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, 2012 described the acts of fundraising and supporting the rebel Free Syrian 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 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).

Al-Ash'ari

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 committed 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!

This view was the opposite of the school of Mu'tazila, which called for a rational method of interpretation of the *Quran*, and argued that the divine injunctions of the Creator are accessible to human reason, and that reason must be the ultimate criterion for judging good and evil.

Al-Ash'ari, who started as a 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. 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 Arsalan, 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 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.

Ibn Taymiyyah

Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah, who was born under the Mongol occupation in 1263 in Harran (now southern Turkey), has today become the key theological source of the Wahhabi, Salafi, and jihadist takfiri groups. Ibn Taymiyyah was the source of inspiration of Abdul-Wahhab, such Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founders as Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna, and later the Afghan Mujahideen main preacher Abdullah Azzam, and Osama bin Laden. Not only did he preach the extreme literal interpretation of the *Quran*, but also became a Fatwa factory for armed groups and political leaders of his time who were willing to use him in their power struggle.

He preached complete non-toleration of Christians and Jews, and using public executions and maiming for the smallest criticism of the religion or suspicion of heresy. He declared many Muslim sects as worse than the infidels, such as the Alawites and Shia, saying they should be completely eliminated from the face of Earth. Many leaders of ISIL, al-Qaeda, al-Nusra and such "moderate" Syrian rebel groups as Army of Islam, use his fatwas against Alawites and Shias to capture and behead all those they can get their hands on. ISIL used a fatwa of Ibn Taymiyyah's to justify the public burning alive of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, for example.

Ibn Taymiyyah, who is called in Saudi and other Salafist schools Sheikh al-Islam, (the grand Sheikh of Islam), is one of the key sources on theological education in Saudi Arabia, and Saudi sponsored religious schools around the world.

—Hussein Askary