Introduction to Islamic Theology

Lesson 3

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ENRICHING THE SOUL

Challenging the Mu'tazilites

- Until the beginning of the 4th century AH, there existed no rival school of theology that could challenge the Mu'tazilites.

- All opposition was based on the claim that the views of the Mu'tazilites were contrary to the apparent meaning of the Quran and Sunnah.

- The leaders of the ahl al-hadith, such as Malik b. Anas and Ahmad b. Hanbal, basically considered any debate, inquiry, or argument about matters of faith to be religiously forbidden.

- Not only did the ahl al-hadith lack any system of kalam to challenge the Mu'tazilites' kalam, they were opposed to kalam itself.

The Rise of the Ash'arites

- In the early 4th century, a new school of kalami thought emerged among Muslims, thanks to the appearance of a distinguished thinker who had received instruction in Mu'tazilite teachings under Qadi Abdul Jabbar and had mastered them.

- He rejected Mu'tazilite tenets and gravitated towards the doctrines of the ahl al-hadith.

- Being a talented individual who was was well acquainted with the Mu'tazilites' rational approach, he founded all the doctrines of the ahl al-hadith on a rational basis and turned them into a relatively coherent intellectual system.

The Ash'arites

- That distinguished person was Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 324 AH).

- Al-Ash'ari, unlike his predecessors among the ahl al-hadith, such as Ahmad b. Hanbal, was of the view that the use of logic and rational arguments in doctrinal matters was permissible and he cited evidence from the Quran and the Sunnah in support of his claim.

- He wrote a treatise entitled رسالة استحسان الخوض في علم الكلام (A Treatise on the Appropriateness of Inquiry into the Science of Kalam)

The Ash'arites

- It was at this point that the ahl al-hadith split into two groups:
    - 1. The Ash'arites, or the followers of Abul Hassan al-Ash'ari, who considered kalam permissible
    - 2. The Hanbalis, or the followers of Ahmad b. Hanbal, who considered kalam to be religiously forbidden.

The Ash'arites

- Another reason why people began to detest the Mu'tazilites is that under the patronage of the caliph al-Ma'mun, the Mu'tazilites tried to coerce the people into accepting their belief in the createdness of the Quran.

- Their actions caused bloodshed and resulted in the imprisonment, torture, and exile of many Muslims.

- Thus, the majority of the people held the Mu'tazilites responsible for what happened and as a result, turned away from them.

The Ash'arites

- As a result of these two factors (i.e. the period of tribulation and the pro-kalam approach of Abul Hassan al-Ash'ari and his followers) the emergence of the Ash'arite school was welcomed by the majority of Muslims.

- After Abul Hassan al-Ash'ari, other distinguished personalities appeared in this school and strengthened its foundations.

- Among them were Qadi Abu Bakr Baqillani (d. 403 AH), a contemporary of Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413 AH)

The Ash'arites

- Abu Ishaq al-Isfaraini (d. 418 AH)
- Imam al-Haramayn Juwayni (d. 478 AH)- teacher of Imam al-Ghazali
- Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505 AH)
- Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606 AH)

The Ash'arites

- The Ash'arite school underwent gradual changes and particularly at the hands of Ghazali, it adopted features of Islamic mysticism.

- Fakhr al-Razi brought it closer to philosophy.

- By the time Khawajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 673 AH) wrote his book تجريد الإعتقاد (Purifying the Belief), more than 90 percent of kalam obtained a philosophical character.

- After the publishing of this book, all Muslim theologians, including the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites, followed the same path that had been trodden by that great philosopher and Shi'i theologian.

The Ash'arites

- For instance, many later works of kalam written by Sunni scholars adopted many of the ideas mentioned in Tajreed.

- In fact, it may be said, that with the passing of time, more of the leading Ash'arites moved away from the ideas of its founder and moved closer to the views of the Mu'tazilites or the philosophers.

The Ash'arites

- The following are the main doctrines of Abul Hassan al-Ash'ari, which are aimed at defending the basic principles of the ahl al-hadith or attempting a rational justification of their beliefs:
    - Divine attributes, contrary to the belief of the Mu'tazilites and philosophers, are not identical with the divine essence.
    - The Divine Will is all al-embracing. The Divine providence and predestination encompass all events (this belief, too, is contrary to the view held by the Mu'tazilites, though in agreement with those of the philosophers).
    - All evil, like good, is from God (of course, this view is a logical corollary, in al-Ash'arites view of the above belief).

The Ash'arites

- Man is not free in his acts, which are created by God (this belief, too, in al-Ash'arites' view, necessarily follows from the doctrine of the all-embracing nature of the Divine Will).

- Acts are not intrinsically good or evil, i.e. *husn* or *qubh* of deeds is not intrinsic, but determined by the *Shari'ah.* The same is true of justice. What is 'just', is determined by the *Shari'ah* not by reason (contrary to the belief of the Mu'tazilites)

- Grace *(lutf)* and selection of the best for creation *(al-'aslah)* are not incumbent upon God (contrary to the belief of the Mu'tazilah).

The Ash'arites

- Man's power over his actions does not precede them [there is no *istita'ah qabl al-fi'l*], but is commensurate and concurrent with the acts themselves (contrary to the belief of the Muslim philosophers and the Mu'tazilites)
- Absolute de-anthropomorphism *(tanzih mutlaq),* or absolute absence of similarity between God and others, does not hold (contrary to the Mu'tazilite view).
- Doctrine of acquisition: Man does not 'create' his own acts; rather he 'acquires' or 'earns' them (this is in justification of the Ahl al-Sunnah's belief in the creation of human acts by God).
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The Ash'arites

- God shall be visible to the eyes on the Day of Resurrection (contrary to the view of the Mu'tazilites and the philosophers).
- The *fasiq* is a believer *(mu'min)* (contrary to the view of the Khawarij, who consider him *kafir,* and contrary to the Mu'tazilite doctrine of *manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn).*
- There is nothing problematic about God's pardoning someone without repentance. Similarly, nothing is wrong about God's subjecting a believer to chastisement (contrary to the Mu'tazilite position).
- Intercession *(shafa'ah)* is justifiable (contrary to the Mu'tazilite position).
- God does not lie, nor does He break His promise.

The Ash'arites

- The world is created in time *(haadith)* (contrary to the view of the philosophers).
- The Quran is pre-eternal *(qadim);* however, this is true of *al-kalam al-nafsi* (meaning of the Quran), not *al-kalam al-lafzi* - the spoken word (this is in justification of the Ahl al-hadith's belief in the pre al-eternity of the Quran).
- The Divine Acts do not follow any purpose or aim (contrary to the view of the philosophers and the Mu'tazilites)
- It is possible that God may place upon a person a duty beyond his power (contrary to the belief of the philosophers and the Mu'tazilites).

The Ash'arites

- Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari was a prolific writer, and, as reported, had compiled more than two hundred books. As many as a hundred are mentioned in his biographical accounts, though, apparently, most of those works have perished.

- The most famous of his works is مقالات الإسلاميين واختلاف المصلين

- Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari is one of those individuals whose ideas, exercised a great influence on the Islamic world.

- Nevertheless, later, his works have been put to severe criticism by philosophers and the Mu'tazilites.

The Ash'arites

- Ibn Sina, in *al-Shifa;* has refuted many of his ideas without mentioning his name. Even some of his followers, such as Qadi Abu Bakr al-Baqillani and Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni revised and modified his views about predestination and createdness of (human) acts.

- Imam al-Ghazali, although an Ash'arite who has to a great extent established and strengthened the Ash'arite doctrines, has put them on a different foundation. Through al-Ghazali, *kalam* was brought closer to *mystic and sufism.*

The Ash'arites

- Rumi, the author of the *Mathnawi,* is, in his own way, an Ash'arite; but his deep Sufi inclinations gave a different color to all the issues of *kalam.*

- Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, who was familiar with philosophic thought, transformed al-'Ash'ari's *kalam,* further strengthening it.

The Ash'arites

- The triumph of the Ash'arite school cost the Muslim world dearly. Its triumph was the victory of the forces of stagnation over freedom of thought.

- As mentioned earlier, during the 3rd century AH, the caliph al-Ma'mun, himself an intellectual and a man of learning, rose to the support of the Mu'tazilites. After him al-Mu'tasim and al-Wathiq also followed him - until al-Mutawakkil assumed caliphate.

The Ash'arites

- Al-Mutawakkil played an important role in the victory of the Ahl al-hadith's doctrines, which acquired dialectic foundations after one hundred years at the hands of al-Ash'ari.

- To be sure, had al-Mutawakkil's way of thinking been similar to that of his predecessors, Mu'tazilism would have had a different fate.

The Shi'i Kalam

- In the early centuries, *kalam* was considered to be inimical to the *Sunnah* and the *hadith* by the Ahl al-Sunnah.

- But in Shi'i *kalam* not only does it not come into conflict with the *Sunnah* and the *hadith,* it is firmly rooted in the *Sunnah* and the *hadith.*

- The reason is that the Shi'i *hadith,* contrary to the Sunni corpus on *hadith,* consists of numerous traditions in which profound metaphysical or social problems have been dealt with logically and analysed rationally.

The Shi'i Kalam

- But in the Sunni corpus such analytic treatment of these subjects is missing.

- For instance, if there is any mention of such problems as that of Divine providence and preordination, the all al-embracing Will of the Almighty, the Divine Names, Attributes, or such topics as the soul, the life after death, the final reckoning, the *Sirat,* the Balance, or such issues as *Imamah, khilafah,* and the like, there is no argument or rational explanation of the topics mentioned.

The Shi'i Kalam

- But in the Shi'i corpus on *hadith,* all such issues have been dealt with in a rational and discursive manner. A comparison between the list of the chapters of the six Sihah and that of al-Kulayni's *al-Kafi* will make this quite clear.

- Accordingly, *"kalam",* in the sense of rational and analytical treatment of problems, is found in the Shi'i *hadith.* This is the reason why the Shi'ah were not divided into two groups like the Sunnis were into "Ahl al-Hadith" and "Ahl al-Kalam."

The Shi'i Kalam

- It was on the basis of the Sunni textual sources that we stated that the first doctrinal issue to become a subject of controversy was the issue of the *kufr* of a *fasiq,* brought up by the Khawarij during the first half of the first century.

- Then emerged the problem of freedom and fate, which led to the formation of the Qadariyyah and Jabriyyah.

The Shi'i Kalam

- This is how the Orientalists and the scholars of Islamic studies in the West and the East explain and interpret the origins of rational speculation and debates in the Islamic world.

- This group, advertently or mistakenly, ignores the profound rational and demonstrative arguments advanced for the first time by Imam Ali. The truth is that the rational approach in Islamic teachings was first initiated by Imam Ali in his sermons and discussions.

The Shi'i Kalam

إِنَّ لِلَّهِ عَلَى النَّاسِ حُجَّتَينِ : حُجَّةً ظاهِرَةً ، وحُجَّةً باطِنَةً ، فأمّا الظّاهِرَةُ فَالرُّسُلُ والأنبِياءُ والأَئِمَّةُ عليهم السلام ، وأمّا الباطِنَةُ فَالعُقولُ

"Verily God has two authoritative proofs over people: a manifest proof and an inward proof. The manifest proof is represented by the prophets and messengers and Imams, and the inward proof is represented by the intellects."- Imam al-Kadhim

Source: al-Kafi, v. 1, p. 14

The Shi'i Kalam

- The Shi'i intellectual and theoretical approach is opposed not only to the Hanbali thinking - which fundamentally rejects the idea of using rational understanding in religious belief - and the Ash'arite approach - which denies the independence of reason and subordinates it to literalist appearance - but also to the Mu'tazilite thinking with all its predilection for reason.

- Because, although the Mu'tazilite thought is rational, it is dialectical or polemical *(jadali),* not demonstrative *(burhani).*

The Shi'i Kalam

- The first Shi'i writer to compile a book on doctrines of faith was Ali b. Isma'il b. Mitham al-Tammar.

- Mitham al-Tammar himself was an orator, expert in debating, and was one of the closest companions of Imam Ali.

- Ali b. Isma'il was his grandson. He was a contemporary of 'Amr b. 'Ubayd and Abu al-Hudhayl al-'Allaf, the famous figures of *kalam* during the first half of the second century, who were from the first generation of the founders of Mu'tazilite *kalam.*

The Shi'i Kalam

- Among the companions of Imam al-Sadiq , there is a group of individuals, referred to as *"mutakallim"* by the Imam himself, such as Hisham b. al-Hakam, Hisham ibn Salim, Humran b. A'yan, Abu Ja'far al-'Ahwal - known as "Mu'min al-Taq" and others.

The Shi'i Kalam

- "In the presence of Imam Abu Abdallah once there was a group of his followers consisting of Humran b. 'Ayun, Muhammad b. al-Ni'man, Hisham b. Salim, al-Tayyar and others among whom was also Hisham b. al-Hakam, a young man. Imam Abu 'Abdallah said, "O Hisham can you tell us what did you do to 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd and how did you ask him questions?"

- Hisham said, "O descendant of the Holy Prophet Your greatness makes me feel shy and my tongue does not work in your presence."

The Shi'i Kalam

- The Imam said, "When I would order you something you should do it."

- Hisham, then said, "I came to learn about the gathering of 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd and sessions of speeches for people in the Mosque of Basra. It disturbed me a great deal and I went to Basra. It was a Friday. I went to the Mosque and found a large circle of people around 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd ....and people would ask him questions.

- I asked people for room, which they made for me. I sat in front of the people with my legs folded beneath and said, "O scholar, I come from out of town. Can I ask you questions?"

The Shi'i Kalam

- He said, "Yes, you may ask." I asked, "Do you have eyes?" He said, "Son, what kind of question is this? Something that you can see why then do you ask?" I said, "That is how my questions are." He said, "Son, you may ask your questions even if they would be foolish ones." I asked, "Do you have eyes?" He said, "Yes, I have eyes." I asked, "What do you do with them?" He said, "I see with them the colors and persons." I asked, "Do you have a nose?" He said, "Yes, I have a nose." I asked, "What do you do with it?" He said, " I use it to smell things." I asked, "Do you have a mouth?" He said, "Yes, I have a mouth." I asked, "What do you do with it?" He said, "I taste things with it." I asked, "Do you have ears?" He said, "Yes, I have ears." I asked, "What do you do with them?" He said, "I hear sounds with them.

The Shi'i Kalam

- I asked, "Do you have a heart?" He said, "Yes, I have a heart." I asked, "What do you do with it?" He said, "I distinguish and discern things that come to it from the other senses."

- I asked, "Why are your others senses independent of your heart and why do they need it?" He said, "They are not independent of my heart."

- I said, "Why do they need your heart when they are all healthy and sound?" He said, "Son, when the other senses face a doubt about something, such as smell, test, etc., I send it to my heart and it ascertains certainty and discards doubts."

The Shi'i Kalam

- I asked him, "Do you mean that Allah has set up the heart to remove doubts from the other senses?" He said, "Yes, that is true." I asked, "Is then the existence of the heart necessary to remove the doubts of the other senses?" He said, "Yes, it is necessary."

- I then said, "O Abu Marwan, Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, as you say, has not left your senses without an Imam to correct the doubts and the mistakes of the other senses in you and remove doubts therefrom, how would He leave all the people with doubts and confusions without an Imam who would remove their doubts and settle their disputes?"

The Shi'i Kalam

- He remained quite and did not say anything for a while. …

- Imam Abu Abdallah smiled and said, "O Hisham who has taught you this?" I replied, "I learned something from you and added something of my self." The Imam said, "This, I swear by Allah, is written in the books of Abraham and Moses."

Source: Al-Kafi, v. 1, p. 169

The Shi'i Kalam

- This shows that the Imams of the Ahlul Bayt, not only themselves engaged in discussion and analysis of the problems of *kalam,* they also trained a group of their pupils for the sake of conducting such debates and arguments.

- Among them Hisham b. al-Hakam distinguished himself only in *'ilm al-kalam,* not in *tafsir, fiqh,* or *hadith*. Al-Imam al-Sadiq used to treat him with more respect than others even when he was a youth,

- The Imam used to offer him a preferred seat and paid him so much respect because of his expertise in *kalam.*

The Shi'i Kalam

- Al-Imam al-Rida personally participated in debates in which al-Ma'mun invited *mutakallimun* of various schools to take part. The records of such meetings are preserved in the Shi'i texts.

- It is indeed astounding that Orientalists should be completely silent about all such events pertaining to the efforts of Imam Ali and ignore the role of the Imams in the revival of rational inquiry in matters of religious doctrine.

The Shi'i Kalam

- Fadl b. Shadhan al-Nishaburi, a companion of al-Imam al-Rida, al-Imam al-Jawad , and al-Imam al-Hadi , whose tomb is in Nishabur, apart from being a *faqih* and a *muhaddith,* was also a *mutakallim.* He is reported to have written a large number of books.

- The Nawbakhti family produced many illustrious personalities, most of whom were *mutakallimun.*

- Fadl b. Abi Sahl b. al-Nawbakht, a contemporary of Harun, was in charge of the famous Bayt al-Hikmah library, and well-known as a translator from Persian into Arabic;

The Shi'i Kalam

- Ishaq b. Abi Sahl b. al-Nawbakht; his son, Isma'il b. Ishaq b. Sahl b. al-Nawbakht; his another son, Ali b. Ishaq; his grandson, Abu Sahl Isma'il b. Ali b. Ishaq b. Abi Sahl b. al-Nawbakht, (called "shaykh al-mutakallimin" of the Shi'ah), Hasan b. Musa al-Nawbakht, a nephew of Isma'il ibn 'Ali, and several others of this family - all are Shi'i *mutakallimun.*

The Shi'i Kalam

- Ibn Qubbah al-Razi in the 3rd century AH, and Abu Ali b. Miskawayh, the famous doctor of medicine and the author, during the early 5th century AH, are also Shi'i *mutakallimun.*

- The Shi'i *mutakallimun* are many. Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, the famous philosopher, mathematician, and the author of the *Tajrid al-'I'tiqad,* and al-'Allamah al-Hilli, the well-known *faqih* and commentator of the *Tajrid al-'I'tiqad,* are well-known *mutakallimun* of the 7th century AH.

The Shi'i Kalam

- The Stages of Shi'i Kalam:
  - **1. The time of the Prophet**: The stage of formation.
  - **2. The demise of the Prophet to the 2nd century:** The development of kalam into a discipline.
  - **3. The 2nd and 3rd century:** The compilation of essays and books on kalam. For example, Ali b. Isma'il b. Mitham al-Tammar (d. 215 AH) wrote a book titled كتاب الإمامة والإستحقاق
  - **4. The 3rd and 4th century:** Scholars delved deep into theological issues and tried to present the ideas of Ahlul Bayt on kalam. For example, Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 380 AH) has a book titled كتاب التوحيد

The Shi'i Kalam

- **5. The 5th and 6th century:** Shi'i scholars like Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413 AH), Sayyid al-Murtadha (d. 436 AH) and Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 460 AH) structured and refined the science of kalam with more analysis.
- **6. The 7th century**: The pioneer of kalam in this period was Khawajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi who brought kalam to its peak.
- **7. The 8th to the 14th century:** Scholars followed the path of Khawajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and wrote commentaries on his works.
- 8. **Contemporary period:** Scholars have faced many challenges in the form of Marxism, Wahhabism, Darwinian evolution etc.