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Rational Theology in Interfaith Communication

Abu l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī’s Muʿtazili Theology among the Karaites in the Fāṭimid Age

by

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Rational speculative theology (kalām) in early Islam was represented most distinctly by the theological school of the Muʿtazila. Founded in Basra in the early 8th century, the school soon became predominant in theological scholarship and discourse and remained so, in spite of the rise of rival, less rationalist schools, until the early 11th century. The Muʿtazila held that the basic truths of theology, such as the existence of God and the nature of His attributes and justice, are entirely subject to rational proof without the benefit of scriptural revelation. Only after these basic truths have been established can the veracity of scripture be proved by reason, and the primacy of reason must also be maintained in the interpretation of scripture.

Muʿtazili theology naturally appealed to rationally inclined theologians of other scriptural religions and provided a suitable basis for inter-faith communication in the Islamic world. In Judaism Muʿtazili thought was adopted to varying degrees from the 9th century on. In the 10th century the Basran school of the Muʿtazila gained ascendancy over the school of Baghdad and elaborated novel systematic thought based on the teaching first of Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāṭ (d. 916) and then of his son Abū Hāshim al-Jubbāṭ (d. 933), who often deviated to some extent from the views of his father. The center of the school now moved to the ʿAbbāsid capital Baghdad where Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī (d. 980) attracted a large following. Muʿtazili scholarship was favoured by the Būyid authorities ruling in Iraq and western Persia. The Būyid vizier al-Šāḥīb b. ʿAbbād in particular in his religious policy promoted Muʿtazili and Shiʿī doctrine. When he appointed ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Asadābādī, the most gifted of Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī’s pupils, chief judge (qādī l-quḍāt) in Rayy in 977, that city in western Persia became the flourishing center of Muʿtazili scholarship.

Muʿtazili influence on Jewish theologians also reached a peak during this century. Among the Rabbanite Jewish mainstream several heads of the ancient Academies (Yeshivot) in Iraq adopted Muʿtazili thought. One of them, Samuel ben Hofni Gaon (d. 1013) had direct contacts with Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī in Baghdad. Even more evident was the impact of Muʿtazili theological and legal thought among the Karaites, a sect that had arisen in the 8th century in Persia and was first marked
by strong ascetic tendencies, but now particularly inclined to rationalist religious thought. The Karaite Yūsuf al- Başīr (d. ca. 1040) brought the theological teaching of Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār from Iraq to Jerusalem in Fatimid territory and adopted and defended it in his own writings, including his comprehensive summaries of theology Kitāb al-Tamyīz and Kitāb al-Muhtawī.

The Muṭāzīlī world view and rational theology was at this time facing increasing competition and criticism from philosophy of Greek origin, which claimed to provide the only scientific world view based on cogent logical demonstration independent of religious beliefs. Study of the philosophical sciences was mostly shunned in religious scholarship, but was an integral part of the education of the medical profession. Among Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s disciples in Rayy was for some time a young physician trained in the philosophical sciences, Abu l-Husayn al-Baṣrī (d. 1044), who challenged some of his teaching in his lectures and went on to compose a massive critical review of the arguments and proofs used in kalām. Most of ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s students were scandalized by this criticism of their teacher and accused Abu l-Husayn of seeking to undermine essential school doctrine and concealing heretical philosophical views. His theological works were generally ignored among the Muṭāzīla and handed down among students of medicine. Only a century later his teaching was revived and espoused by the Muṭāzīlī scholar Maḥmūd b. al-Malāḥimī in Khorezm in Central Asia and gained recognition as a school of Muṭāzīlī theology.

The present study presents evidence that Abu l-Husayn’s theology was immediately registered and controversially debated in the Karaite community under the Fatimid caliphate. Yūsuf al-Baṣīr explicitly defended the views of Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār and vigorously attacked Abu l-Husayn al-Baṣrī in a treatise, arguing that his views destroyed the rational proof for the existence of God. Abu l-Husayn’s teaching was upheld and advocated from the middle of the 11th century, a half century before Ibn al-Malāḥimī, by the Karaite Sahl b. al-Faḍl (Yashar b. al-Fasīl al-Tustarī) in Egypt. Sahl al-Tustarī not only criticized the conceptual principles of the school of ʿAbd al-Jabbār which had been upheld by Yūsuf al-Baṣīr, but also refuted philosophical doctrine on existence, as entailed by Aristotle’s Metaphysics, on the basis of Abu l-Husayn al-Baṣrī’s teaching.

The study is based on source material preserved in Genizahs and now dispersed in libraries around the world. Our thanks are due first to David Sklare of the Ben Tzvi Institute and the Institute of Microfilmed
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