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AL-ASH'ARI AND HIS CONCEPT OF TAWHID

INTRODUCTION

Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, appeared in the history of human society with a zeal of an iconoclast who taught and preached that there is only One supreme and absolute power and his commitment to the one Supreme power found expression in the first aspect of Shahadah: "la ilaha illa Allah" which means 'there is no god but Allah'. In this witness we can see that there is first negation "la", the negation of multiplicity of divinities and then follows the affirmation "illa" that Allah is the only God who deserves to be worshipped and to whom man finally is destined to return.

Allah himself reveals the nature of tawhid in many verses in the holy Qur'an several of which

are as follows:

1. Qur'an, 112: 1-5:

Say! He is God. The One and Only. God, the Eternal, Absolute. He begetteth not. Nor He is Begotten. And there is none Like unto Him¹.

2. Qur'an, 2:163:

And your God Is One God, There is no God But He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful²

Ethimologically, tawhid is derived from the Arabic word *ahadu* or *wahid* which means that God is one without a second, without any other co-eternal entity, of complete supremacy, unrivaled, unopposed, unequaled, and unchallenged. In the context of Islamic theology, it is used to express the unity or oneness of Godhead³. Similarly, Muhammad 'Abduh had said that "the original meaning of tawhid is the believe that God

1 Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of Glorious Qur'an: Text, Translation and Copmmmentary*, Vol. 2, (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al- Masri, nd, 1983), p. 1806.

2 *Ibid.* p. 63.

3 E. Dada Adelowo. "The Concept of Tawbid in Islam" in *The Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. XXXV, No 1. (January, 1991), p.24.

is one in inalienable divinity."⁴ Actually, the word of tawhid is non Qur'anic, but it is found in hadith and is inextricably integrated with the formulations of Islamic faith⁵. In later time when the religious sciences developed in Islam, the particular discipline of 'Ilm al-Kalam was also called 'Ilm al-Tawhid. Concerning this discipline 'Abduh further said: "The theology of Unity or tawhid is the science that studies the being and attributes of God, the essential and the possible affirmations about Him, as well as the negations that are necessary to make relating to Him"⁶. It is in line with this meaning of tawhid that this discussion will go.

Ash'ari's Life and Works

Ash'ari whose complete name was Abu al-Hasan 'Ali Ibn Isma'il al-Ash'ari was born in Basrah in 270 H/ 873 AD, and died in Baghdad in 330 H/ 941 AD⁷. He was

a descendant of one of the famous Companions of the Prophet, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari. Before he studied theology under Abu 'Ali Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Juba'i, a foremost Mutazilite theologian, he had received the usual Islamic education in Qur'an, Traditions, Arabic philology and Shari'ah⁸. In later time, although he was known as an ardent student of Mu'tazilite theology and he gained a reputation as a brilliant debater on the theology in the mosques and wrote works in line with the rationalist tradition, when he reached age forty, however, he moved to the traditional Islamic theology. This is because he did not feel contend anymore to the answers given by his master to the questions on theology that he proposed⁹. Since then he tried to solve his own problems and established a separate school of theology that is later on known after his name, Ash'arism.

- 4 Muhammad 'Abduh. *The Theology of Unity*. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), p.29.
- 5 See Louis Gardet. "God in Islam" in *The encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 6. Edited by Mircea Eliade et al. (London; New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), p.28. and D.B. Macdonald. "Tawhid" in *First Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Vol. VIII. Edited by M. Th. Houtsma, et al. (Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1987), p. 704.
- 6 Muhammad 'Abduh. *Op cit.* p.29.
- 7 There is difference about the exact birthdate of Ash'ari. The date which is applied in this paper is based on *Tabyin Kidhb al-Muftari*. written by Ibn 'Asakir.
- 8 George F. Hourani. *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*. (London, New York, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 118.
- 9 See Watter C. Klein's Introduction to Al-Ash'ari. *The Elucidation of Islam's Foundation*, pp. 26-27.

Henceforth al-Ash'ari is also known as "the first initiator of the main school of Sunnite Kalam."¹⁰

Al-Ash'ari was a very prolific theologian who wrote no less than three hundred books. Among of these works, however, there are only ninety-three books that have been given their titles by Ibn 'Asakir Dimashqi. Even more, there are only a few of them that can be preserved and enumerated by Brockelman¹¹. Below are given several of his most important works which he composed after he "retired" from Mu'tazilite school:

1. *Maqallat al-Islamiyyin* (Theological Opinions of the Muslims).
2. *Risallah ila ahl al-Thaghr bi-Bab al-Abwab* (Epistle to the people of the Frontier at Bab al-Abwab).
3. *Al-Luma'* (The Concise Remarks).
4. *Al-Iman* (Belief)

5. *Al-Ibanah 'an Usul al-Diyawah* (The Clear Statement on the Fundamental Elements of the Faith).
6. *Al-hathth 'ala al-Bahth* (The Exhortation to Investigation).

Several books, besides commentary on Qur'an, that he wrote before his conversion include *Al-Mijiz* (The Epitome); *Al-'Amad fi al-Ru'yah* (The Pillars Concerning God's Visibility); *Idah al-Burhan* (The Clarification of Demonstration); and *Al-Ajwibah al-Misriyah* (The Egyptian Response)¹².

The Concept of Tawhid According to al-Ash'ari

Ash'arism, which is often referred as ahl sunnah wa al-jamaah¹³, raised in the history of Islamic theology not merely as a protest against the religious rationalism of the Mu'tazilites who "held that reason is more fundamental than revelation and is to be preferred to revelation,"¹⁴ but

10 W. Montgomery Watt. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*. 2nd ed. (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1992), p.67.

11 M.Abdul Hye. "Ash'arism" in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*. Edited by M.M. Sharif. (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1966), p. 223.

12 R.M. Frank. "al-Ash'ari" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. I. Edited by Mircea Eliade, et.al. (London, New York: McMillan Publishing Company, 1987), p.446.

13 See, R.M. Frank. "al-Ash'ari" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. I. Edited by Mircea Eliade, et.al. (London, New York: McMillan Publishing Company, 1987), p.449. and Muhammad 'Abduh. *Op cit.*, p.36.

14 M.Abdul Hye. "Ash'arism" in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*. Edited by M.M. Sharif.

it also emerged as opposition to the extreme orthodox classes, particularly the Zahirites, the Mujasimites, Muhaddithin, and the Jurists, all of which were wholly in contradiction to the use of reason in defending religious dogmas and condemned it as being innovation¹⁵. Henceforth, Ash'arism existed as an intermediary position between the two opposed schools of thought. Instead of rejecting rationalism or blindly following revelation Ash'ari and his followers held that revelation is more fundamental as the source of ultimate truth and reality, and reason should merely confirm what is given by revelation¹⁶. Reason, therefore, should be subordinated to revelation and its function is none other than to rationalize faith in the basic principles of Islam and not to question the validity of truth as embodied in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Relating to this R.M. Frank points out that al-Ash'ari, the founder of the Ash'arite school, holds that:

"... Theological inquiry is not originated autonomously by the mind but

it is provoked by the claims of a prophet, and that it is because of the rational validity of the prophet Muhammad's basic teaching that one must accept the entire revelation, including those dogmas that can not be inferred on purely rational grounds and submit unconditionally to the divine law."¹⁷.

In line with this point of view, al-Ash'ari believes in that, as stated again and again in the Qur'an, God is one and the only. "There is no God besides Him"¹⁸. His being is eternal and unconditioned; in His self and in His essential attributes, His non-existence is impossible¹⁹. Again, when al-Ash'ari discusses the attributes of God and their relationship with His essence, he has to face two extreme opposite groups of school of thought. The first group is that of holding that God has all attributes as mentioned in the holy Qur'an that are taken in their literal sense. Such a view of the God's attributes may lead to an anthropomorphism that implies that God exists bodily. The Schools of this group include the Attributists or Sifatists, the Anthro-

(Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1966), p. 231.

15 M. 'Abdul Hye, "Ash'arism", p. 224.

16 M. 'Abdul Hye, "Ash'arism", p. 231.

17 M. 'Abdul Hye, "Ash'arism", in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, *Op cit.*, p. 447.

18 Abu'l Hasan 'Ali Ibn Isma'il al-Ash'ari. *Al-Ibanah 'an Usul al-Diyanah*, tr. Walter C. Klein (Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1940), p.31.

19 R.M. Frank, "Al-Ash'ari", p.450.

pomorphists or Mujassimin, and the Comparers or Mushabbihin. The second group is the Mu'tazilites who hold that "God is one, eternal, unique, absolute Being, having no touch of dualism in Him. His essence is self contained. They believe that God does not possess any attributes apart from His essence."²⁰ According to M. 'Abdul Hye the Ash'arites, in facing these two opposite schools, maintained a view which reconciled them.²¹ In the words of Karen Armstrong "al-Ash'ari was trying to find a middle course between deliberate obscurantism and extreme rationalism."²² He does not reject the unity of God as believed by the Mu'tazilites but he believes that God possesses attributes. The attributes such as God's hand, eyes, sight, etc., however, should not be understood literally as the Sifatis do or to be interpreted allegorically as the Mu'tazilites do. But they are to be believed in "bila kayfa," without asking how, and "bila tashbih," without drawing any comparison²³. This is be-

cause God's qualities and attributes are inapplicable to His creatures, mukhalafah lilhawadith²⁴. Therefore, we are not permitted to ascribe any attribute to God unless it is expressly so applied in the Qur'an.

According to al-Ash'ari God who is not only one, unique, eternal, existence Being but also who is not a substance, not a body, not an accident, not limited to any direction, and not in any space has attributes in general. These God's attributes, according to al-Ash'ari, are inherence eternally in Him and are besides His essence²⁵. This means that God's attributes are not identical with His essence but they are also not separated from it. Unlike Mu'tazilites who believe that it is by His essence that God knows, Ash'ari and his followers are of the opinion that God knows, wills, hears, etc. not by His essence but by His attributes²⁶. In *al-Luma'* al-Ash'ari says that: "Among of the proofs that God is knowing by a knowledge is the fact that He must be knowing either by

20 'Abdul Hye, "Ash'arism", p.226.

21 'Abdul Hye, "Ash'arism", p.227.

22 Karen Armstrong. *A History of God*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p.166.

23 Al-Ash'ari. *Al Ibanah*. p.47.

24 M. Saeed Sheikh. *Islamic Philosophy*. (London: The Octagon Press, 1982), p. 15.

25 Al-Ash'ari. *al-Maqalat*. p.291 as cited by M. 'Abdul Hye, "Ash'arism", p.227.

26 W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*. (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1973), p.316.

Himself or by a knowledge which cannot be Himself."²⁷ To clarify the relationship between God's essence and His attributes in Ash'ari and his followers' point of view Muhammad 'Abdul Hye remarks:

"They, therefore, maintained that these attributes are, in one sense, included in and, in another sense, excluded from, the essence of God. It is common knowledge that the Ash'arites contended that the essence, and attributes are two different things and they cannot be otherwise in the case of God, the Supreme Being. The Ash'arites made a distinction between the meaning or connotation of a thing and its reality. So far as their meaning is concerned, the attributes and of God are not the same and as such the attributes are in addition to the essence of God i.e., they have different meanings. The meaning of dhat or essence is different from the meaning of different attributes. God's essence, for instance, is not knowing or powerful or wise, but so far as their ultimate haqiqah or reality is concerned, the attributes are inherent in the divine essence and hence are not something quite different from or other than the essence of God."²⁸

These attributes are classified into two main groups. The first group is Sifat salbiyyah. The

group includes: Qidam which means that God is before the before. He did not become. He always was; Baqa' which means that God is after the after, eternal. He always will be; Wahdaniyah which means that God is 'unique, without partner, without resemblance, the cause of all; Qiyam bi Nafsihi which means that God is selfexistence, without any needs; and Muhalafatuh hi-Hawadith which means that God is the creator, bearing no resemblance to the created. The second one is Sifat wujudiyyah or existential attributes which is also called Sifat 'aqliyyah or rational attributes. There are seven attributes of this group i.e., 'Ilm or knowledge, Qudrah or power, Iradah or will, Hayat or life, Sama' or hearing, Basr or seeing, and Kalam or speech²⁹. All of these essential attributes are real and belong to God from all eternity. However, God's attributes of action or Sifat af'alihi such as temporal beings, whose existences come into being because of God's creation word like "Be", are not eternal, but corporeal and temporal.

The tawhid accept no change or even the shadow of variation³⁰

27 McCarthy, Richard J. *The Theology of al-Ash'ari*. (Beyrouth. Impremirie Catholique, 1953), p.18.

28 M. 'Abdul Hye. "Ash'arism", p.228.

29 M. 'Abdul Hye. "Ash'arism", p. 227.

Therefore, al- Ash'ari again and again insists that although he believes that God has attributes but they are, as said earlier, not God nor are they other than He because He is essentially one. They subsist in the devine essence in a manner totally unknown³¹. Al-Ash'ari perhaps wants to return to full-blooded God of the Qur'an. He refuses to reduce God into a concept that could be discussed and analysed like any other human idea purely based on reason. Henceforth, "al-Ash'ari insists that various eschatological matters must be taken as they stand and not explained as metaphors"³².

Later on, al-Ash'ari's ideas relating to the God's attributes are then developed by his followers. Some of them are in line with his and some are different from him to some extent. Among of the former is al-Sanusi who writes *Umm al-Barahin*. According him God's attributes are divided into three groups; Wajib or what is compulsory, Mustahil or what is absurd, and Ja'iz or what is contingent. Firstly, Wajib with regard to God are twenty. His self or

Nafsiya constitutes the first; of the other five are negative or sal-biya i.e. His existence, His being from eternity and His subsisting for ever, His being deferent from things originated, His being independent of substrate, and His being one. The other seven are called al-Ma'ni which includes His power, will, knowledge, life, bearing, sight and speech. The rest is called Ma'nawiya, nemety: His being mighty, willing, knowing, living, hearing, seeing, and speaking. Secondly, Musthil with regard to God are also twenty qualities. However, here the qualities are those of counterparts of the twenty mentioned in Wajib. Finally, Ja'iz with regard to God is that He creates all that is contingent, or omits to create it³³. Whereas among the later are al-Baghdadi and al-Juwayni. They, following Mu'tazilites' metaphorical interpretation, interpreted "hand" as "power" and "face" as "essence" or "existence", thus they both ignore Ash'ari's principle of "bila kayf" and "bila tashbih".³⁴ However, the similar way of interpretation tends to be taken by the other later Ash'arites.

30 Louis Gardet. "God in Islam", p.34.

31 Louis Gardet. "God in Islam", p.34.

32 W. Montgomery Watt. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, p. 66.

33 A.J. Wensinck. *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical development*. (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1965), pp. 275- 276.

34 W.Montgomery Watt. "Ash'ariyya", p.696.

The Other Attributes of God

Although God's being is beyond the grasp of human intelligence, these attributes in addition to what have been discussed earlier, known as His most beautiful names (8:20), are known to be true and real as they are stated in the Holy Qur'an. Those names and their sources are as follows:³⁵

al-Rahman	The Beneficent	(1:2)
al-Rahim	The Merciful	(1:2)
al-Malik	The Sovereign	(59:23)
al-Qudus	The Holy	(59:23)
al-Salam	The Peace	(59:23)
al-Mu'min	The Keeper of Faith	(59:23)
al-Muhammin	The Guardian	(59:23)
al-'Aziz	The Majestic	(59:23)
al-Jabbar	The Compeller	(59:23)
al-Mutakabbir	The Superb	(59:23)
al-Khalik	The Creator	(59:24)
al-Bari'	The Shaper	(59:24)
al-Hafi	The Gracious	(3:164)
al-Muhit	The Surrounding	(41:54)
al-Wali	The Protecting Friend	(2:257)
al-Wahid	The One	(23:16)
al-Muqtadir	The Powerful	(54:42)
al-Muqit	The Sustainer	(4:85)
al-Hasib	The Reckoner	(4:6)
al-Karim	The Bountiful	(82:6)
al-Raqib	The Watchful	(33:52)
al-Qarib	The Nigh	(11:61)
al-Mujib	The Responsive	(11:61)
al-Wasi'	The All Embracing	(2:247)

al-Hakim	The Wise	(2:129)
al-Wadud	The Loving	(11:90)
al-Majid	The Owner of Glory	(11:73)
al-Shahid	The Witness	(4:79)
al-Haq	The Truth	(22:6)
al-Qawi	The Most Strong	(22:74)
al-Fattah	The Judge	(34:26)
al-'Alim	The All Knowing	(34:26)
al-Sami'	The All Hearing	(3:38)
al-Basir	The All Seeing	(3:15)
al-Latif	The Subtle	(6:104)
al-Khabir	The All Aware	(34:1)
al-Halim	The Clement	(17:44)
al-Azim	The Tremendous	(2:225)
al-Ghafur	The All Forgiving	(42:23)
al-Shakur	The Responsive	(35:34)
al-'Ali	The Sublime	(2:225)
al-Kabir	The Great	(34:23)
al-Hafiz	The Guardian	(11:57)
al-Hayyu	The Alive	(3:2)
al-Qayyum	The Eternal	(3:2)
al-Qadir	The Able	(6:65)
al-Hamid	The Owner of Prais	(22:64)
al-Barr	The Benign	(52:28)
al-Muta'al	The Exalted	(13:9)
al-Tawwab	The Acceptor of Repen- tance	(9:104)
al-Mubin	The Manifest	(24:25)
al-Musta'an	The One Whose Help to be Implored	(21:112)
al-Warith	The Inheritor	(15:23)
al-'Ahir	The Last	(57:3)
al-Zahir	The Outward	(57:3)
al-Wali	The Defender	(13:11)
al-Wakil	The Trustee	(4:81)
al-Qahir	The Omnipotent	(6:18)

35 See Muhammad Ibrahim H.I. Surty. *The Qur'an and al-Shirk*. (London: Ta Ha Publisher, 1990), pp. 109- 117.

al-Nasir	The Helper	(8:40)
al-'Allam	The Omniscient	(5:109)
al-Khallaq	The Creator	(15:86)
al-Mawla	The Patron	(3:40)
al-A'la	The Most High	(87:1)
al-Qadir	The Mighty	(16:70)
al-Akram	The Most Bounteous	(96:3)
al-Shakir	The Responsive	(2:158)
al-Hafiz	The Protector	(12:64)
al-Kafil	The Surety	(16:91)
al-Matin	The Firm One	(51:58)
al-Ghaliib	The Predominant	(12:21)
al-Qabid	The Grasping	(2:45)
al-Jalil	The Glorious	(55:27)
al-Muhyi	The Giver of Life	(30:50)
al-Mamit	The Giver of Death	(7:28)
al-Ba'ith	The Awakener	(22:7)
al-Baqi	The Everlasting One	(55:27)
al-Mubdi	The Originator	(85:13)
al-Mannan	The Gracious	(19:47)
al-Musawwir	The Fashioner	(59:24)
al-Ghaffar	The Ever Forgiving	(71:10)
al-Qahhar	The Almighty	(13:16)
al-Wahhab	The Bestower	(3:8)
al-Razzaq	The Provider	(51:58)
al-'Afw	The Forgiving	(4:149)
al-Ra'uf	The Compassionate	(2:143)
al-Jami'	The The Gatherer	(3:9)
al-Ghaniyy	The Self Sufficient	(2:263)
al-Hadi	The Guide	(25:31)
al-Nur	The Light	(24:35)
al-Badi'	The Originator	(2:117)
al-Fatir	The Creator	(42:11)
al-Ghafir	The Forgiver	(40:37)
al-Malik	The Sovereign	(54:55)
al-Rabb	The Sustainer	(3:51)
al-Rafi'	The Sublime	(40:15)
al-Kafi	The Sufficient One	(39:36)

al-'Awwal	The First	(57:3)
al-Batin	The Inward	(57:3)
al-Samad	The The Eternally Besought of All	(112:2)

All of these ninety-nine attributes of God are proof of the existence and oneness of God³⁶. In addition, it is believed in some circles of Sunni Islam that God has three thousand attributes or names: one thousand He has revealed to His angels, one He has revealed to His prophets; three hundred are in the Zabur - the psalm of David, three hundred are in the Torah; three hundred are in the Gospel; ninety-nine are in the Holy Qur'an. One, the name of His essence, He has kept for Himself and hidden in the Qur'an.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Among the most prominent Sunnite theologians in the earlier times, Al-Ash'ari, whose influence is still felt strong especially among the Sunnites,³⁸ appeared to be the most important one. Immediately after his decisive decision to separate himself from Mu'tazilite school in which he spent his first forty years he established and developed his orthodox school of theology from which he then criticized Mu'tazilites' doctrines.

On the problems of the Unity of God, he believed that God possesses attributes as mentioned in the Holy Qur'an besides the essence but he tends to safeguard against anthropomorphism. "God knows by virtue of His attribute of Knowledge, wills by virtue of His attribute of Will, etc. There are neither identical with His essence nor different from it. They are all real although we do not know their "how"³⁶. He is of the opinion that by applying to all attributes the principle of "bila kayf or bila tashbih" he could both remain faithful to the literal meaning of what the Qur'an affirms³⁷.

It seems that al-Ash'ari's concept of tawhid, especially the relationship between the eternity of God's essence and His attributes, is not clear. His principles may satisfy an orthodox believer, but they do not bring any comfort to a philosophic mind. Henceforth, his ideas concerning this crucial issue as well as the other ideas which mainly differ from those of Mu'tazilites such as seeing of God, the createdness of Qur'an, etc. were developed and elaborated by his followers such as Abu Sa'ih al-Su'luki, Abu al-Hasan al-Bahili, al-Baqillani, Ibnu Furaak, al-Is-

fara'ini, al-Baghdadi, al-Razi, and al-Ghazali.

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36 Fazlur Rahman. *Islam*. 2nd ed. (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.92.

37 Louis Gardet. "God in Islam", p.34.

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