



THEOLOGIAN'S OPINIONS ON THE ROLE OF AL-ASH'ARI'S BOOK "AL-IBANA AN USUL AD-DIYANA" IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC DOCTRINE

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Abstract. *This paper examines the views of prominent Muslim theologians and scholars on the significance of Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari's work «Al-Ibana 'an Usul ad-Diyana» («The Clarification of the Foundations of Religion») in shaping Islamic creed (aqidah) and theological discourse. The study analyzes both classical and modern scholarly assessments, highlighting the book's role in affirming Sunni orthodoxy, its polemical stance against Mu'tazilite and other heterodox doctrines, and its influence on subsequent theological developments within the Ash'arite school and broader Sunni tradition.*

The analysis concludes that «al-Ibana 'an Usul ad-Diyana» occupies a central place in the history of Islamic theology, serving as a foundational text for understanding the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah and the intellectual legacy of al-Ash'ari in defending Sunni doctrine against theological innovations.

Keywords: al-Ash'ari, Al-Ibana 'an Usul ad-Diyana, Islamic doctrine, Sunni theology, Ash'arite school, Ibn 'Asakir, al-Dhahabi, aqidah, Mu'tazilism, traditionalism, kalam, theological polemics.

INTRODUCTION

Abul Hasan Al-Ash'ari (873-936) was a pivotal figure in Islamic theology, renowned for his extensive writings on aqidah (creed), kalam (theological discourse), Qur'anic exegesis, and jurisprudence. His early works were influenced by Mu'tazilite rationalism, but he later renounced these views and became a staunch defender of Sunni orthodoxy. Among his most significant contributions is the book Al-Ibana 'an Uṣūl ad-Diyana

(«The Clarification of the Foundations of Religion»), which has been both celebrated and debated by scholars throughout Islamic history.

MAIN PART

A distinctive feature of Ahl al-Sunnah (Sunni Islam) is the emphasis on oral transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. This method was considered superior to reliance on written texts, as the living tradition ensured the accurate conveyance of nuanced theological and legal principles. Consequently, early works of the founders of the four Sunni schools of law (madhahib) were often less cited directly than the teachings transmitted by their students. The need for written compendia increased in later centuries as oral memory waned and new generations required concise, accessible texts.

It is widely believed that Al-Ash‘ari’s public renunciation of Mu‘tazilism was a strategic move to affirm his commitment to Sunni doctrine and gain acceptance within the broader Muslim community. Al-Ibana ‘an Uṣul ad-Diyana is thought to have been written in this context, serving as a manifesto of his adherence to Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah (the People of the Sunnah and the Community) (Prozorov, 2004:100; Sagdiyev, 2013:212).

Despite its significance, Al-Ibana was not universally accepted by all of Al-Ash‘ari’s followers. Some later Ash‘arite scholars questioned its authenticity or preferred other works, such as Al-Luma‘ fi al-Radd ‘ala Ahl al-Zaygh wa al-Bida‘. Nevertheless, numerous prominent scholars affirmed its authorship and theological importance:

Ibn ‘Asakir praised Al-Ash‘ari’s works for their precision and clarity, stating that Al-Ibana is essential for understanding his theological stance and his defense of Sunni creed against innovators.

Ibn ‘Asakir also emphasized that Al-Ash‘ari did not found a fifth madhhab, but rather defended the creed of the four Sunni imams and other scholars, refuting heretical sects such as the Mu‘tazilites, Jahmites, Karramites, and anthropomorphists.

Al-Dhahabi, the eminent hadith scholar, cited Al-Ibana as a key text by Al-Ash‘ari, noting its influence on later scholars, including Imam al-Nawawi, who copied it by hand.

Sayyid al-Murtada al-Zubaydi listed Al-Ibana among Al-Ash‘ari’s post-repentance works, alongside Al-Mujaz, Kitab Mufid fi al-Radd ‘ala al-Jahmiyya wa al-Mu‘tazila, and Maqalat al-Islamiyyin (al-Ash‘ari, 1990:18).

S.M. Prozorov, in *Islam as an Ideological System*, observes that Al-Ash‘ari’s emphasis on orthodoxy and polemics may have been partly self-serving, aimed at distancing himself from Mu‘tazilite associations and demonstrating loyalty to traditionalist Islam. Prozorov notes the dual nature of Al-Ibana: it is both anti-Mu‘tazilite and exhibits Hanbali tendencies in terminology and emphasis on absolute obedience to the Prophet. However, he also points out that Al-Ash‘ari’s theology retains rationalist methods, seeking to legitimize kalam within a traditionalist framework (Prozorov, 2004:123).

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DISCUSSION

S.M. Prozorov, in *Islam as an Ideological System*, observes that Al-Ash'ari's emphasis on orthodoxy and polemics may have been partly self-serving, aimed at distancing himself from Mu'tazilite associations and demonstrating loyalty to traditionalist Islam. Prozorov notes the dual nature of *Al-Ibana*: it is both anti-Mu'tazilite and exhibits Hanbali tendencies in terminology and emphasis on absolute obedience to the Prophet. However, he also points out that Al-Ash'ari's theology retains rationalist methods, seeking to legitimize kalam within a traditionalist framework.

Prozorov further discusses the context of Al-Ash'ari's repentance, including his alleged meeting with the Hanbali scholar al-Barbahari, who reportedly dismissed Al-Ash'ari's arguments until he produced a work affirming Sunni creed. Despite this, Hanbalites initially rejected *Al-Ibana*, and it was only later that it gained recognition among Sunni scholars.

Despite initial resistance, many later authorities affirmed *Al-Ibana* as an authentic work of Al-Ash'ari:

Al-Bayhaqi

Al-Dhahabi

Ibn Farḥun al-Maliki

Ibn Kathir

Ibn al-‘Imad al-Ḥanbali

Al-Ibana ‘an Uṣul ad-Diyana articulates the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah, which occupies a middle path between various theological extremes:

Faith (iman) consists of belief, speech, and action.

Major sinners remain believers but are considered transgressors; their ultimate fate is left to Allah’s judgment.

Human free will exists within divine decree; human actions are created by Allah.

Divine attributes mentioned in the Qur’an and Sunnah are affirmed without distortion, allegorical interpretation, or anthropomorphism.

All companions of the Prophet are to be loved and respected.

These principles were defended by Al-Ash‘ari in Al-Ibana, making it a foundational text for understanding Sunni orthodoxy.

CONCLUSION

Al-Ibana ‘an Uṣul ad-Diyana is a seminal work by Abul Hasan Al-Ash‘ari, written at a critical juncture in Islamic history when theological clarity and adherence to scriptural foundations were paramount. Despite initial controversy, it has been recognized by a broad spectrum of Sunni scholars as a vital contribution to Islamic creed. The book not only reflects Al-Ash‘ari’s personal theological journey but also serves as a bulwark for Sunni orthodoxy against heterodox innovations.

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