Introduction of Historical Issues in 'Ilm Al-Kalam

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Abstract

This is a paper on introduction of the historical issues pertaining to 'ilm al-kalām. There are many famous schools of thought in this field like Asya'irah, Mu'tazilah, Jabariyah, Shiites and the Kharijites. However, this study will only focus on two dominant sects in Islam, which are the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites, and some issues brought by the schools. It aims to sort and present the issues, and analyzing the methods and results of the issues. It is whether they were successful in promoting their ideas, the methods they use in doing so and the impacts they had on the modern thought of Islamic theology. Although there have been many studies and works on those sects, it is hoped that this small piece of work can benefit students who are at their starting level in knowing the historical issues pertaining to 'ilm al-kalam.

Keywords: Historical issues**,** Muslim sects, *Ilm Al-kalam*, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al- Jama'ah*, *mutakallimun.*

Introduction

Although they are considered as historical issues, the effects they had on the growth of Muslim's understanding and acceptance of Islam are still significant and *continuous* until this day. Without these historical issues, probably there would not be such a number of Islamic sciences in Islam. The emergence of different sects in Islam can be considered as a blessing from Allah towards humankinds. From these differences, we are able to understand more of the knowledge of Tauhid, the knowledge about God, from their works. More importantly we are able to understand and identify the true knowledge from the false, with the guidance from their thought as well. That is why it is considered as a tool to understand the knowledge of Allah.

The origin of the term *kalām*

As of the origin of the term *kalām*, the scholars had various kind of references to which it originated. Ibn Rushd believed that the term *kalām,* which literally means 'speech' or 'word', is used in Arabic translations of the works of Greek philosophers as a rendering of the term *logos* in its various senses of 'word', 'reason', and 'argument' (Wolfson, 1976). It is also used in Arabic translations from the Greek in the sense of any special branch of learning; while the plural participle of the term is used as a designation of the masters or exponents of any special branch of learning (Wolfson, 1976). This meaning of *kalam* as believed to be the translation of the Greek word is also shared by al-Shahrastāni and Ibn Khaldun (Wolfson, 1976).

Kalām in Arabic literally means 'speech' or 'word'. Technically it is a science of the knowledge of God which talks about His being, attributes, and also his messengers (Ahmad, 1974). As to

why the term '*kalam'* is used to know God, simply because the words of God are the main reference and the focal point of this science. The issue of 'created' or 'eternal' Quran (the words of Allah) was among the main point in historical ilm al-kalām, thus the term was rendered.

Ilm al-kalām is also used as another term for usuluddin or tauhid (Ahmad, 1974). As the meaning of Ilm al-kalām is to talk about Allah, Tauhid is the oneness of Allah. Therefore the term *kalām* is also referring to the tauhidic teaching.

In English, science of *kalam* is always translated to 'Islamic Theology', which consists of two Greek terms; theo and logos. Theo means God and logos; knowledge, therefore the 'knowledge of God'.

Kalam according to Shahrastāni and Ibn Khaldun

According to al-Shahrastani (d.1153), the term *kalam* was there prior to the founding of Mu'tazilism, and that the splendor of the science began during the reign of Harun al-Rashid. He also believed that the existence of a pre-mu'tazilites kalam may perhaps be inferred from the use of the term *mutakallimun* by Ibn Sa'd (d.845) as a designation of those who discussed the problem of the status of sinners in Islam raised by the pre-Mu'tazilites sect of the Murji'ah (Wolfson, 1976). Another rendering was from the use of the term yatakallam by Ibn Kutaybah (d. 889) in connection with the discussion of the problem of free-will by the pre-Mu'tazilites (Wolfson, 1976)).

His view was shared with Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), who believed that *mutakallimun* had flourished prior to the rise of Mu'tazilism (Wolfson, 1976). Ibn Khaldun had explained the reasons behind the emergence of science of kalam in his *al-Muqaddimah* (Wolfson, 1976). As many of us know the disputes raised by Mu'tazilah which had mounted *ilm al-kalam* to its highest place, there were actually root cases to the cause.

Ibn Khaldun believed that argumentations formed by the intellect (*'aql*) began to be used in addition to the evidence derived from tradition, *and in this way the science of kalam originated* (Wolfson, 1976). This was after they have tried to explain the articles of faith using verses from the Quran and reports from the *sunnah*, and when differences of opinion occurred concerning details of these articles, they put efforts in explaining them using their capacity.

He further explained in details of the science of *ilm al-kalam* in his *Muqaddimah*, where he said that ilm al-kalam actually borrowed from the fiqh, the method of qiyas or anology (Wolfson, 1976). This is what he meant when he said that 'in this way the science of kalam originated', that the name *kalam* was given to the application of the method of analogy to problems of faith…(Wolfson, 1976).

Sectarianism in Islam

Before going further into the discussion of the historical issues in *ilm al-kalam*, it is best to know about the different school of thought in Islam and a brief background behind the emergence of sectarianism in Islam.

According to W. Montgomery Watt (1997), exponents of the sociology of knowledge would hold that all theological and philosophical ideas have a political or social reference. There are

connections between theology and politics, and this is one of the reasons that had caused the Muslims to get involved in sectarianism.

Al-Shahrastani used a formula which put fundamental points which were questions of dispute as an indicator to determine the basic divisions of Islamic sects (1984). He classified the sects in Islam into four, which are the Qadarites, the Sifatiya, the Khawarij or Kharijties, and the Shia. These four, according to him, intermingled and various sub-sects are derived from each, which amounting to seventy-three (Al-Shahrastani, 1984).

He also identified the different methods of procedures used by the writers of each sect which consist of two. The first one is to adapt questions as headings, and under each question give the views of all the groups and sects. The second is to use the names of individuals and founders of sects as headings, and to give their views on every question. Al-Shahrastani found the second method to be more accurate.

Chronologically, a theological factor first comes into contact with politics in certain disputes which took place among the followers 'Ali. This is pertaining to the history of the Shiites and the Kharijites as two among the group sect in Islam.

Shiites and Kharijites

Al-Shahrastani wrote in his milal wa al-nihal regarding the origin of Shiites and Kharijites which began after the demise of Uthman the third rightly guided caliph. The Shiites are those who follow only 'Ali. They derive their name from the fact that they are *par excellent* the party (*shi'a*) of 'Ali (Watt, 1997). They hold that his caliphate and imamate were based on designation and appointment, either open or hidden (al-Shahrastani, 1984). They also maintain that the imamate must remain in 'Ali's family because according to them imamate is not a civil matter validly settled by the will of the people appointing an imam of their own choosing. For them, it is a fundamental matter and a basic element of religion (al-Shahrastani, 1984).

While the *kharijites* were among the supporters of 'Ali at their first appearance, but later drew themselves out (*kharaja*) and formed a new sect that is against 'Ali and Mu'awiyah (Watt, 1997). The men concerned in the kharijites risings were not of Mecca not Medinan origin, but men from nomadic tribes (Watt, 1997).

Al-Shahrastani quoted a *hadith* (reports) of the prophet in one battle where a man named Dhu al-Khuwaisira al-Tamimi said to the prophet pbuh: 'Do justice, o Muhammad, for you have failed to do justice'. The Prophet pbuh replied 'if I do not do justice, who will?' but the accursed man reiterated what he had said and went on: 'this is a distribution in which the thought of God was not present'. To which the prophet said, 'out of the loins of this man a people will come forth who will flee from religion as an arrow flies from the bow'.

The prophet already foretold of what will be coming of that man's bloodline, the deviants of the true path.

Mu'tazilites

The Mu'tazilites are called the followers of divine justice and unity (Al-Shahrastani, 1984). They are also known as the *Qadariya* and *'Adliya*. They appeared during the first part of the eighth century which was founded by Wasil ibn 'Ata' (d. 748). The founders of other divisions of the group are of four; namely Mu'ammar, Abu al-Hudhayl and an-Nazzam, and Bishr Ibn al-Mu'tamir. They are also called anthropomorphist in the matter of deeds (Al-Shahrastani, 1984). They went to extremes on the question of the unity of God, and fell into *ta'til* by denying God's attributes. The basis of their belief occurred with regard to two subject matters namely, the first, dealing with the right conception of God, and the second is dealing with the power of God (Wolfson, 1976).

Wolfson stated that Mu'tazilism is divided into a nonphilosophical period and a philosophical period where the former employed methods which are described as 'the method of the Kalam' (1976). While the later, according to him is because of the influenced they had with Aristotle's conception of analogy (Wolfson, 1976).

The Mu'tazilites ara known with their five principles in Aqidah or Islamic belief. **The first** of the five principles is that of 'unity' or Tauhid, that is to imply that God is one. This discussion involved the attributes of God, and passed on to deeper questions like the words of God whether they are created and temporary, or uncreated therefore eternal (Watt, 1997).

The second of the five principles was that of Divine Justice ('adl) or righteousness. In this matter, they called themselves 'the people of unity and justice' *(ahlul 'adli wa al-tauhid)*. This principle linked with other principles than with the principle of justice. Justice in their term came to be primarily associated with their belief in the freedom of human will and the individual's responsibility for his acts. With regard to their concern of the moral laws in Islam, they are more to the outlook of the Khirajites and Qadarites, where they imposed on God to do justice. In their belief, if God condemns men to Hell for acts for which they were not responsible, He is acting unjustly (Watt, 1997; Ahmad, 1974).

The third principle is the promise and the threat (*al-wa'd wa al-wa'id*), or Paradise and Hell where it implies that God is bound to reward the obedient with Paradise as He has promised and to punish the obedient. This principle is in connection with the second one that is the Divine Justice (Ahmad, 1997). It also discusses about light and grave sins.

The fourth principle was that of the 'intermediate position' *(al-manzilah baina al-manzilatain)* believed to be the reason of Wasil's withdrawal from his master Hasan al-Basri, regarding the issue of the grave sinner. This fourth principle sees how Wasil decided to settle the position of the grave sinners who are still Muslim, to stay in between, that they are neither Muslim nor *kafir* (disbeliever) but they will be punished eternally in the Hellfire (Al-Jabbar, n.d)

The fifth principle was that of 'commanding the right and forbidding the wrong' (*al-amr bi al-ma'ruf, wa al-nahyu 'an al-munkar*). This was understood by the mu'tazilites and others as the obligation to maintain justice and oppose injustice by tongue, hand and sword, where one was able to do successfully (Watt, 1997). For the earlier Mu'tazilites, it implied supporting the 'Abbāsids.

Ash'arites and Maturidites

The ash'arites was founded by Abdul Hasan Ali bin Ismail al-Ash'ari (d. 935), a descendent of Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (Ahmad, 1974). He was born at Basra, in 873 and studied under the head of the Mu'tazilites there, al-Jubbā'ī. It seemed that he came to a conclusion that revelation was superior to reason as a guide to life, and decided to attach himself to those who explicitly gave first place to revelation (Watt, 1997). He also saw that mu'tazilism in general was becoming increasingly irrelevant to the contemporary situation.

At the age of forty, he declared his rejection of the Mu'tazilites (Ahmad, 1974). The doctrines he accepted were more particularly those of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, although he later changed his preference (Wolfson, 1976). Between elevating the rank of reason above revelation in the Mu'tazilism and claiming God is the controller of men's actions without any role from the men, he chose to side in the middle, and proposing the Sunnite thought and belief, or *ahl sunnah wa al-jamaah*.

With regards to **Maturidites**, the founder; Abu Mansur Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud (d.944) remains obscure despite his position (Watt, 1997). He must have been the contemporary of al-Ash'ari but virtually nothing is known of his life (Watt, 1997). However, we can find works describing the differences of view between the Ash'arite and the Maturidites by earlier European, but claimed as unreliable source, and in part are mistaken (Watt, 1997). Nevertheless, there were views in which they differ. It is claimed that the Maturidites *put the role of reason higher* than the Ash'arites (Ahmad, 1974). In fiqh, the Ash'arites was comfortable in ascribing to the *Hanafite* position, while Ash'ari, the Shafi'ites (Ahmad, 1974).

However, they also held many *similar* opinions. Abu Mansur al-Maturidi held very close view with that of al-Ash'ari, which made their school of thought put together under the basis for *ahlus sunnah wal jama'ah's* school of thought. Among the views is regarding the grave sinners whom are not considered as *kafir* so will not be eternally in hell (Watt, 1997). They remain the leaders of the school of Sunnite kalam.

Qadarites and Jabriyah

The word *Qadar* means God's determination, including what people choose to do (Wan Fariza Alyati, 2015). In this regards, we would expect that the doctrine will maintain that God determines everything, but in fact the term historically came to mean the opposite where they assert that qadar belongs to man, and man himself determines his own acts, not his Creator (Wan Fariza Alyati, 2015).

The alleged founder of Qadarism is Ma'bad al-Juhani, who had the reputation of being the first to discuss the question of *qadar*. One Qadarite tendency was to say that good actions are from God, but evil actions are from man. Another tendency was to say that both good and evilactions are from man, yet through an ability (*istatâ'a*) or power (*qudra*) given to man by God (Wan Fariza Alyati, 2015).

The doctrines of the Qadarites are in contrast with that of the Jabarites. *Jabr* is a doctrine which denies that a deed is in reality to be attributed to man, and ascribes it to God (Al-Shahrastani, 1984). There are two main groups of Jabrites which are:

(i)   The pure jabriya who do not allow any deed at all to man, not even the power to act;

(ii)   The moderate jabriya who admit that man has power, but maintain that it is a power which is in no way effective.

According to Al-Shahrastani, those who do not hold that this created power has any independent influence in originating or causing acts are *Jabriya* (Al-Shahrastani, 1984).

Major historical issues in ilm al-kalām

Al-Shahrastani in his *al-milal wa al-nihal* had already listed down four fundamental points or major principles of the issues, which I will highlight below.

The first is the attributes and the unity of God in relation to the attributes. This point includes the question of the existence of eternal attributes, which are affirmed by some and denied by others. It also involves an exposition of the essential attributes and attributes of action; of what is obligatory on God, and what is possible for him and what is impossible (Sharastani, 1984). This issue was a major debate between the Ash'arites, the Karramites, the Mujassima and the Mu'tazilites.

The second fundamental point is regarding with qadar and justice; which includes such questions as divine decree and predestination, pre-determination and acquisition, the willing of good and evil, that which is in within one's power and that which is within one's knowledge (ibid). This issue was debated among many other sects apart from the Ash'arites.

The third fundamental issue concerns 'promise and warning', names and judgment, al-asma' wa al-ahkam. This had sparked exchanges between Murji'ites, the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites and others; regarding such questions as iman (faith), repentance, warning, postponement, 'declaring someone an unbeliever', and 'leading astray' (Sharastani, 1984).

The fourth point that al-Shahrastani has listed was concerning revelation and reason, apostle and imamate; which includes such questions as the goodness of the good and the evil of the evil; the good or the best of God's doing, grace, sinlessness ('ismah) in prophets; the conditions required for the imamate whether it is based on appointment by decree as someone hold, or on the agreement of the community as others maintain; the manner of the transmission of the imamate according to those believing in agreement. This question had different groups of sect differ in their opinion such as the Shi'a, the khawarij, the Mu'tazila and the Ash'arites (Al-Shahrastani, 1984).

We will choose only one issue in this matter, which is the attributes of God, according to both schools.

Mu'tazilites

They are the ones who deny altogether the eternal attributes. The early theologians gave special attention to seven attributes of Allah which are the Knowing (omniscient), the Powerful (Almighty), the Willing, the Living, the Hearing, the Seeing, and the Speaking. And some theologians held that God has attributes corresponding to the names, such as Knowledge, Power, Will. To the Mu'tazilites, however, this was seen as introducing an element of multiplicity into the unity of God's nature or essence (Watt, 1997). They believe that God is 'knowing' by His

essence, 'powerful' by his essence, 'living' by his essence. This had led to their opinion whereby they believe that the speech of god is temporal and created in a place; therefore they believe that the words of Allah or the Quran are created (Watt, 1997). Their view is in contrast with that of Asha'irah.

The methods used by the mu'tazilites

In the case of anthropomorphic verses in the Quran, Wolfson in his '*The Philosophy of the Kalam'* claimed that al-Shahrastani meant to say that the philosophical Mu'tazilites blended the analogy used by the *Fiqh* in the mere sense of likeness with the analogy used by Aristotle in the sense of equality of ratios or relations (1976). For instance, the Mu'tazilites assert that the word 'hand' mentioned by Allah in the Quran means 'power and bounty', because their explanations of these terms are reducible to the form of equations, such as; Power and bounty are to God as face is to man, as well as other anthropomorphic (*mutashabihat*) verses (Wolfson, 1976).

Ash'arites

His main differences from the mu'tazilites which later became the principles in the Ash'arites can be summed up under four heads. First, he stressed that the Quran was uncreated (and was the very speech of God, and that it is eternal (Al-Ash'ari, 1981). Secondly, with regard to the anthropomorphic expressions in the Quran, he insisted that it must be simply accepted 'without specifying how' (*bi la kayfa*) (Al-Ash'ari, 1981). Thirdly, al-Ash'ari insisted that various eschatological matters must be taken as they stand and not explained as metaphors. Fourthly, he rejected the Mu'tazilites doctrine of free-will, or man's ability to do an act or its opposite

The Methods used by the Asha'rites

Using his knowledge and experience, al-Ash'ari came up with his view against Mu'tazilites' doctrine regarding the attributes of God which they denied. Ash'ari put to silent those who denied the attributes with an argument they could not answer. Using his sound logical argument backed by verses from the Quran, he argued that just as Allah's acts show that He is knowing, powerful and willing, so also do they show that he has knowledge, power and will (Shahrastani, 1984). Thus through knowledge come order and perfection, through power things occur and come into being, through will comes the determination of time, measure and form. He explained furthermore, when these attributes are ascribed to the essence, they cannot be conceived unless we say that the essence is 'living' with 'life'. (Shahrastani, 1984)

He added that God is knowing with knowledge, powerful with power, living with life, willing with will, speaking with speech, hearing with hearing, and seeing with sight. These attributes,al-Ash'ari said, are eternal and subsist in the essence of God. It cannot be said that they are not He, nor that they not other than He (Al-Shahrastani, 1984).

While the matter of God's knowledge, al-Ash'ari asserted that God's knowledge is one and is connected with all that is known; the impossible, the possible, the necessary, the existent and the non-existent (Al-Shahrastani, 1984)

Conclusion

The Mu'tazilites' doctrines gained popularity during the time of the Abbasid reign and became the state creed at the time of al-Ma'mun's ruling. However, due to its false nature, it was virtually banned from the center of the sunni world about at the end of the 11th century (Schmdtke, 2008). There are many claims and proofs that the Mu'tazilites were actually influenced by their opponents, like the philosophers, as what Wolfson analyzed in his book. It shows that the false doctrine would not survive entirely even with the remaining books and thoughts.

The Ash'arites on the other hand, lived to these days with majority of the Muslims followers regardless of their preferences in fiqh mazhab. They are known to be the founder of *ahlus sunnah wa al-jamaah* group and become the dominant belief in the Muslim world.

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