



Reason and Revelation in Ash'Ariyah Theology: An Epistemological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical development and intellectual significance of Ash'arite theology within the Sunni Islamic tradition. Using a qualitative library research approach, the study analyzes classical and contemporary sources related to the emergence and evolution of Ash'arite thought. The findings show that Ash'arite theology emerged as a mediating response to the tension between Mu'tazilite rationalism and strict textualist approaches, integrating reason and revelation into a balanced theological framework. Through the contributions of major scholars such as al-Baqillani, al-Ghazali, and al-Razi, Ash'arism gained widespread acceptance and became the dominant theological orientation of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in many Muslim societies. The novelty of this study lies in highlighting Ash'arite theology not merely as a system of religious belief, but as a dynamic intellectual and social response to the theological and socio-political challenges of classical Islam.



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INTRODUCTION

Ash'arite theology is one of the most influential schools of theology (kalām) in the history of Sunni Islamic thought. Founded by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (873–936 CE), it emerged as a reaction to the dominance of extreme rationalism developed by the Mu'tazilah school, and as a means to preserve the beliefs of the majority of Muslims grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, while still considering reason as a tool to aid religious understanding (Fakhry, 2004; Nasution, 2022). However, Ash'arism should not be understood merely as a historical reaction to Mu'tazilite rationalism; rather, it represents an epistemological project that sought to define the proper relationship between revelation, reason, and theological authority in Sunni Islam.

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, originally a student of the Mu'tazilite scholar al-Jubbā'ī, departed from Mu'tazilite theology at the age of forty. He authored al-Ibānah 'an Uṣūl al-Diyānah, which marked the founding of the Ash'arite theological tradition (Frank, 1994: 26). His break from Mu'tazilah is often viewed as both a theological and epistemological shift toward a balance between textualism and rationality (Hassan, 2021).

Ash'arism introduced the doctrine of kasb (acquisition), which holds that humans “acquire” their actions while God remains the true creator of all acts. This was a theological compromise between the extremes of determinism (Jabariyyah) and absolute free will (Qadariyyah). Through this doctrine, Ash'arism affirmed moral responsibility within a framework of divine omnipotence, avoiding both theological fatalism and unchecked human autonomy (Fakhry, 2004: 124; Iskandar, 2023). The doctrine also reflects the Ash'arite epistemological concern with maintaining coherence between divine sovereignty, human accountability, and scriptural authority.

Ash'arite theology became the dominant theological framework for most Sunni Muslims worldwide, including the Arab world, Turkey, Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei), North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. It became a spiritual and intellectual foundation for millions of Muslims (Makdisi, 1981; Lapidus, 2014; Alfaruq, 2020).

The teachings of Ash'arism have been widely integrated into the curricula of traditional and modern Islamic educational institutions from pesantren and madrasah to leading Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar in Egypt, Qarawiyyin University in Morocco, and various institutions across Indonesia. Classical texts of Ash'arite creed remain foundational reading (Zouggari, n.d.; Fauzi, 2021).

Ash'arism also articulates a distinction between *kalām nafsī* (eternal divine speech) and *kalām lafzī* (verbal expression). The Qur'an is understood as *kalām nafsī*, and therefore uncreated (Watt, 1973: 264; Al-Jarrah, 2022). The Ash'arite emphasis on divine transcendence (*tanzīh*), unity (*tawhīd*), and God's attributes has shaped Islamic artistic expression encouraging abstract, non-figurative forms in calligraphy, architecture, and poetry as a way of avoiding anthropomorphism (Nasr, 1987; Grabar, 1987; Yusri, 2020).

In many traditional Muslim communities, Ash'arite-trained scholars have often been key authorities in matters of creed (*'aqidah*), issuing fatwas and religious guidance that influence public understanding. Theological disputes in Muslim society frequently reflect divergent doctrinal interpretations, with Ash'arism often serving as a mediating or normative position (Rey, 1994; Farid & Al-Jundi, 2024). Despite this broad influence, existing studies often describe Ash'arism historically or doctrinally, while giving less attention to the epistemological logic that enables Ash'arism to function as a mediating theological system.

Ash'arism is not merely a traditional school of theology but represents a form of theological moderation born from socio-political dialectic and the necessity to reconcile theological extremes. Its emergence marked a transition into a more institutionalized Sunni orthodoxy (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*), developing gradually through historical processes that responded to evolving contexts (Fakih, 2025). This study offers a rare focus on the institutional and geographical impact of Ash'arism, particularly in the Western Islamic world and Southeast Asia an aspect often overlooked in classical *kalām* studies.

Academically, this research contributes to the enrichment of *kalām* scholarship by offering a nuanced understanding of classical Islamic theology. The Ash'arite school not only laid foundational pillars of Sunni theology but also shaped a balanced methodology of Islamic reasoning that integrates revelation and intellect (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). Considering Ash'arism's dominance in many Islamic educational institutions, such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), Islamic universities, and religious schools, a thorough examination of its doctrines is essential for holistic and accurate theological understanding (Azra, 2023).

This study aims to analyze key principles in Ash'arite theology such as divine unity (*tawhīd*), divine attributes, human free will, and the relationship between reason and revelation to attain a systematic and profound understanding of its doctrinal foundations (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). It also seeks to explore how Ash'arism articulates a moderate theological approach in contrast to the rationalist Mu'tazilite position. By doing so, this study positions Ash'arism as a theological-epistemological tradition that mediates between scriptural authority and rational inquiry.

The study will address three core research questions: First, what is the historical background of the emergence of the Ash'arite school?. Second, why does Ash'arism diverge from the theological position of the Mu'tazilah. Third, how does Ash'arism formulate a moderate approach to understanding Islamic teachings.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, aimed at exploring and interpreting the theological development of Ash'arism within the broader discourse of Sunni Islam. The

qualitative method is particularly suited for analyzing complex intellectual phenomena such as Ash'arī theology, which emerged as a balanced synthesis between the rationalism of the Mu'tazilites and the textualism of the Ḥadīth scholars (Fahrul Rozi et al., 2021; Djalaluddin & Fakhruddin, 2022).

The primary research method applied in this study is library research (literature study), wherein all data are collected from primary sources such as classical theological texts and secondary literature including academic journals, articles, and modern scholarly works on Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, Ash'arism, the Mu'tazilah, and the relationship between reason and revelation. As Sarwono suggests, library research is appropriate for examining theoretical issues through careful study of written documents and references.

A historical-conceptual approach is also employed to trace the origin and development of Ash'arī theology within its socio-political context. This approach allows for a deeper analysis of the intellectual shift of Abu al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī after his departure from Mu'tazilite thought and his efforts to construct a more balanced theological framework. As noted by Khoirul Umam et al. (2024), this approach helps situate theology not as an abstract doctrine but as a living response to the intellectual and political tensions of the Abbasid era. In applying this approach, the study first identifies key historical moments in the emergence of Ash'arism, then links these moments to the doctrinal debates that shaped Sunni theological identity.

Additionally, a comparative-analytical method is used to juxtapose Ash'arī theology with other Islamic theological schools, particularly Mu'tazilah and the traditionalist Ḥadīth school (Muḥaddithīn). The comparison focuses on key doctrinal aspects such as divine attributes, human free will, divine justice, and the roles of reason and revelation. For instance, regarding human agency, the Ash'arites proposed the concept of *kasb* (acquisition), a mediating position that affirms God's ultimate will while acknowledging human responsibility contrary to the Mu'tazilite emphasis on absolute free will (Islamadina, 2024). This comparative approach is not only descriptive but also evaluative, critically assessing the internal consistency and contemporary relevance of each theological system. The comparative analysis was conducted through four procedural steps: first, identifying the main doctrinal themes discussed in the selected sources; second, extracting the theological arguments of Ash'arism, Mu'tazilah, and the Ḥadīth scholars on each theme; third, comparing their similarities and differences in terms of epistemology, scriptural interpretation, and theological reasoning; and fourth, evaluating how Ash'arism positioned itself as a mediating framework between rationalist and textualist tendencies.

Furthermore, a philosophical-theological lens is applied to explore how Ash'arism conceptualizes the relationship between reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*). While affirming the cognitive capacity of human reason to recognize God's existence, Ash'arī theology maintains that ethical judgments, religious obligations, and moral distinctions are rooted exclusively in divine revelation. Al-Ash'arī argues that reason alone cannot independently determine what is morally right or wrong, as such judgments are relative and subject to social and temporal contexts (M. Rusydi, 2014; Islamadina, 2024). Revelation, therefore, serves as the absolute source of law and guidance.

In line with this, the Ash'arites emphasize that although reason is valuable as a supporting tool, it does not override revelation in matters of theology and ethics. This methodological stance reflects the epistemological *wasatiyyah* (moderation) promoted by Ash'arism placing revelation as the primary source while allowing reason a constructive but subordinate role (Khoirul Umam et al., 2024; Republika, 2024). To ensure analytical consistency, each source was examined using the same thematic categories: the role of reason, the authority of revelation, divine attributes, human agency, divine justice, and the relationship between theology and socio-political context. These categories served as the basis for organizing, comparing, and interpreting the data.

In summary, this research integrates historical, textual, and comparative-analytical methods to examine how Ash'arī theology developed as a balanced and dynamic response to both intellectual and political challenges in classical Islam, and how it continues to shape mainstream Sunni theology in the contemporary Muslim world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Emergence of the Ash'arite School: A Theological Movement in Islam

Ash'arism is a theological ideology founded by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, a prominent scholar who was initially a devoted disciple of the leading Mu'tazilite figure, Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī. Born in Basra and passing away in Baghdad, al-Ash'arī pursued his studies at Masjid Mansūr under the guidance of the Shāfi'ī scholar Abū Ishaq al-Malwazi (Syawal, as cited in Adam et al., 2022).

The Ash'arite school emerged in the early 4th century AH (10th century CE) in response to the intense tension between the extreme rationalism of the Mu'tazilah and the rigid textualism of groups such as the Jabariyyah and Mushabbihah (Al-Jarrah, 2022). Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (874–936 CE / 260–324 AH), after undergoing a profound intellectual and spiritual crisis, departed from Mu'tazilite theology and began to formulate a theological method that balanced rational inquiry with the traditional beliefs of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah (Makdisi, 1981; Fauzi, 2021).

His departure from Mu'tazilah was marked by the composition of al-Ibānah 'an Uṣūl al-Diyānah, which advocated for the defense of Islamic creed using reasoned dialectical argumentation (kalām) not to replace revelation but to support it. Al-Ash'arī's method, often described as wasatiyyah (moderation), sought a middle ground between Mu'tazilite overreliance on reason and Jabariyyah's denial of human agency (Frank, 1978; Hassan, 2021).

The historical and political backdrop during the Abbasid period also shaped the formation of Ash'arism. Under Caliph al-Ma'mūn, Mu'tazilism became the official state doctrine, and traditionalist scholars such as Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal faced persecution. The state's enforcement of the belief that the Qur'an was created led to widespread opposition, ultimately paving the way for theological alternatives like Ash'arism to gain traction (Watt, 1948; Farid & Al-Jundi, 2024).

Al-Ash'arī's intellectual transformation stemmed from prolonged exposure to Mu'tazilite teachings and growing dissatisfaction with key doctrines, especially the al-Aṣḥāḥ principle, which posited that God is obligated to do what is best for His creation. A famous debate between al-Ash'arī and his teacher al-Jubbā'ī about the fate of a child, a believer, and a disbeliever revealed critical flaws in Mu'tazilite reasoning, prompting al-Ash'arī to rethink their theology (Iskandar, 2023).

Beyond theological disagreement, al-Ash'arī also feared the division within the Muslim community that overly rational theology might cause. He thus crafted a theology that could uphold Qur'anic and prophetic tradition while addressing rational challenges (Fakih, 2025). Based on these findings, the first research question can be answered as follows: Ash'arism emerged as a theological movement because it offered a middle position between Mu'tazilite rationalism and strict textualism, while also responding to the political and doctrinal conflicts of the Abbasid period. During the reign of al-Ma'mūn, Mu'tazilism flourished with its emphasis on reason and the translation of Greek philosophy. However, the imposition of such doctrines generated resentment, leading to a reversal under Caliph al-Mutawakkil, who disbanded the Mu'tazilite agenda and reinstated Sunni orthodoxy (Nasution, 2022).

Key Doctrines of Ash'arism:

- The Attributes of God: Ash'arism affirms that God possesses real attributes such as knowledge ('ilm), power (qudrah), life (ḥayāh), hearing (sam'), and sight (baṣar), rejecting metaphorical interpretations as employed by the Mu'tazilah (Al-Attas, 2023).
- The Qur'an: The Qur'an is considered the eternal speech of God (kalam), uncreated, as evidenced by Qur'an 9:6, which reads:

وَإِنْ أَحَدٌ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ اسْتَجَارَكَ فَأَجِرْهُ حَتَّى يَسْمَعَ كَلَامَ اللَّهِ

Translation:

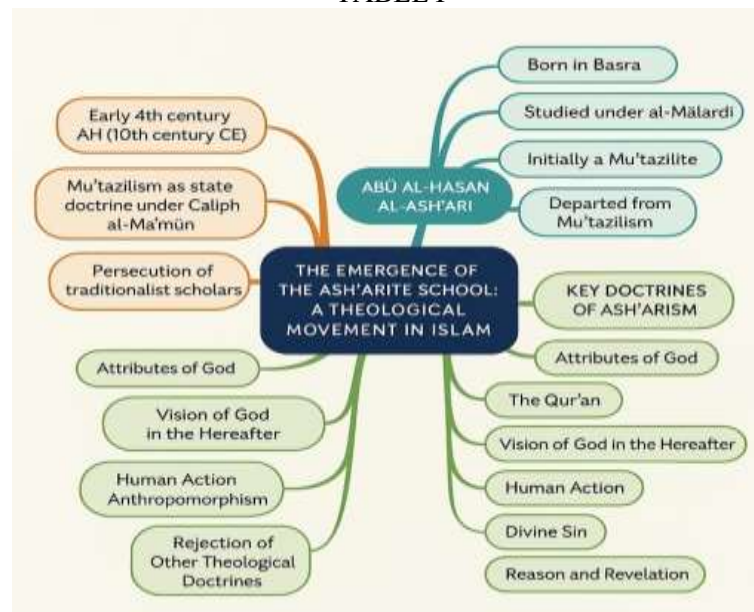
"And if one of the polytheists seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the words of Allah..."

Since it is the word of God, it is pre-eternal (qadim) (Rahman, 2021).

- Vision of God in the Hereafter: Ash‘arīs believe that the believers will see God in the afterlife in a manner befitting His majesty unlike the Mu‘tazilah, who deny this possibility.
- Human Action: While humans possess a form of will and power, Ash‘arism teaches that all human actions are created by God. The doctrine of kasb (acquisition) reconciles divine omnipotence with human moral responsibility (Iskandar, 2023).
- Anthropomorphism: Ash‘arīs accept scriptural references to God’s “face,” “hand,” and “eyes” (e.g., Qur’an 55:27, 54:14) but affirm that these are real without likening them to creation, avoiding tashbih and takyīf.
- Grave Sin: A believer who commits a major sin remains a Muslim and is labeled ‘āṣī (disobedient). Their fate is left to God’s judgment.
- Divine Justice: God is the absolute sovereign and creator. He may admit all to Paradise or cast all into Hell by His will alone (Hamid, 2020).
- Reason and Revelation: Ash‘arism integrates reason and revelation, upholding the Qur’an and Sunnah as the ultimate sources of truth, with reason serving to interpret not override them (Azra, 2023).
- Rejection of Other Theological Doctrines: Ash‘arism rejects Qadariyyah (full human free will), Jahmiyyah (negation of God’s attributes), and Murji’ah (delayed judgment on sinners), viewing these as theological extremes.

Al-Ash‘arī’s thought gained wide acceptance among Muslims due to its clarity and accessible reasoning. Furthermore, its growth was supported by the Abbasid authorities and traditionalist scholars. The balance between rational argumentation and textual fidelity enabled Ash‘arism to become the cornerstone of Sunni theological orthodoxy (Fauzi, 2021; Alfaruq, 2020).

TABLE I



2. Divergences Between Ash‘arism and Mu‘tazilism

Mu‘tazilism was founded amid intense debate over God’s attributes and human freedom. Wāsil ibn ‘Aṭā’, its founder, even differed with his teacher on the moral status of major sinners, positing that they occupy an intermediate position between faith and disbelief neither fully one nor the other (Laila, 2024; Brown et al., 2024) .

As we know, the founder of Ash‘arism was initially a follower of Mu‘tazilism. However, over time, he distanced himself and gravitated toward the views of the fuqahā’ and muhaddithīn, although he never formally trained under them (Burhanuddin, 2024).

Several foundational reasons underlie Ash'arī disagreements with Mu'tazilism:

1. Scriptural metaphors (e.g., “Yadullāh,” “Wajhullāh”)

Ash'arīs agree with Mu'azilīs in rejecting anthropomorphism: God cannot be likened to creation. However, they affirm these terms as hakīqī attributes of God although in an unknown way without allegorical reinterpretation. They also uphold the possibility of seeing God in the afterlife, unlike Mu'azilism, which denied it to avoid corporeal implications.
2. The Qur'ān as uncreated speech

Ash'arīs firmly assert the Qur'ān itself (kalam Allah) is eternal (qadīm), not a creature a direct rejection of Mu'azilī doctrine (Rahman, 2021; Wikipedia Mu'tazilism) .
3. Free will and human action

Unlike Mu'azilīs, who emphasize total human free will and moral responsibility, Ash'arīs advocate the doctrine of kasb. They teach that God creates all acts, and humans “acquire” them and bear moral responsibility even though the creative power is divine. This reconciles divine omnipotence with ethical accountability.
4. The status of major sinners

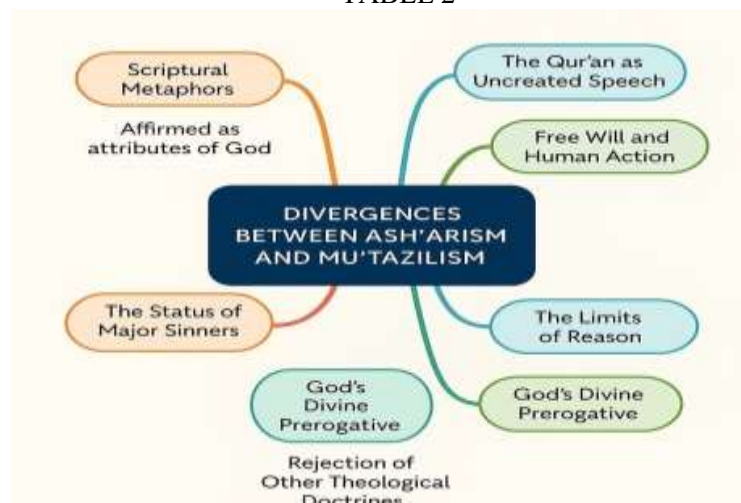
Mu'azilīs classify major sinners in an intermediary category, while Ash'arīs maintain that they remain believers (mu'min) but are 'āṣī (transgressors), subject to punishment but not excommunicated.
5. The limits of reason

Mu'azilīs hold that reason alone can discern good and evil; revelation is secondary. Ash'arīs counter that reason is subordinate to revelation serving to interpret rather than replace divine guidance as reason lacks final authority in moral truth.
6. God's divine prerogative

Ash'arīs affirm God's absolute power to forgive without repentance, to assign obligations beyond human capacity, to grant intercession (shafā'ah), and insist that God cannot lie or break promises positions that Mu'azilīs might have restricted under rational constraints.

Despite these deep doctrinal differences, the intellectual relationship between Ash'arīs and Mu'azilīs remains historically rich. Al-Ash'arī never fully rejected reason; he asserted its importance for interpreting scripture, but only within limits that preserve revelation's central authority. These two traditions, though divergent, greatly enriched the theological and intellectual landscape of Islam.

TABLE 2



3. The Moderate Thought of the Ash'arite School in Understanding Religious Teachings: A Response to the Mu'tazilite School

In response to the third research question, the findings show that Ash'arism represents a moderate theological model because it avoids two extremes: the excessive rationalism of Mu'tazilism and the rigid literalism of some traditionalist groups. The Ash'arite school is a branch of Sunni Islamic theology that balances the use of reason ('aql) and revelation (naql). Its doctrinal foundations reflect the moderate theological approach of Abu al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, who sought to bridge the rationalist methodology of the Mu'tazilites and the textualist orientation of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth (Fahrul Rozi et al., 2021; Djalaluddin & Fakhruddin, 2022).

On the far right, the Muḥaddithīn school rejects the use of reason in interpreting revelation, while on the far left, the Mu'tazilites prioritize reason over textual sources. The Ash'arites (alongside the Māturīdites) emerged as a centrist (wasatiyyah) school within Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, promoting a balanced relationship between reason and revelation. This balanced understanding of tawḥīd (monotheism) is a hallmark of Sunni orthodoxy (Khoirul Umam et al., 2024).

The Mu'tazilites are well known for their rationalistic theology, particularly their denial of divine attributes as independent from God's essence. They argue that acknowledging separate attributes leads to ta'addud al-qudamā' (multiplicity in the eternal), which contradicts God's absolute unity. In contrast, the Muḥaddithīn affirm God's attributes mentioned in the Qur'an and authentic hadith without interpretation or inquiry into the "how" (bilā kayf), adopting a stance of tafwīd (leaving the meaning to God) while maintaining that God is unlike His creation (Zaki et al., 2024).

The Ash'arites take a middle path: they affirm the reality of divine attributes, but emphasize that these attributes are unique to God and cannot be compared to human qualities. They formalized twenty essential attributes (ṣifāt al-wujūb) based on both reason and revelation, sufficient to guide believers beyond blind imitation (taqlīd) without falling into extremes (Khoirul Umam et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, the Ash'arite school within Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah adopts a moderate position. They assert that God possesses attributes that are appropriate only to His majesty and cannot be likened to the attributes of His creation.

ذكر الأشاعرة أقل ما يجب من الصفات التي دل عليها النقل والعقل وهي عشرون صفة، حتى يخرج بها المؤمن من رتبة التقليد في الاعتقاد. وجعلوها أربعة أنواع: نفسية وسلبية ومعاني ومعنوية وهذا إنما هو تحديد تعريف توقيفي تقريرى، وليس تحديد توصيف ، توقيفي نهائي). العقيدة الأشعرية هي عقيدة أهل السنة والجماعة، تأليف عبد الله بن الطاهر السوسي التتائي، الطبعة الثانية 2018 ، دار الأمان الرباط، ص 39

Translation:

"The Ash'arites have identified the minimum number of divine attributes that must be believed in, supported by both revelation (naql) and reason ('aql), totaling twenty attributes. These are sufficient for a believer to free themselves from blind imitation (taqlīd) in matters of faith. They classified them into four categories: essential attributes (nafiyyah), negative attributes (salbiyyah), attributes of meaning (ma'ānī), and attributes of implication (ma'nawiyyah). This classification serves as a descriptive and confirmatory definition (ta'rīf tawqīfī taqrīrī), not as a final and exhaustive prescriptive definition (tawsīf tawqīfī nihā'ī)."

According to the Ash'arite school, the division of the twenty essential attributes (ṣifāt wājibah) of Allah serves as a pedagogical method aimed at helping Muslims understand the divine attributes properly while avoiding blind taqlīd (imitation). This classification also facilitates the intellect in comprehending theological doctrines based on a balanced use of transmitted (naqlī) and rational ('aqlī) evidences (Khoirul Umam et al., 2024; Fahrul Rozi et al., 2021).

Accordingly, it is evident that the attributes of Allah are inseparable from His essence (dhāt) and form a unified, indivisible whole. Since these attributes are united with His essence, Allah is eternal (baqā'), without beginning (qidam), and incomparable to His creation in form, space, or time (Zaki et al., 2024; Djalaluddin & Fakhruddin, 2022).

As a theologian (mutakallim), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī adopted a moderate approach that positioned reason as an auxiliary tool, not as the primary source of legal or ethical authority. M. Rusydi (2014) explains that in al-Ash'arī's view, reason has no inherent authority to determine what is absolutely good or evil. Ethics and religious obligations can only be established through revelation as the absolute source of truth.

The moral judgments derived from human reason are considered relative, as they depend on experience, context, and societal conditions. Without revelation, there is no universal moral foundation. This view is reaffirmed in Islamadina's (2024) analysis, which states that reason-based morality is often flexible and temporary, whereas revelation provides fixed and binding moral directives.

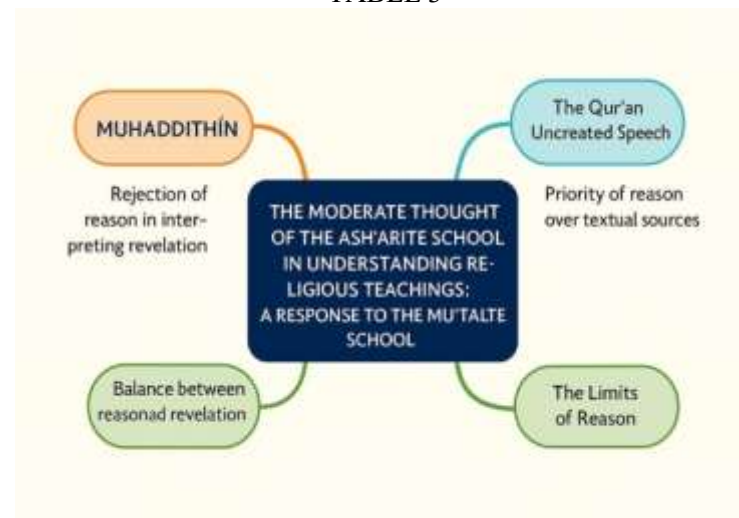
Al-Ash'arī also emphasized that while the intellect can recognize the existence of God, it cannot determine religious obligations such as worship, gratitude, reward, or punishment. Only revelation can establish these (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Therefore, a person who believes in God before the descent of revelation is considered a natural believer (*mu'min bi al-ḥiṭrah*), but is not necessarily entitled to divine reward this remains at the discretion of God's mercy (LSAMA Aceh Publishing, 2022; Dikla & Syauqani, 2024).

Conversely, one who disbelieves prior to the arrival of revelation cannot be condemned outright, as no binding guidance had yet been issued. This underscores the critical role of revelation as a guide to life and a limit on absolute human freedom (Islamadina, 2024).

In conclusion, al-Ash'arī held that without revelation, humanity would be left without clear moral direction and would easily fall into social disorder. Therefore, the existence of revelation and prophethood is not optional, but rather a rational and spiritual necessity (Khoirul Umam et al., 2024; Republika, 2024).

Thus, the third research question can be answered as follows: Ash'arite moderation lies in its integration of reason and revelation, its affirmation of divine attributes without anthropomorphism, and its insistence that reason serves revelation rather than replacing it. By positioning revelation as the principal source and reason as its interpretative instrument, al-Ash'arī exemplified *wasatiyyah* (moderation) both in speech and in practice. This distinguishes Ash'arite theology from more extreme schools, such as the rationalist Mu'tazilites or literalists who reject the role of reason entirely.

TABLE 3



Novelty of This Work

1. The Emergence of the Ash'arite School: A Theological Movement in Islam.

This study presents a fresh perspective on the theological transformation of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī by highlighting his epistemological *wasatiyyah* (moderate epistemology), which strategically mediates between Mu'tazilite rationalism and Ahl al-Ḥadīth textualism. The novelty lies in framing Ash'arism as not merely a theological synthesis but also as a socio-political response to the rationalist dominance of the Mu'tazilah during the Abbasid period (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). However, this study also critically acknowledges that Ash'arism has been interpreted in competing ways: some scholars regard it as a stabilizing force that preserved Sunni orthodoxy, while others view it as a limitation on speculative reason and philosophical inquiry. By

positioning revelation as the ultimate source of truth and reason as its interpretive tool, Ash'arī established a balanced paradigm that redefined mainstream Sunni orthodoxy an angle often underrepresented in modern scholarship.

2. Divergences Between Ash'arism and Mu'tazilism.

This study provides a nuanced analysis of the divergences between Ash'arism and Mu'tazilism by framing their debates not merely as theological contradictions but as contrasting epistemological paradigms. The novelty lies in highlighting that Ash'arism does not reject reason outright but redefines its role asserting revelation as the supreme source of truth while limiting reason to a subordinate interpretive function. Additionally, this research foregrounds Ash'arī's doctrine of *kasb* as a unique solution to the free will vs. determinism debate, distinguishing it from the more rigid rationalist commitments of the Mu'tazilah. This perspective reveals Ash'arism as a system that seeks ethical realism without rational absolutism. Its contemporary relevance lies in offering a theological model for negotiating moral responsibility, divine authority, and human agency in modern debates on ethics, law, and religious pluralism.

3. The Moderate Thought of the Ash'arite School in Understanding Religious Teachings: A Response to the Mu'tazilite School.

This study offers a fresh contribution by framing Ash'arite theology not merely as a reactionary middle path but as a systematic epistemological model that harmonizes revelation and reason in a pedagogically structured framework (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The novelty lies in highlighting how the twenty divine attributes, classified into four logical categories, serve both as doctrinal essentials and cognitive tools for believers to avoid blind imitation (*taqlīd*) while maintaining orthodoxy. Furthermore, the study underscores al-Ash'arī's redefinition of reason not as a source of moral legislation, but as an interpretative assistant to revelation offering a distinct alternative to Mu'tazilite rational absolutism. This balanced theology (*wasatiyyah*) is presented as not only historically significant but highly relevant for contemporary moral and theological discourse.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Ash'arite theology marks a significant development in classical Islamic thought because it offers a moderated theological framework between Mu'tazilite rationalism and the textualist orientation of the Muhaddithūn. Rooted in the thought of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, this tradition affirms the primacy of revelation while recognizing reason as an interpretive instrument that operates within the boundaries of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

This study demonstrates that the main scholarly contribution of Ash'arite theology lies in its formulation of *wasatiyyah*, or theological moderation, through the balanced integration of *naql* and *aql*. Rather than treating reason and revelation as opposing sources of authority, Ash'arite thought positions them within a complementary epistemological structure that safeguards doctrinal coherence while responding to intellectual and socio-political contestations in early Islam.

Accordingly, Ash'arite theology should be understood not merely as a doctrinal system, but as a resilient intellectual tradition that contributed to the formation of mainstream Sunni discourse within *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Its enduring relevance lies in its capacity to provide a middle path for Muslims in addressing both classical theological debates and contemporary religious challenges.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The conflict of interest will occur when the author actions may be influenced from organization or personal relationship such as financial gain, personal interest or any successful outcomes. Please provide a conflict of interest statement. If there is no conflict of interest, state that "The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest."

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