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Al-Asy'ari's Thought as a Middle Way in Islamic Theological Debates

Indra Fauzan*
Faculty of Political and Social Sciences
Universitas Sumatera Utara
Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara 20155, Indonesia
*Corresponding author: indra.fauzan@usu.ac.id
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6988-9491

Yofiendi Indah Indainanto
Vocational School
Universitas Diponegoro
Kota Semarang, Jawa Tengah 50275, Indonesia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7236-4087

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Abstract

This study investigates the theological contributions of Abu al-Hasan al-Asy'ari as a mediating figure in the polarised disputes of early Islamic thought. Utilising a qualitative literature review, it appraises the doctrines he articulated and their service in founding a kalām tradition characterised by a "middle way" between the rationalist Mu'tazilah, the hyper-determinist Jabariyah, and the literalist Ahl al-Hadith. Having begun his career in Mu'tazilah circles, al-Asy'ari receded from pure rationalism upon detecting its incapacity to harmonise the doctrines of divine justice and omnipotence. His subsequent doctrines including affirmation of divine attributes without likening them to creation “ithbāt bilā takyf” , the theory of human acquisition of actions “al-kasb”, a mediating position on the nature of the Qur'ān, and a graduated treatment of major perpetrators of sin, embody a methodical synthesis designed to preclude both excess and deficiency rather than a forced ecumenical compromise. The inquiry shows that al-Asy'ari's theological architecture became one of the most influential frameworks through which Sunni theologians addressed doctrinal disputes and came to define the creed of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah wal Jamā'ah. The study concludes by asserting that al-Asy'ari's enduring legacy is the robust theological paradigm he forged, a paradigm that continues to exert authoritative influence over Islamic orthodoxy.

Keywords: Al-Asyʻari, Islamic Theology, Kalām, Wasatiyyah, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah

Introduction

During the 3rd and 4th centuries Hijri (9th and 10th centuries CE), the Islamic intellectual milieu crystallised around vigorous theological debate. Scholars of Kalām elaborated their systems in response to a complex matrix of internal schisms and external pressures (Fakhry, 1970). The theological enterprise was fuelled in part by the political legacies of the Rashidun era and by the incursion of Hellenistic philosophical questions. Within this fluid environment, three principal currents of doctrine held the field. The first, the Mu'tazilah school, arose in Basra a century earlier. Its adherents, frequently described as Islamic rationalists, placed unyielding confidence in the capacity of the 'aql and in the strict application of al-'adl, doctrines which compelled them to affirm that the human agent enjoys unqualified, theologically unqualified autonomy in authoring his deeds (Nisa & Waeno, 2022).

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In the discourse of early Islamic thought, the Jabariyah faction advanced a rigorous determinism, positing that human will is absent and that individual actions are immutable divine decrees; thus, mankind is likened to marionettes, wholly manipulated by a divine puppeteer (Siswanto, 2017). Opposed to this complete volitional nullification, Opposed to this complete volitional nullification, the Muʿtazilah propounded a moral rationalism that affirmed genuine human agency as the proximate cause of moral acts, locating accountability in the exercise of divinely created capacities (qudra) whilst preserving both divine omniscience and sovereignty. Positioned between these extremes (Davids & Waghid, 2016; Hourani, 1976), the Ahl al-Hadith—adherents of the prophetic traditions, eschewed speculative theology and rational extrapolation, maintaining that the Qur'ān and Sunnah must be received in their ostensible meanings without recourse to allegorical interpretation. The friction among these perspectives intensified during the Abbasid era, particularly when the Mu'tazilah school was enshrined as the orthodoxy of the realm, ensuing in the mihnah, an inquisitorial regime, under Caliph al-Ma'mun, which sought to coerce explicit verbal assent to its determinist tenets (Tsafrir, 2004).

Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Ismail Al-Asy'ari (260-324 AH/873-935 CE) appears on the intellectual scene of the late third century AH against a backdrop of intense theological debate (Džilo & Mehmedi, 2018) (Muttaqin, 2014). A native of Basra, Al-Asy'ari was initially steeped in the doctrines of the Mu'tazilah, studying for four decades under the illustrious Abu Ali al-Jubba'i, whose influence at that time represented the zenith of Mu'tazilī learning (Ghani, 2015). This prolonged immersion in the rationalist tradition equipped Al-Asy'ari with a profound, almost intuitive grasp of its argumentative structures, enabling him to gauge its decisive strengths and critical limitations (Džilo & Mehmedi, 2018). In about the year 300 AH, however, he relinquished his Mu'tazilī allegiance and, in a striking and public gesture at the Basra Mosque, formally announced his new theological stance, thereby inaugurating the line of thought that he would articulate in the subsequent decades and that would prove decisive for Sunni theological development (Halverson, 2010).

The rupture in Al-Asy'ari's intellectual allegiance stemmed from acute, sustained disquiet, most succinctly crystallised in his notorious disputation with al-Jubba'i concerning the eschatological fate of three individuals: a mu'min, a kafir, and a minor (Sulaeman & Almisri, 2023). Al-Jubba'i's inability to render a compelling resolution while remaining faithful to the Mu'tazila axiom of justice laid bare the striking incapacity of that schema to harmonise divine justice with divine decrees in the face of moral asymmetry. Fifteen days of concentrated, solitary inquiry culminated in Al-Asy'ari's evident rupture with the Mu'tazila doctrine (Belo, 2007). His reversion was not, however, to the textualist orthodoxy of the Ahli Hadis; instead, he undertook to forge a mediator's scaffold that would secure the non-negotiables of Sunni dogma while deploying the instruments of rational scrutiny in its defence.

The present investigation contends that Al-Asy'ari's resultant theology was not merely eclectic. Rather, it sought to preserve the primacy of revelation while allowing reason to function as a tool for interpretation and defence. His theological edifice transcended mere, opportunistic eclecticism; it was a rigorously articulated methodological amalgam intended, at every junction, to vindicate the primacy of revelation while enfranchising reason as a subordinate, yet indispensable, ally in its exegesis. By advancing this via media, Al-Asy'ari moulded a robust, coherent corpus that not only withstood contemporary objections but subsequently provided the axiomatic foundation for the enduring theology of the Ahlus Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah.

Literature Review

Research into Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī's theological contributions must be grounded in the corpus he bequeathed, for these texts delineate the contours of his exegetical method and dogmatic nucleus (Ibrahim & Zein, 2014). The foundational elements of his oeuvre comprise Al-Ibānah ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyānah, wherein he articulates the principal tenets of his creed and

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engages critically with the Muʿtazilite position; Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn, a systematic heresiological survey cataloguing the divergent sects of the ummah with scholarly rigour and comparative neutrality; and Al-Lumaʿ fī al-Radd ʿalā Ahl al-Zaygh wa al-Bidaʿ, wherein he deploys sophisticated dialectical proofs in vindication of Sunni orthodoxy (Bodman, 2011). Read in conjunction, these texts disclose al-Ashʿarī's adept synthesis of naqlī and ʿaqlī modes of proof — a synthesis upon which his broader theological architecture rests.

Subsequent commentary, both within the classical Muslim scholarly tradition and modern historiography, consistently situates the Ashʿarī movement as a corrective response to Muʿtazilite ascendancy. Al-Shahrastānī's Al-Milal wa al-Nihal and contemporary surveys of Islamic intellectual history concur that al-Ashʿarī sought to mediate the rationalist methodologies bequeathed by the Muʿtazilah with the transmitted authority of Hadīth learning. Historians have characterised this via media as prudent and measured — a synthesis which, by accommodating divergent constituencies, secured the allegiance of the Sunni majority. Nasution (1994) meticulously traced al-Ashʿarī's doctrinal positioning along the theological spectrum, underscoring his deliberate aversion to the poles of his era whilst elaborating a distinctive and cohesive alternative (Muthalib, 2018).

Among the most consequential contributions to this field remains that of Daniel Gimaret (1990), widely regarded as the foremost specialist on al-Ashʿarī's original teachings. His work is indispensable for distinguishing al-Ashʿarī's own doctrines from later accretions within the Ashʿarite tradition, furnishing the most rigorous reconstruction of his theological system and demonstrating the coherence and originality of his doctrinal positions.

Richard M. Frank (2007), by contrast, interprets al-Ashʿarī as a systematic theologian whose project sought to reconcile rational argumentation with Sunni orthodoxy, thereby laying the foundations for classical Ashʿarite scholasticism. Frank's analysis is particularly illuminating in disclosing the structural logic underpinning al-Ashʿarī's theological method, revealing it as a deliberate and architecturally coherent enterprise rather than a mere succession of ad hoc compromises.

George Makdisi (1990) situates the enduring success of Ashʿarism within a broader socio-institutional framework, attributing its influence in considerable measure to its integration within the madrasa system and its embeddedness within Sunni scholarly culture, a reading that complements doctrinal analyses by foregrounding the institutional conditions of theological authority. Josef van Ess (2017) contextualises al-Ashʿarī within the wider evolution of early Islamic theology, emphasising the dynamic interaction between nascent Sunni orthodoxy and competing rationalist movements, and situating his contributions within a long-term intellectual history spanning the formative centuries of Islamic thought. Frank Griffel (2009), meanwhile, regards Ashʿarism as a living and adaptive theological tradition whose influence extended considerably beyond al-Ashʿarī's own lifetime, shaping successive developments in Sunni kalām across generations of scholarship.

Whilst this body of contemporary scholarship is indispensable, a persistent lacuna remains: analyses frequently treat al-Ashʿarī's doctrines in relative isolation, seldom probing the internal mechanisms that sustain his characteristic wasaṭiyyah. The consequence is a presentation of his thought as a ledger of compromises rather than an articulated hermeneutic consistently brought to bear upon discrete controversies.

This study seeks to address that deficiency by not merely cataloguing the doctrines of the Ashʿarī school, but by extricating and scrutinising the mediating instruments al-Ashʿarī invoked in addressing each doctrinal challenge (Sulaeman & Almisri, 2023). The argument will demonstrate that his wasaṭiyyah constitutes not a static endpoint but a deliberate and layered intellectual architecture, designed to preserve the integrity of Sunni orthodoxy whilst navigating the competing rationalist and traditionalist demands of his age (Fenner, 1990).

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Method

This investigation adopts a qualitative research strategy centred on a literature review (library research) (Garoufallou et al., 2013). Such a methodology is warranted because its primary objective is to dissect theological reflections, concepts, and doctrines enshrined within the historical corpus and scholarly writings. Data were procured from two distinct source categories. Primary materials consist of translated and annotated editions of foundational texts attributed to Imam al-Ashʾarī, notably the Al-Ibānah ʿan uṣūl al-dīnah and the Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn, thereby facilitating direct engagement with his argumentative constructs.

Secondary materials encompass a broad spectrum of pertinent scholarly literature monographs, refereed journal contributions, and doctoral theses addressing the trajectory of Islamic theology, the ʿAshʾarī school, and its thematic juxtaposition with the Muʿtazilah and Jabariyyah traditions. Data accrual proceeded through a threefold process of examination, identification, and synthesis of pertinent texts, erecting robust theoretical scaffolding. A descriptive-analytical and comparative paradigm-oriented analytical facets (Seixas et al., 2017). Each principal doctrine articulated by al-Ashʾarī is subjected first to rigorous explication, subsequently juxtaposed with corresponding tenets from the Muʿtazilah and Jabariyyah. This comparative procedure is intended to elucidate al-Ashʾarī's designation as the "middle path" with systematic clarity, thereby substantiating the investigation's principal thesis.

Results and Discussion

Intellectual Turning Point: Analysis of Al-Asy'ari's Departure from Mu'tazilah

Al-Asy'ari's rejection of Mu'tazilism signified more than a mere doctrinal shift; it inaugurated a profound intellectual upheaval that reconfigured the trajectory of Islamic dogmatics (Rohe, 2015). To appreciate the full weight of this rupture, one must examine the deliberations of the so-called “brothers” experiment, particularly the dialogue with al-Jubba’i, his mentor. Al-Asy'ari presented a hermeneutical triptych designed to test the elastic limits of ethical rationalism: what will become of a pious Muslim, a stubborn apostate, and a child who dies before the age of discernment on the Day of Resurrection? Al-Jubba’i, applying the Mu'tazilite axiom of divine justice, adjudicated that the faithful soul would enter the Garden, the infidel would be consigned to the Fire, and the child would be sheltered from Hell's flames yet would not be admitted to the highest paradisiacal tiers, having not accumulated the requisite record of moral submission (Alimuddin, 2017).

Al-Asy'ari pushes the question further: Suppose the child berates God, “You did not allow me enough time; had I lived longer, I would have obeyed." What reply does God make? Al-Jubba'i retorts that God would declare, "I foreknew that had you lived, you would have sinned and eventually descended into hell; hence your early death was the more merciful disposition." At this point, Al-Asy'ari plants the decisive counter: "Then the denizen of hell will plead, 'O God, why did You not take my life at the beginning of my existence so that I might not suffer this punishment?'" According to later Ashʿarī sources, al-Jubbāʾī was unable to provide a satisfactory response (Hoover, 2009). The exchange thus illuminates the inner contradictions haunting Mu'tazilah thought. In their zealous defence of justice (al-'adl) and of the conditional promises and threats (al-wa'd wa al-wa'id) that rally the human will, they inadvertently constricted the scope of divine power and sovereign agency (Naqvi & Hasan, 2018). Confined to the constraints of human reason, they ventured beyond reason's limits while neglecting the profundity of the divine decree (Lubis & Nasution, 2025).

Al-Asy'ari's departure from Mu'tazilī thought represented a decisive repudiation of the principle of unqualified rational autonomy in interpreting the Qur'ān and Hadīth (Awalluddin, 2019). However, he preserved a role for reason that more traditional Hadīth scholars had denied; rather, he recalibrated the interaction of reason and revelation (Ayday, 2022). For Al-Asy'ari,

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reason retains the status of a legitimate and necessary instrument (Kafrawi & Djati, 2010). However, its appointed task is constrained to the interpretation, elucidation, and reasoned defence of truths that revelation has already fixed. Thus, the centre of gravity moves from an unbounded rational critique to a rationality that is ever deferential to the foundational texts. Al-Asy'ari was acutely aware of the sectarian fracturing that excessive theological partisanship could unleash and therefore sought to construct a theological synthesis that could, in the long term, restore communal cohesion beneath a single, unifying orthodoxy (Ladjal, 2015).

Mediating Anthropomorphism and Denial: The Doctrine of the Attributes of God (The Nature of God)

During the period of Al-Ash'arī, the question of divine attributes constituted one of the most fevered theological disputes (Belo, 2007). The debate crystallised into two principal yet polar oppositional camps. The literalist faction, including both the Musyabbihah who asserted corporeal resemblance and the Mujassimah who maintained a fully corporeal conception, insisted upon a straightforward reading of scriptural statements, interpreting the vocabulary of "Hand" (Yadullah), "Face" (Wajhullah), and the asserted settlement upon the Throne (Istiwa) as unqualified description (Effendy & Rustandi, 2020). They maintained that such exegesis necessitates attributing to God characteristics that resemble created forms. The alternative position, defended by the Mu'tazilah, was grounded in a rigorous commitment to the purity of the divine oneness (tawhid) and the absolute transcendence (tanzih) of the deity (Campanini, 2012). In their view, postulating attributes as discrete ontological realia alongside the divine essence would entail an unwelcome and ontologically plural theism. They held that, if attributes such as Knowing, Will, and Power were themselves uncreated (qadim) and parallel to the divine essence, the result would be multiple uncreated principles and thus an implicit concession to shirk. For this reason, they resolved the question by denying the attributes (ta'til), arguing that divine knowledge, for example, is realised directly and immediately through the essence of God, not through any additional property of knowing (Azadegan, 2022).

Al-Asy’ari articulated a coherent position that he termed the principle of itsbāt bilā takyf (affirmation without inquisition into modality) (Mouftah, 2019). This doctrine constitutes a finely calibrated interpretive instrument within Islamic apologetics. Initially, he aligned himself with the tradition of the Hadīth masters by affirming (itsbāt) that the Divine does subsist in the predicates documented in the Qurʾān and the Prophetic tradition (Sheibani, 2014). Such predicates as 'ilm (knowledge), qudra (omnipotence), ḥayāh (living agency), samʿ (audition), and baṣar (vision) are acknowledged to be real, necessary, and coexistent with the Divine essence (Yazdani, 2010). They are neither concealed within it nor wholly external to it. This formulation thereby repudiates with precision the Muʿtazilī position of categorical negation.

Second, in his commentary on mutashabih verses, al-A'sh'arī imposes decisive rational checks, stipulating that inquiry into kaifa is forbidden and that any attempt to draw tashbih is already a misstep (Hussain, 1993). He insists that the phrase, as reported, must be accepted precisely as articulated. However, the believer is mandated to hold simultaneously that the "hand" in question is wholly dissimilar to any limb of a created being, and the "face" is entirely unlike any creature's visage. Such attributes must therefore be apprehended wholly congruent with divine majesty. At the same time, the specific manner or finite limits of their being is left wholly inscrutable (lā yukayyaf wa lā yuḥadd). By this adjudication, al-A'sh'arī secured the inerrancy of the textual corpus, satisfying the partisans of tradition, while sustaining the absolute transcendence of the divine, thereby addressing rationalist apprehensions (Ukeles, 2014). He thereby negotiated a decisive via media that successfully evades the errors of tashbih and the opposite excess of taʿṭīl.

Al-Asyʻari's treatment of divine attributes illustrates a dynamic interplay between rational inquiry and loyalty to the scriptural witness (Belo, 2007). The resulting synthesis exceeds mere accommodation; it operates as a discernment of epistemic boundaries, recognising the

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incapacity of human thought to traverse the divine-inflected dimension of reality. He disavows a strictly literal hermeneutic precisely because such an interpretation risks assimilating the Transcendent to the contingent, a gesture that compromises the absolute unity of tawhid (Bhutto, 2015; Nasution et al., 2024). Conversely, he also contests the Mu‘tazilite negation of all attributes, which, although motivated by a zeal for tawhid’s purity, evacuates the revelatory corpus of substantive reference and leaves the community without palpable, empirical anchors in divine self-disclosure.

Firmly establishing the triadic principle of isbat, by which affirmation is disjoined from anthropomorphic specification, Al-Asy‘ari located his thought within a distinctive epistemology of faith: the conviction that the text is to be received in its outward form yet read against the limitless horizon of the divine (Gutas, 2011). From this vantage, his doctrine matured into a measured theological paradigm that subsequently undergirded mainstream Sunni thought; it thus succeeded in harmonising the two antithetical inclinations that threaten the revelatory corpus: literalism that constrains it and rationalistic critique that dissipates its authority (Neuwirth, 2016).

Situated within a broader theological landscape, this doctrinal position reveals how classical Islamic thought endeavoured to harmonise the imperative of revealed authority with the legitimate quest for rational demonstration (Nasution et al., 2025). By so doing, the tradition sustained an intellectually coherent and spiritually rich belief system, avoiding the reduction of the faith to mere rationalism while safeguarding it from fideism. This careful calibration not only preserved the transcendental dimensions of the faith, which invite wonder and reverence, but also equipped its adherents with reasoned arguments that could withstand critical scrutiny.

The Theory of Al-Kasb: The Middle Path Between Determinism and Free Will

Al-Ash'arī's most intricate doctrine, which has come to distinguish his theological system, is the theory of al-kasb or acquisition, which he elaborated to mediate between the tension of divine predestination and human agency (Hussain, 1993). He again found himself caught between two polar positions. He again found himself caught between two polar positions. What classical heresiographers designated as the Jabariyyah, a label applied polemically rather than to a self-identified, institutionally coherent theological school comparable to the Ashʿariyyah or Muʿtazilah, represented the extreme position that every event is determined absolutely by God, leaving no remainder for human initiative; in this scheme, the individual is no more than a passive receptacle for divine acts, and the idea of moral accountability collapses (Farooq, 2020). The rival Qadariyah and Mu'tazilah, by contrast, insisted that human beings themselves generate their deeds, so that justice in God's dispensation is preserved; to punish one for acts one has not authored is, they argued, the very definition of injustice (Ayish, 2015). Nevertheless, Al-Asy’ari and the majority of Sunni theologians saw an unwitting form of shirk in this latter position, for it posits a second creator whose agency rivals that of God (Halverson, 2010).

To resolve the tension between divine authorship and moral accountability, Al-Asy’ari formulated the theory of kasb. The doctrine unfolds in the following manner: God, as the sole Creator (Al-Khaliq), brings every reality, including human deeds, into being (Abrahamov, 1989). Nevertheless, such deeds materialise through a volumetric capacity (qudrah) which God instils in human beings concurrently with the occurrence of the actions, not precedently. The human agency is thus not a productive power but a striving to the point of attainment or a form of acquisition (kasb or iktisab) of deeds already generated by God. Consequently, while the actions are purely divine creations, the individual's identification with them constitutes the moral ownership that underlies the imperatives of responsibility (taklīf) and the differential treatment of reward and punishment.

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Categories of Analysis	Jabariyah (Extreme Determinism)	Mu'tazilah/Qadariyah (Absolute Free Will)	Ash'ariyah (Middle Path via Kasb)
Creator of Actions (Khaliq al-Af'al)	God is absolutely.	Human beings, as a consequence of God's justice.	God is absolutely; He is the only Creator.
The Role of Humans	Passive, like puppets. No choice or will.	Active, as the Creator (khaliq) of their actions.	Agent who acquires actions (muktasib or kāsib).
Human Power (Qudrah)	No effective power.	Adequate power created by God before action.	Ineffective power is created by God simultaneously with action.
The Basis of Moral Responsibility (Taklīf)	There is no logical basis; it is purely coercion (jabr).	Humans are responsible because they are the creators of their actions.	Humans are responsible because they "strive for" (kasb) the actions created by God.

Table 1. Comparison of Theological Views on the Creation of Human Actions: Jabariyah, Mu'tazilah/Qadariyah, and Asy'ariyah
Source: Author, 2026

The following table presents the divergent positions adopted by the three classical Islamic theological schools—Jabariyah, Mu'tazilah/Qadariyah, and Asy'ariyah—on the intricate interaction among God, humanity, and volitional behaviour (Grabus, 2012). Regarding the originator of acts (khaliq al-af'al), the Jabariyah school asserts a rigorous form of determinism, maintaining that God alone is the Creator of every act, leaving no room for human volition. In contrast, the Mu'tazilah/Qadariyah stream contends that human beings generate their deeds as a necessary corollary of God's justice, thus affirming absolute freedom (Zarkasyi, 2014). The Asy'ariyah position articulates a mediating stance, affirming that God is indeed the sole Creator while acknowledging that humans can be designated as agents or casabella (kāsib) for the deeds God has brought into being (Hussain, 1993).

Concerning the role assigned to humanity, the Jabariyah, by denying any choice whatsoever, presents the individual as a wholly passive being, kinematically akin to a marionette. Conversely, the Mu'tazilah portrays the individual as a proactive agent capable of producing acts. The Asy'ariyah position depicts the human being as one who exerts effort (kāsib) toward acts that are ultimately instantiated by the divine will (Belo, 2007). On the separate but related question of human capacity (qudrah), the Jabariyah outright negates its reality; the Mu'tazilah affirms a granted capacity that is potent prior to the act itself; the Asy'ariyah school, however, insists that this capacity is itself ineffectual, arising only concurrently with the act it purportedly enables (Annafiri & Aziz, 2022).

From the vantage point of taklīf, the Jabariyah position invites reproach because its insistence on human passivity appears to dissolve the very framework of justice: if agents are inert, then the attribution of moral responsibility reduces, at best, to mere coercive imposition (Padela & Mohiuddin, 2015). In contrast, the Mu'tazilah school maintains that moral agents are entirely accountable because they manufacture their deeds. The Asy'ariyah, striving for equilibrium between these poles, contends that moral responsibility endures, since creatures are regarded as striving agents (kasb) concerning their actions, albeit acknowledging that ultimate authorship belongs to the deity (Vasalou, 2008). The schematic thus delineates a pivotal dialectic within Islamic theology concerning the intersection of voluntary action and divine decree: Jabariyah foregrounds divine omnipotence, Mu'tazilah underscores the liberality of the human will, and the Asy'ariyah mediates by positing kasb as a supplementary, reconciliatory principle.

Some classical and modern critics argue that the Asy'ari doctrine of kasb approaches a form of theological determinism because God remains the creator of all human acts. Nevertheless, proponents of Asy'ari theology contend that kasb provides a conceptual basis for moral responsibility by distinguishing between divine creation of acts and human participation in, or acquisition of, those acts. Whether this formulation adequately resolves the tension between predestination and free will remains a subject of ongoing theological and philosophical discussion (Nasution et al., 2026). This critique, however, overlooks the core concern that

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animated Al-Ashʿarī (Hussain, 1993). His immediate aim was not the persuasion of philosophers, but the defence of the twin pillars of Islamic faith, tawḥīd and unqualified divine sovereignty (Saputra & Nasution, 2026). Any suggestion that mortals generate their deeds, a position endorsed by the Muʿtazilah, betrays a latent polytheism and, to Al-Ashʿarī, is utterly unallowable. The kasb formulation, regardless of its recondite language, secures its principal function: it affirms that God alone retains exclusive title to creation (khalq) while offering, if only tenuously, a thread by which human moral agency may be upheld. The resultant philosophical indistinctness, therefore, registers not as a defect but as the necessary concession for preserving dogmatic integrity.

Notwithstanding its internal theological logic, a substantial body of scholarship has argued with considerable force that kasb does not genuinely resolve the problem of human freedom but merely redescribes it in more elaborate theological language,a critique that demands sustained engagement. Harry Austryn Wolfson (1976), in The Philosophy of the Kalām, contended that the doctrine is philosophically vacuous: if God creates both the act and the concurrent qudrah,a capacity the agent cannot exercise independently then the human contribution to the act is so attenuated as to be indistinguishable from the passivity of the Jabariyyah, rendering kasb a terminological relabelling rather than a genuine solution. Josef van Ess (2006) further demonstrated that even later Ashʿarī theologians Al-Bāqillānī, Al-Juwaynī, and Al-Ghazālī interpreted kasb in divergent and sometimes incompatible ways, revealing that it functioned less as a precise philosophical resolution than as a malleable theological framework that left crucial questions unresolved. Frank Griffel (2009), examining Al-Ghazālī's philosophical theology, observed that Al-Ghazālī himself tacitly attributed to human beings a degree of causal efficacy in the Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn that sits uneasily with strict Ashʿarī occasionalism, suggesting that even the tradition's most sophisticated exponent sensed the doctrine's insufficiency.

The persistence of kasb as the dominant Sunnī framework, notwithstanding these criticisms, is nevertheless intelligible once one recognises that Al-Ashʿarī's primary desiderata were theological rather than philosophical: his overriding concern was the defence of tawḥīd against the latent polytheism he perceived in the Muʿtazilī position, and kasb, whatever its metaphysical imprecision, discharged that function whilst preserving the minimum conceptual scaffold required to sustain the normative framework of taklīf (Vasalou, 2008). The philosophical indeterminacy that critics from Wolfson to van Ess identify as a conceptual failure may therefore be read, more charitably, as a deliberately preserved ambiguity—the necessary cost of maintaining doctrinal integrity across two irreducible theological commitments.

The Legacy and Hegemony of Asy'arī Theology

Al-Asy’ari consistently employed his middle-way approach across various related theological matters (Ladjal, 2015). On the question of the Qur'ān, the debate turned on the terms of eternality (qudama) and newly-createdness (ḥadīth) of the text itself (Ediwibowo, 2016). The Mu'tazila maintained that the Qur'ān must be a created entity (makhlūq) lest two uncaused realities be posited, a position that contradicts strict monotheism (Campanini, 2012). In opposition, scholars grouped around Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal affirmed the text as the uncreated speech of the Divine. Al-Asy’ari advanced a mediating view by separating the nāfsī speech of God from its manifest, linguistic instantiation. The nāfsī speech, denoted as kalām nafsī, is God's attribute that is unconditioned by letters or acoustic phenomena, thus proper to the Divine essence and uncreated (Aradi, 2013).

In contrast, kalām lafẓī describes the articulation of that attribute that occurs in syllables, words, and sounds and is temporally and ontologically contingent. By this demarcation, Al-Asy’ari claimed that the Qur'ān in its qualitative root remains eternal and unmixed with createdness (thereby satisfying the position of the Ḥanbalis) (Choudhury, 2016). At the same

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time, it is newly created in its audible and written forms, a conclusion that addresses the logic of the Mu'tazila without succumbing to their exclusivist logic.

The soteriological middle ground is important to ponder Confronted with the question of major sinners' standing, Al-Asy'ari emphatically distanced himself from the Khawarij, who branded such individuals as outright infidels, and equally rejected the Mu'tazilah doctrine of a ternary state, the so-called al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn, positing that the sinner occupies a zone that is neither the full faith of the believer nor the rejection of the infidel (Hussain, 1979). Instead, Al-Ashʿari maintained that a Muslim who perpetrates a major sin (kabīrah) does not thereby cease to be a believer (muʾmin), although he may be regarded as sinful (fāsiq). In contrast to the Khārijite stance, which classified grave sinners as unbelievers, and the Muʿtazilite doctrine of al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn, al-Ashʿari held that such individuals remain within the community of faith. Their ultimate fate in the hereafter rests upon God's will: they may be forgiven or subjected to punishment that is proportionate to their sins, but they are not destined for eternal damnation. This position enabled Ashʿari theology to uphold both the seriousness of moral transgression and the doctrines of divine mercy and intercession.

The Mu'tazilah maintain, based on rational analysis, that the vision of God in the hereafter is impossible, for seeing necessitates an object's location within space and orientation, a contingency that a non-material deity cannot fulfil. In contrast, Al-Asy'ari subsumes rational inquiry under the supremacy of revelation (Mavil, 2014).

In light of Qur'ān 75:22-23 and corresponding authentic reports, he declares that the faithful will behold God in the afterlife. He circumscribes the manner of this perception, however, insisting that it is an experience incommensurable with any worldly sight, a reality proportionate to the divine majesty. The ascendancy of Asy'ari theology is attributable to its philosophical coherence and contingent historical and political developments (Ladjal, 2015). Following Al-Asy'ari, subsequent thinkers, most notably al-Bāqillānī, al-Juwaynī, and finally the towering figure of Imam al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), consolidated, elaborated, and vigorously defended the Ash'arite doctrinal corpus (Leaman, 1996). Al-Ghazālī, exercising a far-reaching influence, harmonised the Asy'arī worldview with the mystical currents of Sufism, securing its status as a foundational edifice of normative Sunni belief.

The ascendancy of Asy'ariyah theology was decisively aided by changing political contexts. The weakening of Mu'tazilah doctrine accelerated when Caliph al-Mutawakkil rescinded the mihnah, provoking widespread animus against its hyper-rationalism, and the appearance of Al-Asy'ari was fortuitous, coinciding precisely with this anti-Mu'tazilah headwind (Belo, 2007). Crucially, Asy'ariyah gained enduring backing from the rising Sunni polities of the age, most conspicuously the Seljuk dynasty. Nizam al-Mulk, the dynasty's pre-eminent vizier, championed Asy'ariyah as the state doctrine and inaugurated a web of illustrious educational complexes, known as Nizamiyahs, which dotted the Seljuk realm and disseminated Asy'arī teachings with systematic rigour (Forouzani & Pirouzan, 2017).

This state-sponsored scaffolding elevated the school, converting it from a viable heterodoxy to the uncontested orthodoxy of the age. Its doctrine then set the curriculum of the pre-eminent seminaries, from Baghdad to Nishapur, and eventually radiated across Dar al-Islam, reaching as far as the archipelago of Indonesia.

The doctrine's intellectual disposition—positioned as a measured via media—combined with endorsements by luminary scholars and steadfast political patronage to isolate, consolidate, and sovereignise Asy'ariyah as the principal and, by that token, paradigmatic representation of the creed of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah (Lewental, 2014).

Conclusion

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Imam Abu al-Hasan al-Asy'ari's theological thought marks a decisive inflexion in the development of Islamic intellectual history, not only by responding to the major theological controversies of his age but also by constructing a coherent methodological synthesis that would ultimately become one of the most prominent and pivotal foundations of classical Sunni theology. Emerging not as the author of a feeble compromise, he acted instead as the designer of a nuanced, structurally sound theological corpus.

Confronting the radical rationalism of the Mu'tazilah and the absolutist determinism of the Jabariyah, al-Asy'ari charted a "mean course" that secured Sunni orthodoxy against the calamities of division. His distinctive methodological stance—upholding the supremacy of revelation whilst wielding reason instrumentally in argument - empowered him to resolve the most intricate disputes regarding divine attributes, human volition, and the nominal undiminished status of the Qur'ān, all the while safeguarding the cardinal tenets of tawhid and the divine justice that nourished them.

The affirmation of divine attributes “without asking how” and the theory of “acquisition” of human acts illustrate his capacity to construct a reconciliatory structure, subsequently elaborated and propagated by his intellectual heirs. Benefiting from evolving political conditions and institutional endorsement, the theology of the Asy’ariyya matured into the prevailing school embraced by the vast majority of Sunni believers. Al-Asy’ari’s abiding contribution is securing a moderate, all-encompassing theological edifice that has remained the inextricable hallmark of the convictions identified with Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah. Al-Ashʿarī's abiding contribution is securing a moderate, all-encompassing theological edifice that has remained the inextricable hallmark of the convictions identified with Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah.

Nevertheless, the present study acknowledges certain limitations: the analysis has relied predominantly upon classical Arabic sources in translation and upon a selective body of Western secondary scholarship, which inevitably constrains the breadth of perspectives represented, particularly those emerging from non-Arab Sunnī intellectual traditions such as the South and Southeast Asian Ashʿarī heritage. Furthermore, the scope of the study has not permitted a sufficiently granular engagement with the internal diversity of the Ashʿarī school across its historical development, from Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Juwaynī through to Al-Ghazālī and beyond.

Future research would possibly benefit from a comparative examination of the kasb doctrine alongside analogous compatibilist frameworks in Western philosophy of religion, particularly in the Thomistic and Calvinist traditions, so as to situate Ashʿarī theology within a broader cross-cultural conversation on determinism and moral agency. Equally productive would be an investigation into contemporary Muslim theological responses to the free will problem, exploring the extent to which modern Ashʿarī scholars have sought to reformulate or defend the kasb doctrine in dialogue with analytic philosophy of action.

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