The Origins and Roots of the Kalām Theology of the Jahmiyyah and their Offshoots

In his essay, The Origins of Islamic Platonism: The School Tradition (published in P. Morewedge, "Islamic Philosophical Theology" 1979), F.E. Peters writes:

"There were many varieties of Platonism in Islam. One of the earliest of the Muslim Theologians**, Jahm ibn Ṣafwān** (d. 746), was promulgating a view of God remarkably different from that of his contemporaries and yet remarkably like the **negative theology** current in later Greek Neo-Platonism."

Classical theism, whether under the influence of Plato as was that of the Church Fathers, or under that of Aristotle as was that of the Scholastics, presented God as *actus purus*. Of the latter, Aquinas became the chief spokesman. Beginning with the idea of God as Pure Abstract Being, Aquinas maintained that all other attributes could be deduced with logical consistence from this single actuality or subsistence. In the *Summa Theologica* this monopolar idea is given its most rigorous form. The whole section from Q.3. Art.1 to Q.11. Art.4. is designed to prove that as Self-subsistent Being, God is without body, without imperfection, without limit, without mutability, without temporality, without parts.

Central to the idea of classical theism is the conception of God as a Necessary Being, the First Cause of all existences, Himself a pure actuality, simple and impassible — "without body, parts, and passions." This, without doubt, was the understanding of God held alike by Plato and Aristotle. For whatever their differences in other respects they were at one in their rational account of deity. True, Aristotle criticised his mentor, but in spite of

exclusively according to its concepts. Classical theism, as it is called, has therefore its origin in the notions of Plato and Aristotle rather than in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. "Not the Gospels and the Old Testament," declares Hartshorne, "but Greek philosophy was the decisive source for the Classical idea of divine perfection." [3]

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The people of kalām used a proof based on the philosophical language of Aristotle to demonstrate the universe had a beginning and therefore a creator. The nature of the proof they used forced them to describe this creator with the language and terms demanded by the proof.

Aristotle's "Ten Categories" aimed to describe whatever we observe in the world. Here they are, the first deals with "**what something is**":

1. substance (jawhar)

The rest are incidental attributes (a'raad) which deal with "**how it is**":

1. quantity (al-kam) - dimensions and measurable features, length, breadth, width and so on

2. <u>quality</u> (al-kayf) - perceived characteristics, color, shape, and so on.
3. <u>relation</u> (al-idaafah) - how a [substance](#) is in relation to others, above, below, right, left and so on.
4. <u>place</u> (al-ayn) - where it is
5. <u>time</u> (mataa) answering "when?" - temporal characteristics of the substance
6. <u>position</u> (al-wad') - how a substance's parts are ordered in relation to each other
7. <u>action</u> (yaf'al) acting - what a [substance](#) is doing
8. <u>affection</u> (yanfa'il) a [substance](#) being acted upon
9. <u>having</u> (al-mulk) - what the [substance](#) has on

The basic idea for the proof is that all things in the world are bodies (*ajsām*). Bodies possess incidental attributes (*aʿrāḍ*). The presence of these incidental attributes in bodies is taken as evidence that the bodies themselves are created because the bodies could not have preceded these attributes and nor acquired these attributes on their own. Hence, they are events (*ḥawādith*), which is that they came to be after not being.[1] Then upon the principle that infinite events in the past are impossible, everything in the universe, and the universe is a whole is proven to be originated. They made the knowledge of this rational demonstration, *ḥudūth al-ajsām*, to be the first and greatest obligation and something upon which a person's faith itself depends.[2]

This was the claim of the Jahmiyyah and Muʿtazilah and they were followed in this by the Ashʿariyyah, Māturidiyyah.[3] This particular observation, reflection and

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[1] Examples of such events are the formation of clouds, or the descending of rain, or the sprouting of seeds, or the bearing of fruits in a tree, or the rising and setting of the sun, or the alternation of the night and day and likewise, the states and conditions of happiness, sadness, illness, in a person, and likewise what emanates from a person of his actions, these are all things which came to be after not being.

[2] The first obligation upon the *mukallaf* (the one bound by the Sharīʿah obligations due to having reached maturity) is the two testimonials of faith, and not inspection, observation (*al-nadhar*) and nor the intent (al-qaṣd) for inspection and observation, and nor to start with the assumption of doubt (*al-shakk*). When the Prophet (ﷺ) sent Muʿādh (ﷺ) to Yemen he ordered him, "...*let the first thing you call them be to the testification that none has the right of worship except Allāh*..." (al-Bukhārī and Muslim). This is the position of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah* who guide themselves by the revealed texts.

[3] These are a sample of the Muʿtazilī, Ashʿarī and Māturīdī books which are in complete agreement on this point: *Sharḥ Uṣūl al-Khamsah* of al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (pp. 60-70), *Al-Ghunyah Fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nīsābūrī (p. 55), *al-Tawḥīd* of al-Māturīdī (p. 135),

deduction (*al-nadhar*, *al-iʿtibār* and *al-istidlāl*) they called to is one they innovated, not one that is legislated.[4]

Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah mentions that the Jahmiyyah and Muʿtazilah were the first to manifest this approach among the Muslims and as a result of it, they began to say that Allāh is not a *jism* (body) purified of *aʿrāḍ* (incidental attributes) and *abʿāḍ* (parts) and *ḥawādith* (events, occurrences) and *miqdār* (extent), *ḥadd* (demarcation) and the likes. What they meant by *aʿrāḍ* (incidental attributes) are Allāḥ's attributes and what they meant by *ḥawādith* (events) are Allāh's actions which are established with His self, and what they meant by *miqdār* is to deny Allāh's ʿuluww over His creation, and His being separate and distinct from them. And by negating *abʿāḍ* (parts) they also meant the negation of His ʿuluww and the attributes He informed of Himself such as face, hands and the likes. Refer to *Darʾ al-Taʿāruḍ* (8/98).

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al-Irshād of al-Juwaynī (p. 3) and *Sharh Jawharah al-Tawḥīd* of al-Bayjūrī (p. 38), and also the Sharh by al-Laqqānī (p. 24-25). And al-Juwaynī went to extremes in that he declared a disbeliever the one who reached the age of maturity, had the opportunity to look into this rational proof, but did not pursue it and then died. See *al-Shāmil Fī Uṣūl ad-Dīn*, pp. 15-22.

[4] Belief in a Creator is *fiṭriyy*, *ḍururiyy* (instictive, necessary) in humanity. Allāh, the Most High said, "**And (remember) when your Lord brought forth from the Children of Ādam, from their loins, their offspring and made them testify as to themselves (saying), "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes! We testify," lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Verily, we have been unaware of this**." (7:172). That which is found in the Qurʾān of the command to observe and reflect is for the purpose of recognizing Allāh's Ulūhiyyah, abandoning false worship, and for taking admonition. Ibn Kathīr comments on the verse, "**Do they not look in the dominion of the heavens and the earth and all things that Allāh has created, and that it may be that the end of their lives is near. In what message after this will they then believe?**" (7:185), with the following:

> [Meaning], do not those who reject our signs look in the dominion of Allāh and His ownership and control over the heavens and the earth and in whatever He has created so that they may reflect upon that, ponder over it and come to know that He is the one who has no equal, or like, and that it is the work of the One besides whom none is worthy of worship and sincere devotion. So as a result of this they may believe in Him, believe in His Messenger and repent and return to His obedience and abandon the various rivals (in worship) and idols and that they may be aware that their final time has come ever near and that they might die and perish upon their disbelief, and advance to the punishment of Allāh and the severity of His chastisement?

This is the saying that was inherited by the later kalām schools, the Ashʿariyyah and Māturīdiyyah, and the mechanisms of "taʾwīl" (metaphorical interpretation of the attributes, to explain them away and negate them) and "tafwīḍ" (assuming ignorance of the meanings of the texts of the attributes and leaving knowledge of their meanings to Allāh) were inventions to make the revealed texts to conform to this rational proof.

This orientation in describing the Creator is prominent in the philosophy of the Greeks. Plotinus (d. 270CE), had a notion of absolute oneness in his work "*The Six Enneads.*" The translators of the *Enneads*, Mackenna and Page, write in their introduction:

> Plotinus taught that there is a supreme, absolutely transcendent "One", which is beyond all categories of being and non-being. The concept of "being" is derived by us from the objects of human experience, but the infinite, transcendent One is beyond all such objects, and therefore is beyond the concepts derived from them. "Being" or "existence" is an attribute, and the One is beyond all attributes as their source. The One "cannot be any existing thing", and cannot be merely the sum of all such things, but "is prior to all existents" ... The One contains no division, multiplicity or distinction... Thus, no attributes can be assigned to the One... The One, beyond all attributes, including being and non-being, is the source of the world not through any act of creation, willful or otherwise, since activity cannot be ascribed to the unchangeable, immutable One. [5]

Plotinus's philosophy has been summarised succinctly in the following paragraph:

> The One (God) is the principle of all knowledge, and all things are dependent on Him. He has neither material nor spiritual qualities; neither knowledge nor will belong to Him. He is above all understanding, and can be best approached by **negative theology**. All we can attribute to Him is "oneness" in contrast to everything else, which implies multiplicity.[6]

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[5] Translated by Stephen Mackenna and B.S. Page (Larson Publications, 1995). Refer also to D.J. O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, (Clarendon Press, 1995).
[6] Refer to radicalacademy.com, accessed 18th July 2010.