



AŠ'ARĪYA

AŠ'ARĪYA (or Ash'arism), an Islamic school of theological thought founded by **Abu'l-Ḥasan Aš'arī**. In accord with the division of disciplines taught in the *madrasas*, the bio-bibliographers of Islam are wont in *kalām* to characterize an impressive number of scholars as Ash'arites, just as in *feqh* they specify scholars' adherence to one or the other of the four great legal schools (*maḏāheb*). One is therefore inclined to think of the Aš'arīya likewise as a well-defined school. But its self-conception as universalist Muslim, and the still continuing discussion of the specialists about its common identity, require that significant differences be kept in mind: 1. The Aš'arīya is primarily concerned with subtleties of doctrine, not with the legal practices that give the *maḏāheb* their obvious individualities. 2. Abu'l-Ḥasan Aš'arī and his writings play a less influential role in the Aš'arīya than, by comparison, the founders of the *maḏāheb*, or other schools, and their works. 3. Association with the Aš'arīya is not based on specific texts or a set of principles, but on affinity with its reasoned spirit of compromise, hence a loose spiritual bond. But by analogy, e.g., with the Augustinian or Thomist theological schools of the Latin Middle Ages, we may speak of the Aš'arīya as a theological school of Islam. Whether Aš'arī is not merely the school's eponym chosen by his later followers, but also its true founder, has always been, and probably will remain, a hotly discussed question, since most of his works are no longer extant and little is known about the first phase of the Ash'arite movement.

Although sagacious scholars before Aš'arī had already proposed essentially the same solutions, and although the number of his first followers was small (Ebn



'Asāker, *Tabyīn kādeb al-moftarī*, Damascus, 1347/1928, p. 397), careful analysis of the writings of some later Ash'arites has brought to light the seminal influence of Aš'arī's teachings. It was his personal discovery (leading to his conversion from the Mu'tazilites) that the two dangerously polarized tendencies which threatened to rip the Muslim community apart could be joined through a mutually beneficial connection: On the one hand there would be a strict adherence to the traditions of the forefathers (especially emphasized by the Hanbalites), on the other a good measure of independent reasoning usually resulting from enthusiastic application of the principles and methods learnt from foreign savants (chiefly the Mu'tazilite line). This compromise became the rallying program of the numerous scholars over the centuries who chose to follow Aš'arī, regardless of individual doctrinal differences. Its inherent difficulty often made them suspect as double-faced.

Characteristic teachings. The Ash'arite program branches out into a number of characteristic teachings differing only in details from one author to the other. (a) Reality of Allāh's attributes. Against the Mu'tazilites, who endeavored to purify theology from anthropomorphism by divesting Allāh of all attributes (*ta'ṭīl*), Aš'arī and his followers insisted on the reality of the revealed attributes. They are eternal as Allāh himself, but they are neither identical with His essence, nor altogether different from it. The Qur'ān, too, is, as Allāh's speech, eternal and uncreated. (b) But no anthropomorphism. Against the Ḥašwīya the Ash'arites denied that the anthropomorphic attributes implying bodily existence have the same meaning for Creator and creation. Hence interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the revealed texts is necessary. (c) Man's responsibility for his acts which are, nevertheless, part of Allāh's creation (against the Mu'tazilites and the Jabarites). Allāh is the sole Creator, hence also of man's acts, but man is given the possibility of acquiring (*kasb*) his acts and thus becoming responsible for them. (d) Man's vision of Allāh in the future life (against the Mu'tazilites and the Jabarites). Allāh will be truly seen by man in his future life, but independently from the conditions of earthly vision, in the manner He sees His creatures.

Historical function. Aš'arī was an excellent debater, and his followers appear to have developed their theories mostly on the occasion of dialogues with contemporary scholars. As a result Ash'arite thought is strongly influenced by the intellectual and social conditions of the time and is meant to act upon them. This explains why sometimes the emphasis on the traditions prevails and other times the emphasis on rational views, depending on the sectarian



exaggerations of the opponents. But in the long run rational and even philosophical arguments acquired the upper hand. Aš'arī himself had mostly battled with the Mu'tazilites in 4th/10th century Baṣra and Baghdad. Although against the Persian Ahvāzī he is put forward as a true Arab (Ebn 'Asāker, op. cit., p. 364), his most famous followers came from Persia. They brought with them the problems at issue there and established the strong position of the school among the new forces. Bāqellānī (d. 403/1013) can almost be regarded as the second founder of the school, since he introduced such rational foundations as atomism, the existence of the void, etc. (Ebn Ḳaldūn, *Moqaddema*, Paris, 1958, III, p. 40); he still lived in Baghdad (and died there) but also traveled to Shiraz. Ebn Fūrak (d. 406/1015) and Esfarāyenī (d. 418/1027), his fellow-students under Bāhelī in Baghdad, both originated from Persia and returned there to dispute with the Karrāmīya sect and spread Ash'arite teachings. Through Ebn Fūrak, who also attracted Sufis to his lectures, among them Qoṣayrī, Ash'arite thought began its fruitful union with mystical experience which reached its peak in Ġazālī (d. 505/1111).

In 5th/11th-century Persia the Aš'arīya at first had to struggle hard to gain a foothold; in Nišāpūr the founder and his school were even publicly cursed (in 445/1053). The Mu'tazilites appear to have become an even more dangerous enemy in Persia than earlier at the court in Baghdad because of their factual alliance with Shi'ism. Probably they left their imprints on the rather philosophical vocabulary of the orthodox Mātorīdiya school as well. But the spirit of compromise gave the Aš'arīya greater influence with the masses and consequently also with the new Saljuq administration. By building schools for its great teachers the vizier Neẓām-al-molk effectively helped to establish the Aš'arīya as the dominating representative of orthodox Muslim thought. The Aš'arīya proved its own internal strength by producing its greatest thinkers just when the external conditions were most favorable: Abu'l-Ma'ālī Jovaynī Emām-al-ḥaramayn (d. 478/1085-86) and Abū Ḥāmed Ġazālī (d. 505/1111), who formed Islamic thought for centuries. According to Ebn Ḳaldūn it was Ġazālī who reformed *kalām* by introducing the "method of the moderns" (*Moqaddema* III, p. 41), i.e., recourse to philosophy, and especially employment of the Aristotelian syllogism in its stringent form. This new method was so eagerly adopted by such later Ash'arites as Moḥammad Šahrestānī (d. 548/1153), Faḳr-al-dīn Rāzī (d. 606/1210), 'Azod-al-dīn 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Ījī (d. 756/1355), and 'Alī b. Moḥammad Jorjānī (d. 816/1413), that philosophical and scientific views could freely enter into Ash'arite thought and even become predominant.



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