

Wahhabism and Ash'arism

The highest Wahhabi religious personality in Saudi Arabia, the Mufti and Chairman of the Supreme Council of Ulama (clergy), Abdul-Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Asheikh, on March 12, described the acts of fundraising and supporting the rebel Syrian Free Army as *jihad* under Islamic law, because, according to him, the Syrian regime is *kafir* (blasphemous or apostate). However, when it came to peaceful protests in Saudi Arabia by those demanding economic and political justice, these he declared to be evil.

This is a typical example of the selectiveness of the Wahhabi clergy, which always takes the side of the House of Saud. A former Mufti, Abdul Aziz bin Baz, was asked about Muslims wearing crosses and other ornaments; he declared it a sin. However, when he was asked about King Fahd wearing the Iron Cross of the British Empire, awarded to him by Queen Elizabeth II, making him an honorary British Knight in 1987, bin Baz replied that “if the Wali al-Amr (the ruler of Muslims) considers that wearing the cross has a benefit to the Muslim nation, then that cannot be considered an offense”!

This idea that the “ruler of the Muslim nation” cannot be faulted was an artificial creation of theologians who were used by Umayyad kings at the beginning of the Eighth Century to get immunity for oppressing the people and killing other Muslim opponents, to acquire and preserve power. They manipulated the following verses from the Quran as a blank check for their rule: “O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you” (Surah Al-Nisaa, verse 59).

One of the most vocal such theologians was **Abu Al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari** (875-935), the spearhead against the Islamic Renaissance. His concept was that Allah is the Creator of everything in existence, and so both evil and good acts of human beings are predestined by God's will. Therefore, the evil com-

mitted by the ruler is not his own creation, but that of God, and if people tried to change that evil, they would be committing a sin against God's will!

Al-Ash'ari, who started as student of the Mu'tazilites, turned against them in 912, and published his book *Clarification of the Bases of Religion*, in which he argued for absolutely literal interpretation of the Quran, in a clear attack on the Mu'tazilites, who were calling for a rational method of interpretation, because the divine injunctions of the Creator are accessible to human reason, and that reason must be the ultimate criterion for judging good and evil. The Mu'tazilites had become a strong philosophical and scientific school in the early Renaissance age in Basrah and Baghdad in the Eighth Century.

Al-Ash'ari attacked, for example, their view that God's references to his “seeing, hearing, having hands, ‘sitting on the throne,’ etc.” were metaphors. He claimed that God does indeed have such physical attributes, because that is what is stated in the Quran.

As part of the Seljuk power grab in Baghdad, **Nizam-ul Mulk Al-Tusi** (1018-92), the Seljuk vizir (minister) under Sultan Alp Arslan, raised the Ash'arites to prominence in Baghdad to take over the Shafi'i Sunni sect, while undermining the other Sunni sects, creating sectarian strife in Baghdad. He established the Nizamiya school of theology, the institution from which a later theologian emerged, **Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali** (1111-58), who launched the final and most fatal attack on the science and philosophy of the Islamic Renaissance. His most famous book, *The Destruction of Philosophers*, is entirely oriented to destroying the philosophical thoughts of Ibn Sina (980-1037), the greatest of Muslim scientists and philosophers of the Islamic Renaissance, and his predecessor Al-Farabi. Al-Ghazali's inquisition became a tool of destruction of rational thinking, pushing society into mystical fundamentalism. The socially and economically weakened and divided Islamic state became an easy prey for the Venetian-run Crusades, and later, the Mongol invasion.

—Hussein Askary