

# A CRITICAL STUDY OF ASH'ARISM WITH REFERENCE TO IQBAL AND SCHUON

*Shahzad Kaiser*

The Muslim contact with the Greek mind started the process of rationalism in the world of Islam. A few of the primordial lessons which the Greeks had learned from the ancient world remained opaque to the consciousness of the medieval and the modern Muslim mind. There were, no doubt, certain notable exceptions to this dominant tendency in different epochs, the impact of which is being visible on the horizon of the Muslim world. The Muslim thinkers, however, have not fully succeeded in extricating themselves from the huge net-work of speculative reason. The uprooting of the inductive method from its intellectual foundations, in response to the Western mode of thought, has further complicated the situation. The modern Muslim finds himself in a strange dilemma. He is caught between the 'shadow' of abstraction and the 'reality' of the concrete. He oscillates on the spectrum of 'idea' and 'action'. In order to remember the forgotten lesson, it is necessary to retrace our steps to that point where they faltered in the very first instance.

The Mu'tazilites were the early Rationalists who called them-selves the "People of Unity and Justice". Wasil Ibn 'Ata seceded from the teachings of his master Hasan of Basra and started a rational process which has left its footprints on the shores of time. The Mu'tazilites dealt with numerous issues including God and His Attributes, Reason and Revelation, Free Will, Eternity of the Qur'an, Beatific vision. By dint of the speculative method they trespassed into the province of religion. The strength of Al-Ash'ari consists in perceiving that some violation had been committed but he could not understand the bounds of transgression. The latter constitutes the inherent limitation of the Ash'arite vision and methodology.

Iqbal has made certain keen observations in this regard. He says: "Patronised by the early Caliphs of the House of 'Abbas, Rationalism continued to flourish in the intellectual centres of the Islamic world; until in the first half of the 9th century, it met the powerful orthodox reaction which found a very energetic leader in Al-Ash'ari (b. 873 A.D.) who studied under

Rationalist teachers only to demolish, by their own methods, the edifice they had so laboriously built")<sup>7</sup> As to the cause of reaction, he says: "Rationalism was an attempt to measure reality by reason alone; it implied the identity of the spheres of religion and philosophy, and strove to express faith in the form of concepts or terms of pure thought. It ignored the facts of human nature, and tended to disintegrate the solidarity of the Islamic Church. Hence the reaction".<sup>8</sup> He expresses the same idea in these words. "The Mu'tazilah, conceiving religion merely as a body of doctrine and ignoring it as a vital fact, took no notice of non-conceptual modes of approaching Reality and reduced religion to a mere system of logical concepts ending in a purely negative attitude".<sup>9</sup>

What was the nature of the Ash'arite reaction? Iqbal says: "Al-Ash'ari's interest was purely theological; but it was impossible to harmonise reason and revelation without making reference to the ultimate nature of reality. Baqilani, therefore, made use of some purely metaphysical propositions . . . in his theological investigation, and thus gave the school a metaphysical foundation".<sup>10</sup> But such a foundation was a pretension to true metaphysics for it lacked intellectual edifice. He says: "The orthodox reaction led by the Ash'arite then was, in reality, nothing more than the transfer of dialectic method to the defence of the authority of Divine Revelation".<sup>11</sup> He further says: ". . . yet, on the whole, the object of the Ash'arite movement was simply to defend orthodox opinion with the weapons of Greek Dialectic."<sup>12</sup>

The results of the Ash'arite reaction are visualised by Iqbal in these words: "It is, therefore, clear that while the dialectic of Rationalism destroyed the personality of God, and reduced divinity to a bare indefinable universality, the antirationalist movement, though it preserved the dogma of personality, destroyed the external reality of nature."<sup>13</sup> He concludes the

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<sup>7</sup> *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>12</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, p. 61.

argument, thus: "The Ash'arite reaction against Rationalism resulted not only in the development of a system of metaphysics most modern in some of its aspects, but also in completely breaking as under the worn out fetters of intellectual thralldom".<sup>14</sup> For us, this state of affairs constitutes no strength of Ash'arism. Rather, it compounds its inherent powerlessness. The development of a system of metaphysics most modern in some of its aspects is no moment of rejoice. Strictly speaking, there cannot be a system of metaphysics. Also, the term development is alien to true metaphysics. The affinity which Iqbal finds between Ash'arite metaphysics and modern thought is precisely due to the reason that both Ash'arism and the modern world are devoid of intellectual foundations.

It seems that Iqbal does not take into consideration the subtle distinction between reason and intellect. He tends to treat them as synonymous terms. For instance, he says: "This intellectual revolt against Greek philosophy manifests itself in all departments of thought . . . . It is clearly visible in the metaphysical thought of *the* Ash'arite. . . ."<sup>15</sup> For us, Ash'arism *can never be construed as an* intellectual revolt against Greek heritage. The reason being twofold. First, Ash'arism remained captivated in the Greek Dialectic. Second, it was a movement isolated from the intellectual ground. It is pertinent to point out that Iqbal does not consider a constellation of original thinkers who made an authentic rebellion against Greek speculation. This omission clouds his thinking on the subject. The point would become more clear when we deal with Schuon's critique of Ash'arism.

Iqbal has critically examined the Ash'arite theory of Atomism. For the Ash'arites, the world is composed of 'Jawahir' which are not further divisible. Since the creativity of God is limitless therefore the atoms cannot be finite. They are being created each moment. "The essence of the atom is

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in /slam*, p. 128.

independent of its existence. The crux of the matter is that 'nothing has a stable nature'. Iqbal seems to be fascinated by this idea. He says: "I regard the Ash'arite thought on this point as a genuine effort to develop on the basis of an Ultimate Will or Energy a theory of creation which, with all its shortcomings, is far more true to the spirit of the Qur'an than the Aristotelian idea of a fixed universe. The duty of the future theologians of Islam is to reconstruct this purely speculative theory, and to bring it into closer contact with modern science which appears to be moving in the same direction".<sup>16</sup> Iqbal *tries to understand Ash'arite Atomism in reference to Greek Atomism which precedes it and the modern one which follows it and this constitutes the main difficulty. He sees things placed either in the static orbit or in the dynamic one. The immutable, in the metaphysical sense, does not seem to exist for him. The future theologians of Islam have to note instead, that modern science is based on the absence of metaphysical principles.*

Iqbal poses a very critical question in this context. He says: "It may, however, be asked whether atomicity has a real seat in the creative energy of God, or presents itself to us as such only because of our finite mode of apprehension. From a purely scientific point of view I cannot say what the final answer to this question will be."<sup>17</sup> For us, atomicity is not integral to the creative energy of God. It arises due to our rational habit of looking at things. Further, science can never provide a final answer to any ultimate question. The Ultimate is beyond the scope of science. It is metaphysics which deals with the Ultimate and is qualified to reach the terminal. Modern Atomism shall always remain oblivious regarding the reality of creation. From the metaphysical point of view, creation is no-thing but a manifestation of God.

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72.

Iqbal scrutinises Ash'arite theory of space and time. For the Asharites, space is the product of the aggregation of the difficulty so Nazzam coined the notion of 'jump' to overcome

space and according to Iqbal it has its parallel in modern atomism. They considered time as a succession of individual 'nows'. Like the concept of space, they faced the problem of a void of time. Iqbal considers the notion of time as the 'weakest part of the Ash'arite theory of creation' for like the Greeks it takes an objective view of time. Modern physics falls in the same trap by assuming that matter is discontinuous. He observes that both of them fail for they lack the subjective aspect of time revealed in the process of psycho-logical analysis. This is the reason that no organic relation is found between material atoms and time atoms in the theory of the Asharites.

Here, again, Iqbal accepts the categories of 'subjective' And 'objective' and thus his penetrating analysis remains one-dimension<sup>al</sup>. The method of psychological analysis, which he advocates for understanding the reality of time, is far from certitude. It fails to reveal the essence of time. From the metaphysical point of view, time is neither subjective nor objective. To consider it as such falsifies the divine-human situation.

Schuon's analysis of Ash'arism adds another instructive chapter. on the subject. Since the Ash'arite reaction was primarily theological, therefore, it faced the contradictions of a theological approach. Schuon says: "Theology is a mental activity which, being founded on the inevitably antinomic and elliptical — but by no means contradictory or insoluble — Data of the sacred Scriptures interprets these data by means of the reason and in terms of a piety that is often more fervent than enlightened. All too often this theories

psychological:doubtless opportune and effective in a given or moral context, but which are nevertheless restrictive or even fallacious from the point of view of pure and simple truth, and in any case unacceptable on the

plane of metaphysics."<sup>18</sup> He makes a very pertinent observation in this regard: "Ash'arite theology in particular offers more than one example of a reasoning inspired rather by an almost totalitarian zeal than by intellectual intuition."<sup>19</sup> He spells out the reason for this in these emphatic words: "The great problem, for Ash'ari, was to substitute for Mu'tazilite rationalism something which, without being rationalism, would replace or canalize the need that gives it birth."<sup>20</sup>

Ash'arite theology thrives on the dominant tendency towards anthropomorphism at the expense of symbolism. But anthropomorphism is not integral to religion. Guenon says: ". . . religion, how-ever, has always tried to react against the anthropomorphic tendency and to combat it in principle, even when a more or less garbled conception of religion in the popular mind sometimes helped to develop it in practice."<sup>21</sup> Schuon scrutinizes Ash'arism on this account. He says: "The great weakness of the protagonists of kalam is to apply anthropomorphism to what in God most completely eludes being made anthropomorphic, namely, Beyond-Being or the Supraontological Essence, and to confuse Beyond-Being with its ontological self determination, namely, Being which creates, reveals and saves."<sup>22</sup>

The Ash'arite obsession with Omnipotence lands them in the orbit of theological voluntarism, where everything seems arbitrary. Schuon says: "When Ash'ari depicts the unlimitedness of Omni-potence, he strangely loses sight of what a quality is in itself, as well as what the Divine Nature is; he seems only to discern extrinsic qualities or situations. . . Ultimately, the error here is the subordination of Being to Power, of God — Atma to God-Maya,

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<sup>18</sup> *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, Lahore, 1985, p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> *An introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, Luzac, London, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 141.

or of Essence (*Dhat*) to Qualities (*Sifat*). ..<sup>23</sup> He further says: "There is here a strange forgetfulness of intrinsic values — God is presented, not in accordance with his Qur'anic image, which stresses above all his infinite Goodness (*Rahmah*, whence the names *Rahman* and *Rahim*), but as a sort of "moral vacuum" whose only characteristic is an unintelligible and incalculable wilfulness. If this were the truth, no name signifying a quality would be applicable to God; human intelligence would be pointless, since there would be nothing to understand; it would not exist, any more than would the virtues, which by definition reflect something of God."<sup>24</sup>

The Ash'arites became highly subjective in their approach to the Omnipotence of God. Schuon says: "Here the awareness of our ontological nothingness and of our personal limitations is trans-posed into the language of sentimental individualism, a contradictory attitude which yields nothing to the most excessive obedientialism, and which reduces mysticism to an infantile level and impoverishes it just as Ash'arism ruins theology. Let us recall here that Ash'arism has a tendency to reduce the Divine nature to Omnipotence alone, while losing sight of the fact that while God certainly can do all he wishes, he nevertheless does not wish to do all that he can."<sup>25</sup> He sums up the entire argument in these words: ". . . in short, when everything is made to depend upon a divine arbitrariness which is unintelligible by definition and to which our will, and even our intelligence, have merely to yield, as if in such conditions it were still worthwhile being man".<sup>26</sup> The observation of Ibn 'Arabi is very illuminating in this regard. He says: "Certain thinkers, intellectually feeble, starting from the dogma that God does all that He wishes, have declared it admissible that God should act contrarily to principles and contrarily to that which is the Reality (*a/-amr*) in itself (that is in its principal state — as if the manifestation of God did not

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> *Logic and Transcendence*, London, 1981, p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, Lahore, 1985, p. 100.

proceed from the possibilities eternally present in the Divine Being and in the Universal Intellect)".<sup>27</sup>

AI-Ash'ari's great zeal to prove the nothingness of man in front of the Majesty of God lands him in a strange dilemma. Schuon says: "God does not owe us any explanations, thinks Ash'ari, dazzled as he is by his awareness of our nothingness; but he forgets that God 'wishes to owe' explanations, and that if God creates an apple tree, it is to produce apples and not figs. God 'wishes to owe' human intelligence the clarifications for which it was made... And if God thus keeps His word, ontologically and humanly, it is certainly not from lack of freedom, but because He is Truth and Goodness and because ontologically His Freedom wills the good"<sup>28</sup> From our point of view, if man is reduced to nothingness, God as such remains in oblivion. It is pertinent to point out that the existentialists launched a crusade for the individual. But it was more or less a reaction against the abstract mode of thought. Since the revolt lacked intellectual foundations, therefore, the reality of the individual could not be sustained. Without universal, individual has no ground. Schuon rightly observes: "Existentialism has in fact, whether it be Protestant or otherwise, promoted nothing except individualism; never the understanding of metaphysical doctrines, never sanctity".<sup>29</sup> To sum up, true metaphysics neither reduces man to nothingness nor installs it as an idol: it appropriates the existential reality of man in a higher form. Sanctity too blooms forth with the induction of the religious element.

Taking a clue from divine arbitrariness, the Ash'arites repudiated the Law of Causation. It was a heavy price the Ash'arite meta-physics had to pay for establishing the possibility of miracles, Schuon says: "If we look for a prime mover in Ash'arism, it is the wish to relate everything, absolutely everything, to the Divine Cause alone. This means denying all cosmic or

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<sup>27</sup> *Fusus al Hikam*, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Dilemmas of Moslem Scholasticism, *Christianity/ Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, 1985, pp. 208-209.

<sup>29</sup> Letter on Existentialism, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Spring 1975.



"horizontal" relationships in favour of "vertical" or ontological relationships alone, as if the first were incompatible with the second and as if the "horizontal" relationships were not, on the contrary, the necessary images of the "vertical" relationships and invested with the same right to existence as the things to which they relate".<sup>30</sup> He expresses the notion of Maya in relation to causality in these words. "...the idea of Maya permits the combination of the two causalities — physical causality, which is 'horizontal', and metaphysical causality, which is vertical. ...."<sup>31</sup>

The Ash'arite concept of creation is far removed from the intellectual perspective. Schuon says: "Universal Manifestation — creation — is nothing other than the outflowing of a Divine Quality, and if necessity is by no means imperfect but on the contrary signifies a perfection, this is precisely because Manifestation, inasmuch as it is a Divine Quality, goes beyond the alternative "Creator-creature". From this point of view, the world is "none other" than an aspect of Atma.... The duality 'Creator' and 'creature' is situated in Maya; Atma alone transcends it."<sup>32</sup> Lindbom says: "God, as Creator, separates and objectifies His work by throwing — symbolically speaking — a veil over the creation." This is what the Vendanta calls "the veil of Maya."<sup>33</sup>

Schuon, however, finds some truth in Ash'arite atomism. He says: "Indisputably, there is a basis of truth in Ash'arite atomism, and moreover necessarily so, since what is in question is a theology that grosso modo is orthodox. . . . The metaphysical reason for which created things — and first of all the universal substance it-self — necessarily compromise an element of limitation and separativity, is the gap between the Principle and Manifestation, God and the world, the Uncreated anti the Created; as the Principle alone is absolute Reality. It alone is situated beyond all trace of

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<sup>30</sup> *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>33</sup> *The Tares and the Good Grain*, Mercer University Press, Macon, Ga. 31207, USA, 1983, p. 78.

nothingness. . . . the cosmic substance with its productions, and likewise the cosmic energy with its effects, must have a discontinuous character, and this discontinuity precisely marks the presence of the element of nothingness which distinguishes the Created from the Uncreated".<sup>34</sup>

He explains the process in these words: "It is with Being that the reign of Maya begins, which by definition implies the presence of a trace of nothingness, hence of illusion; consequently it is only the Essence which is absolutely the Principle, and therein lies the basis of the profound divergence between gnosis and theology."<sup>35</sup>

In his essay, 'Dilemmas of Moslem Scholasticism,' he gives a sympathetic consideration to the Ash'arite view of Causation. He says: ". . . .Ash'arite atomism is a reminder of the Divine Presence, or an introduction of the transcendent — of the marvellous, one might say — into everyday life. . . . From the point of view of meta-physics, this is an unnecessary luxury, since the intellect has resources other than pious absurdity; but from the theological point of view it doubtless marks a victory."<sup>36</sup>

The problem of good and evil was a point of contest between the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites: The Mu'tazilites considered good and evil as ingrained in the nature of things. Reason was competent in this respective field. For the Ash'arites, good and evil, on the contrary, were based on Divine decree. From the metaphysical point of view, both these schools of thought fail to understand the reality of this issue. Schuon says: ". . . .metaphysically there is no evil; the notion of evil presupposes in fact a fragmentary vision of things, characteristic of creatures, who are themselves fragments; man is a "fragmentary totality".<sup>37</sup> He further says: "An evil is what is opposed to the Divine Nature, and not what God — because He is

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<sup>34</sup> Atomism and Creation, *Christianity/Is/am: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

<sup>37</sup> *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, pp. 19-20.

"Omnipotent" — has decreed to be evil; it is the very content of the Divine declaration that confirms the evident fact that lying is an evil; it is not the fact of the declaration that makes lying evil".<sup>38</sup> Since the Mu'tazilites lacked the intellectual method, therefore, their understanding of the subject remained superficial. By virtue of the rational method they were condemned to remain on the periphery. The Ash'arites also lacked an ultimate understanding of the issue. Schuon says: ". . . evil created" or "wished for" by God can only be a provisional element in a greater good, and that this evil is consequently integrated and dissolved in the final and decisive good; it is this — and not the notion of a gratuitous "Omnipotence" which explains that nothing can be an evil on the part of the Sovereign Good".<sup>39</sup> Marcos Pallis expresses the same idea in these emphatic words: "All relativity can, and indeed must, ultimately be transcended, not by arbitrary denial but by integration".<sup>40</sup> It is only by dint of Maya that one can have an authentic understanding of the issue. Schuon says: ". . . the notion of Maya does not contradict relative reality, but simply annuls it at the level of Absolute Reality. .."<sup>41</sup>

The issue of good and evil has always remained a stumbling block for the theologian. It is only on the plane of metaphysics that an understanding of this problem becomes an actuality. Schuon says: ". . . but the metaphysical cause of sin is different from that of the Divine Command. On the one hand there is for every man a Divine Will which commands the good; on the other hand there is, for the world, a Divine Will in view of a certain cosmologically inevitable or necessary quantity of evil; and there is for every man the freedom to appropriate this or that Universal Will by choosing either good or

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<sup>38</sup> *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, pp. 120-21.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>40</sup> *A Buddhist Spectrum*, London, 1980, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 137.

evil....."<sup>42</sup> He sums up the view in these emphatic Words:".....the choice of the good is the choice of Freedom."<sup>43</sup>

The controversy regarding the Divine Essence and the nature of Attributes engaged the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites for a considerable period of time. It was very unfortunate that the Mu'tazilites posed a wrong question which made the Ash'arites strike against a blind wall in seeking the right answer: The Unity of God could properly be understood by metaphysics alone. Speculative reason was lost in the tracks of abstraction. The method of "kalam" proved to be more of an apology than defence. The intellectual tradition of Islam as symbolised by Ali presented a true perspective. Ali says: "The correct form of belief in His Unity is to realise that He is so absolutely Pure and above nature, that nothing can be added to or subtracted from His Being there is no difference between His Person and His Attributes, and His Attributes should not be differentiated or distinguished from His Person. Whoever accepts His Attributes to be other than His Person then he actually forsakes

the idea of Unity of God and believes in duality And whoever holds such a belief he accepts limitations in His Being and confines Him to a place or to particular powers and attributes and brings Him in level to His creatures".<sup>44</sup> The observations of Muthari are very emphatic in this regard. He says: "The Nahj al Balaghah, while it ascribes all the Attributes of perfection to God, the Exalted, negates any separation of these Attributes from His Essence and does not consider them as an appendage of Divine Essence. On the other hand, the Ash'arites, as we know, consider the Divine Attributes to be additional to Essence and the Mu'tazilites negate all Attributes... the Attributes negated by the Nahj al Balaghah with respect to Divine Essence are qualities of imperfection and limitation; for the Divine Essence, being infinite and limitless, necessitates identity of the Attributes

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<sup>42</sup> Dilemma of Moslem Scholasticism, *Christianity/ Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*, p. 239.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Nahjul Balagha*, pp. 101-2.

with the Essence, not negation of the Attributes as professed by the Mu'tazilites. Had the Mu'tazilites reached such a notion they would never have negated the Divine Attributes considering them subservient to the Essence".<sup>45</sup>

Tabatabai' expresses the metaphysics of the idea in these words: "But because the Divine Essence is limitless and infinite these perfections which are shown to be His Qualities are in reality the same as His Essence and one with each other. The difference observed between the Essence and the Qualities and at the same time between the Qualities themselves is only on the plane of concepts. Essentially there is but one Reality involved which is one and indivisible".<sup>46</sup>

The main problem with the Mu'tazilites was their acceptance of conceptual way of looking at things. They tended to consider the process of conceptualization as ultimate. They failed to transcend to the stage of intellect. Their metaphysics remained oblivious of the intellectual foundations of Islam. The Ash'arites, on the other hand, committed a graver mistake. They chose to fight on the battlefield of reason unarmed with intellect. With the weapon of 'kalam' they did subjugate the Rationalists but they failed to destroy the edifice of rationalism.

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<sup>45</sup> Glimpses of the Nahj al-Balaghah, *Al-Tawhid*, July-Sept. 1985, pp. 158-59.

<sup>46</sup> *Shi'a*, p. 129.