

Brief Sketch of the Origins of Islamic Theology

The earlier generations had little need for a codified form of theology. Most of the time, *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*⁵ would suffice. Moreover, during the lifetime of Allāh's Messenger ﷺ, in particular, whenever a question of faith or belief arose, he was there to answer it. There was no need then to formally systematize *ʿaqīda*, just as there was no need to do so for *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, and other religious sciences. Nearly the same was the condition of the era of the Companions and that of the Followers, the blessed period known as that of the pious predecessors (*salaf ṣāliḥīn*).⁶ Nevertheless, although Islamic belief and practice were for the most part unshakable during this period, faint tremors ominously signaled the quake that would soon rumble, then rock, the umma. Seeing the danger posed to sacred Islamic knowledge by deviant individuals, ambitious politicians, and an increasingly troubled populace, scholars from each successive generation, in response to the exigencies of their respective times, compiled and systematized Islamic norms, ideas, and beliefs, and meticulously crafted the disciplines we recognize today.

The origin of rigorous theological study can be traced back to as early as the caliphate of ʿUthmān ؓ. During his time, various alien ideas took root, with varying durability, in Muslim society and found an eager audience. During the ʿAbbāsīd period, starting around the middle of the second century AH, the introduction of Hellenistic philosophy into Muslim lands led to heated discord. The newly formed Muʿtazila managed to attain great favor with the ruling class, winning several caliphs over to their beliefs. They used their powerful political purchase to question and reinterpret many fundamentals of Islam and force conformity to their beliefs, or at least cow any would-be dissenters into silence. Those who had the courage to object were mercilessly persecuted, most notably Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal⁷ (may Allāh have mercy

⁵ Qurʾān 112:1–4.

⁶ *Salaf* or *salaf ṣāliḥīn* can be translated as “righteous predecessors” or “righteous ancestors.” In Islamic terminology, it generally refers to the first three generations of Muslims: the Companions (*ṣaḥāba*), the Followers (*tābiʿīn*), and Followers of the Followers (*atbāʿ al-tābiʿīn*) regarding whom the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said, “The people of my generation are the best, then those who follow them, and then those who follow them” (*Bukhārī*). Some have said that the appellation refers to all the generations up to the fifth century AH. The *khalaf* (successors) are then those who came after these three generations, or it refers in some cases to those who came after 500 AH (see Bājūrī, *Tuhfat al-Murīd ʿalā Jawharat al-Tawḥīd* 55).

⁷ Abū ʿAbdillāh Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal ibn Hilāl ibn Asad al-Dhuhli al-Shaybāni al-Marwazī (then al-Baghdādī) was born in 164/780. About him, Dhahabī says, “The true shaykh

on him), who was cruelly put to the lash for refusing to accept false doctrines concerning the Qurʾān. It was out of this turbulent setting that the orthodox theological schools of Abu ʿl-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī and Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī emerged.

Many of the differences one finds in Islamic doctrine and scholastic theology (*kalām*) literature are primarily between the Ashʿarīs and Māturīdīs and the Muʿtazila and, on a lesser scale, the Khawārij, Jabriyya, Murjiʿa, and a few other groups. The differences that some point to between the Ashʿarīs and the Māturīdīs are not theologically significant and have clear historical reasons, which we shall touch on below. It is more appropriate to view them as two approaches to the same theology and treat them as one. Indeed, the scholars do just that, referring to both groups collectively as Ashʿarīs when contrasting them with other sects. Both groups have always been mutually tolerant and never labelled the other innovative or heretical. It is only when their doctrine is set against the Muʿtazilī and other doctrines that we see major theological divergence. An exhaustive study of each of these groups, and of others, and the effects their interplay had on Muslim government and society has been charted in the venerable tomes of history and theology. It is far beyond our purpose here to give even a synopsis of these works, but to gain a proper context in which to place *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, it is fitting to give a brief overview of the major theological groups whose origins date back to the author Imām Abū Ḥanīfā's time.

The Ashʿarīs

The eponymous founder of the Ashʿarī school was the “Imām of the Theologians,” ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl ibn Abī Bishr al-Ashʿarī al-Yamānī al-Baṣrī (*Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ* 15:88). A descendant of the famous Companion Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, he was born in Baṣra in the year 260/873 and died in 324/935.

Imām Ashʿarī was born at a time when several bickering sects were busying themselves with leveling charges of heresy and unbelief at other Muslims. Of these, the Muʿtazila emerged as the strongest by far and earned the most adherents, especially once they started to garner support from the caliphate.

of Islam and leader of the Muslims in his time, the ḥadīth master and proof of the religion.” He had memorized one million ḥadīths by heart, was a great theologian, and was the founder of the Ḥanbalī school of *fiqh*. He died in 241/855 in Baghdad (see Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-Ḥuffāz* 2:431; *Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ* 11:187).

“al-Qadar,” 2081). Yet His writing entails descriptions, not commands, that is, everything is written in the Preserved Tablet in complete detail as regards its attributes, such as beauty, ugliness, width, breadth, smallness, largeness, paucity, abundance, lightness, heaviness, hotness, coldness, wetness, dryness, obedience, disobedience, will, power, acquisition, and other descriptions, conditions, and characteristics. Nothing is written in it as merely a command to occur without description or cause. For example, “Let Zayd be a believer and ‘Amr an unbeliever” is not written in the Tablet as such. Had it been written that way, Zayd would have been involuntarily compelled to believe and ‘Amr to disbelieve, because whatever Allāh Most High commands necessarily transpires. Allāh Most High commands, and there is none to rescind (*mu‘aqqib*) His command. Rather, it is written in the Tablet that Zayd will be a believer through his own choice and power, and he will desire true faith (*īmān*) and not unbelief; and ‘Amr will be an unbeliever through his own choice and power, and he will desire unbelief and not true faith. Therefore, the purpose of the Great Imām’s statement “His writing entails descriptions, not commands” is to deny compulsion in the actions of servants and to refute the belief of the Jabriyya.¹¹⁸

Ordaining, decreeing, and willing are His attributes in preeternity without description, that is, without any explanation of their description. This means that while the reality of the attributes is established through the Qur’ān, Sunna, and consensus of the umma, they are from the ambiguities (*mutashābihāt*); in short, their interpretation is not known but by Allāh. Their descriptions are unknown, and no amount of effort can lead the intellect to comprehend them. The same holds for all the attributes of Allāh Most High, because His

¹¹⁸ An example by which the issues of predestination and compulsion may become more understandable is that of a teacher who works with a group of students for a number of years. Before administering a set of exams, he speculates on the grades his students will receive, writes them down on a piece of paper, and then leaves for vacation. When he comes back, he receives their actual scores and finds that most of his estimates are accurate or extremely close to the actual scores. It is quite clear that he was able to achieve such close approximations because of having worked with these students long enough to determine their capabilities and potential. As Allāh is the Creator of all and is endowed with eternal knowledge of both the whole and particular of things, His knowledge of all His creation is also on a very highly detailed and definitive level. In fact, He has knowledge of all things before they even occur. A ḥadīth states that He had the Pen write all that was to happen until the Day of Judgment. Then as each person comes into this world and does what they want to do with their free will, their acts are in accordance with what is written by the Pen on the Preserved Tablet, because Allāh had this information from before, and not because they are being forced to do what is written.

attributes are unlike the attributes of creation just as His essence is unlike the essence of creation.

[Qārī] Though *qadā’* (ordaining) and *qadar* (decreeing) have similar meanings, there is a difference between the two terms. The first term means a non-detailed general command and the other a more defined and detailed command.¹¹⁹ Under the topic of ordaining and decreeing emerges the critical issue of the existence of unbelief. The Mu‘tazila claim that if unbelief was from the decree of Allāh, it would be necessary for one to be satisfied with it, since satisfaction with the decree of Allāh (*riḍā’ bi ’l-qadā’*) is necessary. They say this is problematic since satisfaction with unbelief is unbelief too, and thus unbelief cannot be from the decree of Allāh. In effect, all the actions of servants are not from the decree of Allāh as the Ahl al-Sunna wa ’l-Jamā‘a maintain [but some of their actions—the evil ones—are from themselves].

The rejoinder to this is that the claim of the Mu‘tazila is fundamentally flawed since unbelief is not the decree (*qadā’*) of Allāh but is the decreed (*maqḍī*); moreover, it is necessary to have satisfaction with the decree of Allāh and not necessarily with the decreed. To elaborate, unbelief can be attributed to Allāh in that He created it according to His wisdom. There is no questioning Him on his desire (*mashī’a*), since He is the Sovereign Most High and is free to act toward His creation as He wills. However, unbelief also has another consideration, which applies to the responsible human being (*mukallaf*). It [unbelief] becomes the trait of such a person by his own acquisition (*kasb*) and choice. Accordingly, he is questioned for his actions, since he has angered his Lord by his acquisition and become worthy of uninterrupted punishment. Whoever is pleased with his own unbelief, by agreement [of the scholars], is guilty of unbelief.

Following this, scholars have differed regarding one who is pleased with the unbelief of another. The stronger opinion is that one is not guilty of unbelief in this situation as long as he dislikes unbelief itself. This is because his being pleased may well be because he wishes that Allāh take away true faith from that person so he may be given retribution for his harms and wrongdoings. This

¹¹⁹ This seems to be a unique definition of *qadā’* and *qadar*. A more well-known definition is that *qadā’* is His foreknowledge of events prior to their occurrence, while *qadar* is His bringing into existence those events in accordance with how He knows them to be. Some reverse the two definitions.

[opinion] is mentioned in the *Tatārkhāniya*¹²⁰ and supported by what Allāh relates about Mūsā ﷺ in the Qurʾān where he said, “Our Lord! Destroy the power of their [Pharaoh and his cohorts] wealth and send hardness to their hearts, so much so that they will not believe until they have seen the great punishment” (10:88). [133–134]

Imām Abū Ḥanīfa says in *Al-Waṣīyya*: “We declare that Allāh Most High ordered the Pen to write. The Pen asked, ‘What should I write, O Lord,’ so Allāh Most High said, ‘Write what is to occur until the Day of Judgment,’ as He Most High says, ‘And everything they did is in the scriptures, and every small and great deed is recorded’” (54:52–53).

Whatever the mind tries to entertain by way of the description of these three attributes (*qaḍāʾ*, *qadar*, and *mashīʾa*) is false, since it is impossible to truly understand their reality; this is true for all the attributes of Allāh. Hence, it is necessary for one to believe in them and hold that anything that the intellect may conclude about them be invalid. Shams al-Aʾimma [al-Sarakhsī] (may Allāh have mercy on him) says, “There are two types of believers in this regard. The first are those who, due to their ignorance of these attributes, are tested in their endeavor to seek out their meanings. The second group consists of those who, due to being honored with some type of [inspired] knowledge about them, are tested with abstinence from seeking their meanings. The second type of believer is sometimes in far greater trial than the first, since after possessing some knowledge, he has to refrain from seeking the intellectual satisfaction of deeper understanding and realize that such is impossible.”

The position of the second group is also the stronger position, since it encompasses belief in an unseen reality, in which there is neither a role for the intellect nor satisfaction for the human nature [in attaining complete knowledge of these attributes]. Rather, it is merely [forcing the self] to follow the truth that has been transmitted in the sacred sources. This is in contrast to the first position, in which one is relying completely on one’s intellect and reason. This affirms that complete resignation and submission in acts of ritual worship (*ʿibādāt taʿabbudiyya*)¹²¹ is superior and more complete than it is in

120 This is the famous compendium of formal legal opinions (*fatāwā*) of ʿĀlim ibn ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn, Farid al-Dīn al-Andarpatī (al-Dihlawī) al-Hindī al-Ḥanafī (d. after 777/1375), in which he compiled rulings from *Al-Muḥīṭ al-Burhānī*, *Al-Dhakhīra*, *Al-Zahīriyya*, *Al-Khāniya*, and others. This compendium is also known as *Zād al-Musāfir fi ʿl-Furūʿ* and was compiled in the 8th/14th century.

121 These are laws that are strictly and precisely determined by Allāh through the Qurʾān and Sunna of His Messenger ﷺ, as opposed to non-ritual (*ʿādī*) acts.

other forms of worship because there is no gain in it for the lower self (*nafs*); in order to achieve this submission, complete following of Allāh’s command is essential.¹²²

Allāh says, “And of knowledge you have been given but little” (Qurʾān 17:85). About this, it has been related that “I don’t know” (*lā adri*) is half of knowledge and that “to realize one’s inability to comprehend is, in fact, to comprehend.” The caliph ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib ؑ was asked about a matter while he was standing on the pulpit, to which he responded, “I don’t know.” It was said to him, “How can you ascend this pulpit and say you do not know?” His reply was, “I ascended it according to my knowledge of things, had I ascended it according to my level of ignorance, I would have reached the heavens.” It was similarly asked of Abū Yūsuf, “You take such and such from the treasury and yet you are unable to solve this matter?” He said, “Yes, I take from the treasury according to my knowledge. If I were to take according to my ignorance, I would take it all.”¹²³

Imām Abū Ḥanīfa mentions the will (*irāda*) of Allāh again to emphasize its status as a preeternal attribute of Allāh that designates a created being to be a certain way at a certain time; it is also a rejoinder to the Karrāmiyya and some Muʿtazila, who claim that the will of Allāh is created (*makhlūq*). As for the majority of the Muʿtazila, they deny that Allāh Most High wills evil and abominable things, such that they say Allāh Most High wills for the unbeliever and the sinner belief and obedience, not unbelief and disobedience; their assumption is that willing the abominable is also abominable as is the creation and origination [of evil equally abominable]. This position is negated and rejected by the fact that the abomination is what the person has acquired and become characterized by [and not Allāh creating or willing the

122 The human free will is limited, and its boundaries can be understood from the following. A person has the free will and ability to lift one foot off the ground and stand on just the other foot. However, lifting both feet off the ground at the same time is not within the free will granted to the human being. Therefore, the human has the ability to perform a number of things through his will but does not have control over many other things such as the span of his life, the timing of his death, the venue of his death, the number of children he has, the identity of his parents, the extent of his wealth, etc. Allāh says in the Qurʾān, “It is He who knows what is in the wombs. Nor does any one know what it is that he will earn tomorrow. Nor does any one know in what land he is to die. Verily with Allāh is full knowledge and He is well acquainted (with all things)” (31:34).

123 This statement emphasizes that mankind can only reach a certain level of understanding, even at the most advanced level, and that true knowledge is to recognize the limit of one’s knowledge, intellect, and understanding.