

CHAPTER ONE

THE MEANING OF THE TERM *ASH'ARĪ*

THE TERM *ASH'ARĪ* is used for one who follows the way of Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī in doctrine out of guided conviction and not servile conformism [*taqlīd*]. Imām Abū al-Ḥasan—may Allah have mercy upon him—is like others who firmly held the banner of the way of the early generations, in order for those who see them to be guided. Ascription to him [in the matters of doctrine] is similar to ascription to Imām Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik, Shāfi'ī, and Aḥmad—may Allah be pleased with all of them—in the branches of jurisprudence. So even though they disagreed about the methods of deriving and extracting legal rulings, they were in agreement regarding the sources from which they took and the springs from which they drew.

In the fundamentals of the religion, Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī was similar to them in that he took only from the Holy Qur'ān and noble Sunna and treaded the path of the *Salaf* and ascribed himself to it. He is who he is only because he shed light on the path and was taken as its spokesman and made it well known to the Umma after people of blameworthy innovations and desires sought to extinguish it.

Imām Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī—may Allah have mercy upon him—said:

You should know that Abū al-Ḥasan did not innovate a novel opinion or develop a new doctrine. He only confirmed the doctrine of the *Salaf* and defended the way of the noble Companions of Allah's Messenger ﷺ. Ascription to him is only due to the fact that he was considered a spokesman for the way of the *Salaf* and had held firmly to it and established proofs and evidence for it. The one who follows him in that and treads his path in proofs is called an *Ash'arī*...

Shaykh al-Islam, 'Izz al-Dīn b. 'Abd al-Salām, mentioned that his [al-Ash'arī's] doctrine was unanimously agreed upon by the Shāfi'īs, Mālikīs, Ḥanafīs, and the virtuous Ḥanbalīs. [He mentioned] that his contemporaries who

agreed with him included the Shaykh of the Mālikīs in his time, Abu 'Amr b. al-Ḥāḥib, and the Shaykh of the Ḥanafīs, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ḥaṣīrī.²

Al-Ḥāfiẓ Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī—may Allah have mercy upon him—who was from the third rank of those who followed Imām al-Ash'arī,³ said:

Until the time came for our Shaykh, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī—may Allah have mercy upon him. He did not invent anything in the religion of Allah or bring a blameworthy innovation. Rather, he took the statements of the Companions, the followers, and those after them among the Imāms, regarding the fundamentals of the religion and aided them with additional commentary and clarification and demonstrated that their beliefs and what the Sacred Law brought in matters of creed are rationally sound—contrary to the claims of the people of vain desires who said that some of it does not withstand rational scrutiny.

His elucidations strengthened what was not [previously expounded upon] from Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamā'a and aided the beliefs of the past Imāms, such as Abū Ḥanīfa and Sufyān al-Thawrī from the people of Kufa, al-Awzā'ī and others from the people of the Levant, Mālik and al-Shāfi'ī from the people of the two Sacred Sanctuaries [Mecca and Medina], as well as those who traversed their way in the Ḥijāz and other lands, such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and others from the people of Ḥadīth, Layth b. Sa'd and others, and Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-Bukhārī and Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Naysabūrī—the two Imāms of the people of Prophetic reports, as well as the authors of the *Sunan* collections around which the Sacred Law revolves—may Allah be pleased with all of them.

Al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn 'Asākir—may Allah have mercy upon him—said:

² *Al-Ṭabaqāt*: 3:365.

³ See: *Tabyīn Kadhib al-Muftarī*: p. 103, and *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*: 3:397.

We do not concede that Abū al-Ḥasan invented a fifth school. He only established the doctrines of Ahl al-Sunna that were made obscure by the innovators. He explained the doctrines of the four [Imāms] who went before him—and others—that were vague, and he renewed the signposts of the Sacred Law that were obliterated by the rejection of the transgressors. Our ascription to him in matters pertaining to Divine Oneness does not mean that we blindly follow him and rely solely upon him in those matters; Rather, we agree with him in his method regarding Divine Oneness because of the soundness of its proofs—not out of servile conformism. Those among us who ascribe themselves to him only do so in order to be distinguished from the innovators who do not hold [his] beliefs, such as the various groups of the Mu'tazila, Jahmiyya, Karrāmiyya, anthropomorphists, Sālimiyya, and other groups of innovators and corrupt doctrines.

Al-Ash'arī was tasked with refuting them and he was able to subdue them and expose their innovations to those who did not know. We do not see the four Imāms differing in the fundamentals of the religion. On the contrary, we see that they were in agreement regarding their belief in the Oneness and transcendence of Allah, and they were united in their negation of resemblance [*tashbih*] from the Pre-eternal ﷻ. Al-Ash'arī—may Allah have mercy upon him—was upon their methodology. There is no blame on one who ascribes himself to him in this manner. No success is hoped for one who repudiates his [al-Ash'arī's] correct doctrine. If believing in Divine transcendence and shunning resemblance [between Allah and His creation] is considered Ash'arism, then all of the believers in Divine Oneness are Ash'aris! False accusations against a faction that ascribes itself to a believer in Divine Oneness will not harm in the least.⁴

See how he declared that ascription to Imām al-Ash'arī is in contradistinction to the people of blameworthy innovations and desires, and that he and those who ascribe themselves to him are upon the way of the *Salaf* and the four Imāms. He also said:

⁴ *Tabyīn Kadhib al-Muftarī*, p. 359.

And they [the Ash'arīs] are strict in their adherence to the Book and the Sunna; they shun the causes that lead to dissension; they are patient in their religion during times of affliction and trial; and they are victorious over their enemy without taking revenge or feuding. They do not abandon the Qur'ān and the Prophetic proofs and they do not follow the way of the Mu'atṭila (deniers) and Qadariyya in the rational sciences. Rather, in matter of doctrine, they gather between revelatory evidence and rational proofs. They avoid the extremism of the Mu'tazila, eschew the ways of the deniers, and they repudiate the negligence of the anthropomorphists and corporealists. With proofs, they expose the doctrines of the false sects. They reject the ways of the Jahmiyya; they disdain the Karrāmiyya and the Sālimiyya; they invalidate the beliefs of the Qadariyya; and they reject the doubts of the Jabriyya... Their doctrine is the most moderate of doctrines; their drinking-source contains the sweetest drink; their positions are the noblest of positions; and their ranks are the greatest of ranks. The insult of a detractor has no effect upon them, and the injury of an injurious person leaves no mark upon them.⁵

Imām al-Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī—may Allah have mercy upon him—said:

It should be known that neither Imām Abū al-Ḥasan nor Abū al-Manṣūr—may Allah be pleased with them and reward them with good on behalf of Islam—innovated an opinion from their own selves or derived a [distinct] doctrine; they only confirmed the doctrines of the *Salaf* and defended the way of the Companions of Allah's Messenger ﷺ... Both of them debated with the people of blameworthy innovation and misguidance until the innovators were cut down and fled in defeat.⁶

These are the Ash'arīs: the followers of Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī. So who, then, was this illustrious Imām?

⁵ Ibid., p. 397.

⁶ *Ithāf al-Sāda al-Muttaqīn*: 2:7.