

Understanding Islam

Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message

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Part Five: Theologians and their schools

Islam is a way of life; therefore it needs to be lived out. But it is lived out by thinking human beings, who have the ability to reflect, to ask questions and to try to find a way of explaining what they believe and why they believe it. Human beings are natural questioners; therefore this is an on-going process. Whenever a new philosophy or way of thinking comes along, there is a challenge to express one's beliefs in the terms of that new system. This process we can call theology – talking about God and matters related to God. Over the Islamic centuries, there have been great theologians, who have influenced the way in which Muslims express their belief and tackle new questions.

The Mutazilites

Whenever a religion teaches a set of ideals, one of the natural consequences is that we have to deal with those who say that they believe but their deeds fall short of the ideals that are taught; are they still to be considered Muslims? Islam teaches that God is all-powerful; then how can I be held responsible for my actions? These were some of the first theological questions to occupy the Muslim community in the early decades of Islam. Some took the position that God was so all-powerful that God actually determined the life of every human being. Our lives were like living out the script of a play that had been written by God; some even went so far as to say that God compelled all our actions (Jabarites), but then, where did human dignity and human freewill fit in? At the other end of the spectrum, there were those who said that God determines nothing but leaves each person completely free to do whatever they want; human beings, viewed from this position, control their own destinies (Qadarites). The consequence of this position is to say that my works flow from my faith and so others are able to know if and what I believe by looking at my actions. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that “grave sinners” have shown by their actions that they are unbelievers. At the extreme fringe on this end of the spectrum, were those who said that such “unbelieving grave sinners,” even (especially) if they claimed to be Muslims, should be executed before they could spread their corruption through the whole community (Kharijites). The vast majority of Muslims took a position between these two extremes (Murji'ites) and said that only God could judge the heart of a man or woman and that therefore the judgement on whether the “grave sinner” had lost faith or not would be determined by God on the Day of Judgement. This meant that if someone professed to be a Muslim, then they must be regarded as such, even if they were a sinner (thus a “bad Muslim”), with the final judgement being left up to God.

It was against this background that the Mutazilite school of theology arose and flourished in the 8th to 10th centuries based in the cities of Basra and Baghdad. By this time, Greek philosophical thought had begun to reach the Muslim scholars and it challenged them to think out and express their beliefs using these concepts. Human reason was seen as the great human dignity, therefore the Mutazilites are sometimes referred to as the Rationalists, later they preferred to call themselves “The People of Justice and Unity” (*Ahl al-Adl wal Tawhid*).

They articulated five principal bases for Muslim belief. The first was the absolute oneness of God, which entailed a rejection of anything that could even hint at any multiplicity. This meant that they taught the doctrine that the Qur'an was created in time and therefore it was not eternal, so that one could avoid any notion of two eternal entities; God alone is eternal. They opposed any form of dualism or polytheism. God is a spiritual being without any bodily form; therefore God cannot be seen either in this life or in Paradise. They were opposed to speaking about God in human bodily concepts (anthropomorphism) and so such references in the Qur'an were to be understood allegorically or metaphorically, e.g., references to “God’s hand(s)” should be understood as meaning the grace or power of God. They were against the idea that an attribute of God, e.g., speech/word, could be separated from the essence of God, and thus any idea such as the Christian notion of “the word of God taking human form” was unacceptable.

The second principle was the justice of God. God is just and speaks only the truth. God has given human beings guidance and said that everyone will face judgement. If human beings are not held to account for their actions by God, then that makes God a liar. Consider the case of two people who are equally tempted to commit a sin; person A commits it and person B struggles with great sacrifice and discipline not to commit it; if, on the Day of Judgement, God “let’s off” person A for their sin and does not punish them, then God is being unjust to person B, who resisted the temptation and should be rewarded; the conclusion is that God *must* judge, reward and punish justly. They held that God only wills what is good and neither wills nor creates evil; human beings create their acts through the exercise of their own free will, thus responsibility lies with each individual. God is all good and therefore could not possibly create evil acts.

The third principle is that the Qur'an lays down what is right and wrong, and this is reinforced through the investigation and use of human reason. Those who believe in the guidance of the Qur'an will bear the fruits of their belief in actions. Human reason can predict how God in justice will judge human acts and thus predict the final destiny of the unrepentant great sinner; their destiny is hell but only God is able to judge if an individual is repentant or not.

The fourth Mutazilite principle was to take an intermediate position concerning the sinner. We can observe the actions of others and say that they do not correspond to the actions of one who believes but we cannot pass final judgement on someone and

say that they are an unbeliever; therefore the sinner (*fasiq*) occupies an intermediate position between “true believer” and “unbeliever.”

The fifth principle was that every Muslim has the duty to promote good and forbid evil; if necessary this must be done through the use of force. Critically, in political terms, this included deposing the unjust ruler.

The Mutazilites as a distinct group within Islam were opposed and marginalised by the dominant Sunni schools, so that they are a tiny community today, but their ideas had a considerable influence in Shi'a theology and elements of Mutazilite thought appear periodically in later Sunni theologies.

The Asharites

The first Sunni theologian to take a decisive stand against the Mutazilites was Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855). He is renowned as a collector of Hadith and the Hanbali school of law is named after him. He based his teaching on the Qur'an and Hadith, which he accepted without further interpretation or discussion. He regarded the discipline of theology to be dangerous as it leads to speculation and thus should be avoided. He taught that the Qur'an is the uncreated word of God and that God has no human form; therefore the references in the Qur'an to God using human concepts are to be understood literally but referred to God, so: God has hands but they are God-like hands not human-like hands. He held that it is for God to judge and punish the grave sinner not human beings. Indeed, human beings cannot pass ultimate judgement on another being; judgement, mercy, justice and forgiveness all lie with God. In 832, ibn Hanbal was in Baghdad when the ruling Caliph al-Ma'mun (r.813-833) moved in the direction of the Mutazilites and tried to force the scholars to agree or face imprisonment. Most accepted the Mutazilite positions but ibn Hanbal refused and was imprisoned for two years.

Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari (873-932) was born in Basra and studied under Mutazilite scholars until breaking with that school in 912. He then went on to seek a middle way between Mutazilite and Hanbali positions. He emphasised that the starting point for theology should be the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad as contained in the Hadith and narrations from companions of the Prophet; in this way, he moved more in the direction of ibn Hanbal. He saw a literal reliance on scripture alone to be lazy and that reason alone was dangerous, so he sought to combine the two. Reason can only go so far, he taught, thereafter one has to accept on the basis of revealed faith without, in his famous phrase, “asking how” (*bila kayf*). He taught that the Qur'an is the uncreated, eternal word of God and that only the ink, paper and individual letters are created. In a phrase attributed to him: “The word of God is not God but is not other than He; ask not how.” In a similar way, he taught that human beings will really see God on the Day of Judgement but we don't know how.

He wanted to limit the emphasis on rationalism and taught that the non-rationalist elements of belief transcend human categories and experience. Human knowledge is

limited in comparison with God's knowledge; therefore we have to accept God's will in all things simply because it is God's will. He held that the Mutazilites had limited God's omnipotence by subjecting it to reason and thus showed a lack of faith in God's justice, mercy and compassion. This means that if God chooses to send the pious to hell and the sinner to heaven, then this must be accepted as God's will, which is beyond reason and logic. He accused the Mutazilites of turning God into a dry abstraction and human life into a meaningless series of "causes and effects." What would be the point of revelation, he asked, if reason and logic are enough?

A famous illustration has been handed down of a discussion between al-Ashari and his Mutazilite teacher.

The scene is in heaven where a child notices that a man has a higher place than he has and so asks God why this is. God responds that this man did many good things in his life and so this is his reward. The child then asks God why he was allowed to die young before he had the chance of earning such a high position by doing good deeds. God responds that God caused him to die young because God knew that if he continued to live to full adulthood he would be a sinner. At this point there is a chorus of voices from hell asking God why they too had not been killed as children.

The law of cause and effect was held by al-Ashari to be inadequate to cover God's relations with human beings.

When it came to human acts, al-Ashari tried again to steer a middle path. God creates all acts, both good and bad. God creates the evil act but God does not will it. This is a necessary consequence of the all-powerful nature of God. But God is good, so why does God create evil acts? The answer must lie in human need not God's need, so the argument was made that human beings can only thus appreciate the good by comparison, so we thus come to learn that evil is not just the absence of good but the real and existing counterpart of good.

Al-Ashari grappled with the question of determinism and the responsibility of people for their actions. He saw the danger in extreme determinism, that it leads to moral laxity: "What is the point in me fighting against my weaknesses when God made me weak and has determined all my actions?" At the same time, if God is all-knowing, then how can we avoid saying that God created each one of us to be either faithful or unfaithful? On human responsibility, al-Ashari tried to balance the all-powerful nature of God with giving humans sufficient freedom to be liable to judgement by developing the doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*). The argument went as follows: All acts are created by the will, knowledge, decision and decree of God; thus primary causality (that the act is done) belongs to God. Just before each act is done, the human being acquires accountability for how it is done and thus becomes responsible for the act and thus liable to judgement and punishment; so secondary causality (how the act is done) belongs to the human being. This means that God knows the outcome of every human act but does not determine it.

The Maturidiyya

The Asharites grew to become the largest of the theological schools within Sunni Islam but another school was founded by the contemporary scholar al-Maturidi of Samarkand (d.944). He regarded the Asharites as being too conservative and wanted to give more of a role to reason in supporting doctrine. He taught that human beings are able and obliged to gain knowledge of God and that through reason independent of revelation we can come to thank God. He interpreted the anthropomorphic sayings in the Qur'an in a metaphorical way but held that we can see God in the life hereafter.

The attributes of the knowledge and power of God were accepted by al-Maturidi as real and eternally subsisting in the essence of God; therefore "God is eternally the creator" even though the creation is temporal. Likewise he taught that speech (*kalam*) is an eternal attribute of God.

On human acts, he held that God creates the root of all acts but that human freewill gives them their good or evil specification. Similarly to al-Ashari, God knows the outcome of human acts but does not predetermine them. So, God leads astray only those that God knows will choose to go astray and leads to the right path those that God knows will choose the right path; the initial choice rests with the human being not God.

Finally, he taught that faith is the inner assent of the human being expressed by verbal confession and not through works; so if one confesses the *shahada* then one is a Muslim. Further, the faithful sinner may be punished by God but will eventually enter Paradise.

Al-Ghazali

We have seen so far two of the early aspects of Sunni Islam: the rationalist Mutazilites, and the two great theological schools associated with the names of al-Ashari and al-Maturidi. To these must be added the mystical dimension, often identified with the term *sufi* and traced back through such figures as Hasan al-Basri (d.728) to the Prophet himself. A major factor in the religious development of Islam was the encounter with Greek philosophy and thus the attempt to express Muslim belief in philosophical terms. Key figures in this development were al-Farabi (d.950) and ibn Sina (d.1037). The person who tried to reconcile these various elements was al-Ghazali.

Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) was born in Tus, Iran and grew up at the time of a reinvigoration of Sunni learning under the ruling vizier, Nizam al-Mulk (1020-1092), who had established centres of learning, Nizamiyya Colleges, in places like Nishapur and Baghdad. As a young man, al-Ghazali received training in *sufi* practices and then travelled to Nishapur, where he studied Asharite theology in the Nizamiyya College. As a brilliant student and teacher, he was called to the Nizamiyya in Baghdad in 1085 where he taught and wrote for ten years. Towards the end of this time, he wrote one

of his major books “The Incoherence of the Philosophers” (*Tahafut al-Falasifa*), in which he used philosophical arguments to show that philosophy does not always lead to ultimate truth and does not bring rational insight into the transcendent God. This meant, in his judgement, that revelation was the most important source of religion but that this must be combined with religious experience to bring one to knowledge of God and God’s existence.

In 1095, al-Ghazali seems to have experienced a life crisis that prevented him from teaching and brought to him the awareness that he had been seeking prestige as a teacher rather than seeking that which would lead to eternal life. There then began a decade of travelling in search of spiritual knowledge and training. The scholars are divided about his whereabouts during this time but he appears to have travelled to various places, finally returning to his home town of Tus, where he established a residential sufi training centre (*khanqah*). From here he was persuaded to return to teach in the Nizamiyya in Nishapur from 1106 to 1109, before returning to his *khanqah* where he died in 1111.

It was in 1106, that al-Ghazali wrote his most influential work “The Revival of the Religious Sciences” (*Ihya Ulum al-Din*), in which he tried to integrate his philosophical and theological learning with his spiritual experience. The book is divided into four sections dealing with worship practices (*ibadat*), social customs (*adat*), vices or faults of character that lead to perdition (*muhlikat*), and virtues or qualities that lead to salvation (*munjiyat*). Al-Ghazali saw the pre-embodied soul as being of pure, eternal substance. In order to grow in ultimate knowledge of God, the soul had to attach itself to a body so that it can exercise reason. In the body, the soul is subject to the corrupting influences of anger, desire and evil, and thus needs to be disciplined through both the outer practices of religion and inner mystical sufi practices. The inner practices enable the soul to grasp the spiritual core of the outer practices and thus bring the person to justice and wisdom.

Al-Ghazali had a significant influence on medieval Jewish and Christian writers, such as Maimonides (d.1204), Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) and Dante (d.1321); his name was transformed into Algazel in Latin

Al-Tusi

Another integration of philosophical and theological concepts took place within the Shi'a tradition. This was initiated by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201-1274), who was also born in Tus, Iran and studied at the Nizamiyya in Nishapur. He is regarded as a comprehensive scholar, contributing to the study of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, ethics, history and geography, as well as philosophy and theology. He lived at the time of the Mongol invasion and thus the overthrow of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad (1258) and the rise of Shi'a influence. His main philosophical influence was ibn Sina and he spent years living with the Ismaili communities in Alamut and elsewhere, during which time his philosophical understanding of Islam deepened.

His commentary on ibn Sina defended the philosopher's Islamic reputation and revived his school of philosophy in the East. Al-Tusi wrote in both Arabic and Persian, and the Persian influence can be seen coupled with Aristotle in his political ethics. He developed a philosophical support for the Imam as a "Philosopher-King," who would lead the community in virtue. He emphasised the family as the central component of society and stressed mutual respect and the importance of education. He systematically formulated the fundamental tenets of Shi'a belief and practice in his book "The Definition of Fundamental Beliefs" (*Tajrid al-Itiqadat*), on which many subsequent scholars wrote commentaries. Towards the end of his life, he oversaw the construction of the Maraghah Observatory, which opened in 1261, and which was the focus of a new centre of higher learning, of which al-Tusi was the Director.

One of his pupils in philosophy, who also wrote a commentary on his *Tajrid*, was Hasan ibn Yusuf al-Hilli (1250-1325). Al-Hilli is credited with the foundation of the Usuli school within Shi'a Islam, which is today dominant. The word *usul* means foundational principles, as in *usul al-fiqh*, the foundational principles of jurisprudence. Al-Hilli established reasoning (*aql*) as the central tool in developing law. He systematically addressed the terminology and methodology of critical Hadith scholarship and set it on a solid basis. His systematic works on theology are still basic texts in universities and *madrasas* today.

Ibn Taimiyya

At the same period in history, a contrary intellectual movement was afoot pioneered by Taqi al-Din ibn Taimiyya (1263-1328), who was born and lived almost all his life in Damascus where he studied under some of the great Hanbali scholars. He wanted to return to the purity of Islam, as he saw it, based strictly on the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet. He stressed the need to understand Islam through the lens of the pious predecessors (*salaf al-salih*), the first three generations beginning with the companions of Muhammad, who lived most faithfully according to the message. Anything that could not be traced back to the Qur'an and Hadith had no place within Islamic thought or practice and must be regarded as innovation (*bid'a*) and thus removed. This made him a deeply controversial character and fierce polemicist, who was opposed to the philosophers, the Shi'a tradition, ibn Arabi (d.1240) and other sufis, and al-Ghazali.

His position was "to describe God only as he has described himself in his Book and as the Prophet has described him in his *sunna*." Although he is thought of as a strict Traditionalist and was accused of anthropomorphism on account of his literal interpretation of the Qur'an, he was certainly not unthinking but rather stressed intellectual struggling (*ijtihad*) within these parameters by those who were experts in the field (*mujtahid*). He spoke of a "happy mean" (*wasat*) between tradition, reason and freewill. Although he was brought up as a member of the Hanbali school, he preferred his own *ijtihad* and was against those who automatically followed one of the schools of law in an unquestioning way (*taqlid*).

Ibn Taimiyya was a lifelong bachelor, so periods in prison were more opportunity than deprivation, and he wrote many of his books whilst imprisoned for criticising the prevailing sufi practices or on charges of anthropomorphism. He held that Islam needed political power, as in the days of the Prophet and the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, to that it could command the good and forbid the evil in society, which he saw as a duty placed on the State. In order to do this, the State needed the guidance of religion and so there was a mutual dependency between State and Islam. He had a considerable following amongst ordinary people, partly due to his role in fighting off the Mongol invaders from Damascus, in which action he fought with valour, and has also had a huge influence on later generations of Muslims, who wanted to purify their Islamic beliefs and practices.