution in his theological views, signaled in the accounts of the sources by a Pauline-type conversion after three dreams in which the Prophet appeared to him and indicated the correct way of belief—a story which may well contain some symbolic truth. A feeling seems to have arisen that the Mu'tazilite attempts to explain such basic theological problems like the createdness or uncreatedness



of the Qur'ān, free will and predestination, God's necessary justice or the purely capricious nature of His actions, God's attributes, etc., by rational arguments were spiritually and intellectually unsatisfactory. Aş'arī therefore moved now to the traditionalist Sunni position in upholding the superiority of revelation to reason, basically that of such conservative founding fathers of Islamic theology as Mālek b. Anas and Ebn Ḥanbal.

Aş'arī now spent the remaining years of his life engaged in developing his views and in composing polemics and arguments against his former Mu'tazilite colleagues. The Aş'arī scholar Ebn Fūrak numbers these at 300, and a biographer like Ebn Ḳallekān at 55 (Beirut, III, p. 286, tr. de Slane, II, p. 228); Ebn 'Asāker gives the titles of 93 of them, but only a handful of these works, in the fields of heresiography and theology, have survived. The three main ones are his *Maqālāt al-eslāmīyīn* (ed. H. Ritter, Istanbul, 1929-30), which comprises not only an account of the Islamic sects but also an examination of problems in *kalām*, or scholastic theology, and of the names and attributes of God; the greater part of this work seems to have been completed before his conversion from the Mu'tazilites. His *Ketāb al-loma'* (ed. and tr. R. C. McCarthy, Beirut, 1953) and his last work *Ketāb al-ebāna 'an oşul al-dīāna* (tr. W. C. Klein, New Haven, 1940) are expositions of his developed theological views and arguments against Mu'tazilite doctrines.

Aş'arī's significance in the development of Muslim theology is that he adopted a conservative position on the supreme importance of the Qur'ān and revelation, but defended them with the new weapon, learnt from the Mu'tazilites, of rational argument or *kalām*, being apparently the first scholar to make such argumentation congenial to the traditionalist scholars. Much of his writings consists of arguments from the Qur'ān and tradition, but in fact these are handled with the new technique of rational reasoning, all in the service of emphasizing God's transcendence and omnipotence. Aş'arī therefore marks a slight ebbing of the first period of the reception of Hellenism and philosophy into Islam at its formative period; changes had been made in the fabric of Islamic thought, and some of these were irreversible, but Aş'arī ameliorated them and made them palatable to the mainstream of Sunni thinking.

After his death, such followers in Iraq and Iran as Şo'lūkī, Bāqellānī, Ebn Furāk, Esfarāyenī, Qoşayrī, and the Emām-al-ḥaramayn Abu'l-Ma'ālī Jovaynī carried on Aş'arī's work and made Aş'arism, linked with the conservative Shaf'ite school of *feqh*, a dominant intellectual force in the central and



eastern lands of Islam (Aš‘arī’s own legal affiliation is uncertain, though most later authorities attach him to the Shafe‘ites), and it was eventually even carried to the Mağreb through the enthusiasm of Ebn Tūmart, the Mahdī of the Almohad movement in the 6th/12th century; a substantial proportion of the leading thinkers of the Islamic world at this time were followers of the Aš‘arī *kalām*. Within Iran, Aš‘arism became a powerful and influential force among the *olamā*’ of Nīšāpūr, contending amongst them for dominance with the rival Ḥanafī *madḥab* (for details, see C. E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, pp. 173ff.; R. W. Bulliet, *The Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in Medieval Islamic Social History*, Cambridge, Mass., 1972, pp. 36ff.; H. Halm, *Die Ausbreitung der šāfi‘itischen Rechtsschule von den Anfängen bis zum 8./14. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden, 1974, pp. 32ff.). Although it was under a cloud during the period of the Daylamī Buyids, adherents of Shi‘ism and sympathizers with the Mu‘tazilites, and was even mildly persecuted by the Saljuq Ṭoğrīl Beg’s vizier, the Ḥanafī Abū Naṣr Kondorī, Aš‘arism came into royal favor in the reign of Malekšāh through the influence of the latter’s great vizier Neẓām-al-molk, himself a product of the Aš‘arite-Shafe‘ite scholarly tradition in Nīšāpūr. These doctrines now became the official teaching in the network of *madrasas* established, from Syria to Transoxania, by Neẓām-al-molk, and a further fillip was given to their prestige by the adherence to them of Ġazālī.

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