**Sunnite Theology**

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As a reaction to the Mu‘tazilī kalām two kalām schools developed: One is called Salafiyya, a school consisted of mostly of Muhaddiths like Ahmad b. Hanbal, Bukharī and others and they rejected rational interpretations of Qur’anic text. They supported a limited rationality which was confined totally to the rationality of the text not to human beings on the topics like divinity of God, His attributes, nature, etc.

Hāris al-Muhāsibī and Ibn Kullāb are the forerunners of the second school of kalām. However, this school has competently been represented by Māturīdī and As‘harī. In the beginning of fourth century after Hegira, Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d.935 C.E) and simultaneously Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (d.944 C.E.) founded the first Sunnite theological school. However, if we speak a Sunnite theology after Mu‘tazila, this could be Maturīdi before Ash’ari. Because Ash’ari is reported to have spent his 40 years as Mu‘tazila, as the disciple of Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī, which means while he was promulgating Mu’tazilite tendencies, Māturīdī was paving way for Sunnite theology. If we leave aside the discussion on who was the first to be called as the leader of Sunnite theology, it can be said with these two schools’ efforts the two major centers of Mu‘tazila, Basra and Baghdat, became centers of Ash‘arite school of theology, and Samarqand became the biggest Sunni school at that time.

Abu Mansūr al-Māturīdī (333/944) credits his school with Abu Ḥanīfa[[1]](#footnote-1) calling him as Imām (leader in the sect). His popular book *al-Fiqḥ al-akbar[[2]](#footnote-2)* is among the most influential creedal text of his time afterwards and it indirectly created the Sunnite theology to be followed by Māturīdī. Although Abū Hanīfa himself did not intend to found a theological school, he was later on considered by Maturīdīs as the founder of Sunnite theology.

Disturbingly very little is known about the life of Māturīdī (333/944). He was born, in Māturīt, a place near Samarqand. He followed the opinion of Abū Hanīfa in legal matters. His *Kitāb al-tawhīd* and *Ta’wīlātu’l-Qur’ān* are milestones in Kalām. While the former is pure speculative theology book, the latter is hermeneutical interpretation of the Holy Qur’an.

While Basra, where Ash‘arī maintained his doctrine, had issues saturated with philosophical problems, Samarqand has its *sui generis* ones. Besides the problems discussed in Baghdāt and Baṣrā, Māturīdī, focused on rejecting the regional widespread doctrine of manichaism with its dualistic approach in addition to rejecting Mu’tazilī doctrine.

As to the place of Ash‘ari and Māturīdī in the history of Islamic thought, the testimony of Tashkuprizāda may be considered typical:

*“Know, then, that two men may be considered leaders of orthodox Islam in the science of speculative theology, one a Hanafite, the other a Shafi'īte. The Hanafīte is Abū Mansūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmud al-Māturīdī, the rightly guided Imam... The other, the Shafi'īte is Abu’l- Ḥasan al-Ash'ārī al-Baṣrī.” [[3]](#footnote-3) …*

With these two schools’ dominion over Muslim world, Mu‘tazila was pushed more narrow space to operate. Thanks to the Shi‘īte scholars who followed the mainstream line of Mu‘tazilīte doctrine, it survived intellectually.

Ash'ari first followed the doctrine of the Mu‘tazila, then he became converted to traditionalism, but continued to use the speculative method of the Mu‘tazila to defend traditionalist doctrine; in this way he arrived at an intermediate position, and this position was maintained by his school. In his *Istiḥsān al-khavḍ fī 'ilm al-kalām,* a treatise in defense of kalām and an answer to objections raised by the censurers of kalām, Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī outlines quite a rationalist outlook. On the contrary, in his *ibāna* he is rather traditionalist. This is because he undertook a mental transformation from a rationalist point of view into a traditionalist one. When he is compared with Mu‘tazila and Māturīdīyya, Ash‘arī could be seen as a traditionalist, yet he deserves to be called a traditionalist using reason in defense of orthodoxy. Two claims have been echoed about his stance: a Mu’tazilite with traditionalist tendencies, and Ash'arī with a rationalist tendency. In his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, he just outlines the doctrines of the various groups of theologians concerning theological issues.

The differences between these two theological schools have always been under discussion, some of which are accounted as follow:

For al-Maturīdī, the concept of God's wisdom is an active principle governing and determining the structure and operation of the universe. Contrary to Māturīdī, Ash‘ari considers it perverse to search for a wisdom in God’s acts. In his opinion, He is unquestionable for whatever He does. Mu‘tazila, on the contrary, think that the actions without wisdom are not but nonsense and are nothing to do with God. The doctrine of *tanzīh* is a middle way between these two and asserts not a necessary but a wise and intelligent cause.

They differ in their role of human reason in the development of religious faith. Unlike Ash‘arī who claimed that knowledge of God derives from revelation through the prophets, Māturīdī argues that knowledge of God’s existence can be derived through reason alone. So according to Ash‘arī a person who grows up in an isolated place is not responsible for finding out God, because human reason does not have the capability of discovering Him. On the contrary in Māturīdīte thought such a man is taken responsible for discovering the existence of God, as human reason does have this capability.

On the one hand both Ash’arī and Maturidī are presented as partisans of metaphorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*); and on the other, as partisans of the way of the Ancestors (*Salaf*), namely, the acknowledgment of all the scriptural and traditional data concerning God's attributes without attempting to interpret them for fear of falling into anthropomorphism, or of explaining them completely away and thus removing God of His attributes, or of using *tanzīh* which is an reduction of the doctrine of denudation. These two views are diametrically opposed.

These two schools in Kalām made use of reason in order to understand what they considered as the legitimate sources of theology: scripture and tradition. What they could not understand they left as it stood in the sources; they did not make use of reason to interpret the sources metaphorically. On the other hand, the rationalists advocated the use of reason on scripture and tradition; and all that they deemed to contradict the dictates of reason they interpreted metaphorically in order to bring it into harmony with reason.

Until al-Ghazalī (d.505), the first period of Sunni theology is called the period of *mutakaddimūn*. And its main characteristic was to rely on mostly the Qur’anic arguments in their discussions. In this period such names as Baqillānī (d.403), Ibn Fūrak, Abu Bakr al-Bayhaqī, Juwainī (d. 478), Abu’l-Mu‘īn an-Nasafī, etc. After al-Ghazalī, which was known as the period of mutaahhirūn, classical logic was included to the Islamic sciences and philosophical topics gained much more ground than ever. Nūraddīn as-Sābūnī, Shamsaddīn al-Samarqandī, Shahristanī (d. 548), Fakhraddīn al-Razī (d.606), Sayfuddīn al-‘Amidī, Qādī Baydāwī, Adududdīn al-Īcī, Taftazānī, Curcānī, Ibnu’l-Humām, Calāladdīn ad-Dawwanī were among these *mutaahhirūn*.

Together with the changes in theological and philosophical considerations and with the new tendencies, novel topics were added to the subject matter of kalām and accordingly new method was developed to resist against the scientific evidences put forward by newly born sociology, biology, psychology, etc. Among those who opted for a new theology with a new method and subject matters are İzmirli İsmail Hakkı *Yeni İlm-i Kelām,* Istanbul 1339; İsmail Fenni Ertugrul, *Maddiyyūn Mezhebinin İzmihlali,* Istanbul 1928; Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi, *Uss-i Islām: Yeni Akāid*, Istanbul 1923, *Allah’ı İnkār Mümkün müdür?*, Istanbul 1327; Farīd Vajdī, *al-Islām fī ‘asr al-‘ilm*, Cairo 19529; Jamāladdīn Afghānī, *ar-Radd ‘alā al-dahriyyīn,* Cairo 1955; Muḥammad Abduh, *Risāla al-Tawhīd* (Cairo, 1353); Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Shibli Nu’manī, *‘Ilm al-Kalām*, Karachi, 1929; Muḥammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,* Lahor 1989).

1. Abu Hanīfa, Numan bin Thabit (80-150) lived in the reign of Umayyads. He was gifted with a keen sense of reasoning and exceptional intelligence and acquired great fame as the interpreter of religious doctrines. He joined the circle of the most famous Imam of the time Hammād in Kūfa, after whose death he became the Imam of this circle. He founded a body of intellectuals from his distinguished students in order to create a new legal doctrine in Iraq. Under the period of Caliph al-Manṣūr he was offered the position of Chief Judge but he refused it. Finally he was imprisoned and died while still there in 150 A.H. (767 C.E.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These creedal treatises *(ar-Risāla, pl. ar-Resāil)* are popular expositions of the creed (*aqīda*) and written for the instruction of the people, which were meant to be learned by heart and recited by people. They have popular character, and put practical problems in the forefront, eschatological features, edifying dogmas such as those concerning miracles, details of little theological importance but which would strike the popular imagination, such as the number of the prophets, apostles and sacred books revealed before Islam. The oldest document of this series which has come to hand is the authentic *al-Fiqh al-akbar* by Abu Hanifa; *‘Aqāid al-Nasafiyya* by Nacmaddīn al-Nasafī; *al-‘aqīda at-Tahāwiyya* by Tahāwī (d.321/933); *Bayānu aqīdati’l-usūl by* Abu’l-lays as-Samarqandī; *As-Sawād al-a‘zam* by Hakīm al-Samarqandī; *’Amālī* by Sirājaddīn al-Ūshī; *al-Qasīda an-nūniyya* by Hızır Bey are examples of Māturīdīte creedal treatises. *Jawharatu’t-tawhīd* by Lakānī is an As‘harīte treatise. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tashkuprizādeh, *Miftāh al-sa’āda wa miṣbāh al-siyāda* (Hyderabad, 1329), II, 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)