

RESEARCH
ARTICLE**Religion and politics according to the MU'TAZILITES between imitation and rationalization****Bekhadda Tahar**

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Abstract

This research examines the aspects of Islamic intellectual debate. The first concerns the limits of the concept of Islamic doctrine, and the second is political, embodied in the characteristics of the ruler and the conditions of political action. The Mu'tazila raised this duality of religion and politics since the beginning of the 8th century AD. They represented a free, rational movement seeking a scientific explanation for religion and politics, in contrast to the conservative Salafi movement. This led to a radical shift towards openness and intellectual pluralism. The religious and political rationalism of the Mu'tazila was the result of a broad debate that emerged in the middle of the seventh century AD on a general issue related to the nature of authority and an individual issue related to faith, which was fought by four major movements: the Kharijites, the Murji'ites, the Umayyad authority, and the Shi'ites who claimed power. The Mu'tazila found themselves in tense political and sectarian circumstances. As an enlightened intellectual movement, they had to adopt a practical and rational solution that combined religion and political interests represented by free choice within the framework of individual and collective moral responsibility, as stipulated in their Five Principles. Through their rational approach, the Mu'tazila represented a pioneering experiment in Islamic thought, marking the beginning of a scientific renaissance and a path toward the right path, a transition from a phase of imitation to free scientific thought, thus establishing the first theory of knowledge in Islam

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Introduction:

The transmitted sciences, including jurisprudence, interpretation, Qur'anic recitations, and Hadith, constituted the fields of Islamic sciences. This concept of science remained prevalent throughout the first century AH/eighth century CE. Islam called for rational reflection on nature and the universe through the texts of the Holy Qur'an. Therefore, the Mu'tazila explored metaphysics, the universe, politics, and ethics, all of which could be scientifically investigated according to a rational approach.

The Mu'tazila revolutionized Islamic thought when they called for the possibility of subjecting all knowledge, including religious matters, to reason, considering that reason has no limits. Therefore, they rejected abstract faith and required knowledge to be acquired rationally, not merely through tradition or education, by way of deduction and proof. They were the first to develop a theory of knowledge, and through them the boundaries of knowledge expanded. They were the first to adopt a scientific approach in Islam, through their research in various fields of theoretical and applied sciences.

The Problem statement:

The political, social, and sectarian circumstances in which the Mu'tazila emerged were behind the emergence of their philosophy and views, which they formulated into five principles that represented an intellectual approach for understanding various religious, political, social, and economic issues. Based on this, we can pose the following problem:

Is the rational approach of the Mu'tazila an intrusion into Islamic thought, or is it a necessary stage of development? Was rational thinking absent among Muslims before the Mu'tazila brought it to light? Were the Mu'tazila seeking a utopian-ideal—Islamic society through politics and religion?

The intended objectives of the research:

- To highlight the diversity of research approaches in Islamic thought, between a traditional Salafi approach - follower-oriented-that relies on the apparent meaning of texts from the Qur'an and Hadith to understand matters of faith, governance, or authority in Islam, and a rational approach adopted by the Mu'tazila, based on interpreting texts to break free from intellectual rigidity and constriction. We also note that the Mu'tazila did not completely abolish the text, but rather placed it second to reason, interpreting it in light of it.

- Through their rational approach, the Mu'tazila contributed to expanding the scope of research, particularly with regard to religious and metaphysical issues, which remained unspoken, not to be discussed, but to be believed as they were.

The Mu'tazila considered this a restriction on the human mind, which distinguishes humans from animals.

This intellectual stance constitutes a bold act by the Mu'tazila in the face of fierce opposition from the traditional Sunni movement. The emergence of theology at the hands of the Mu'tazila was a product of the rational approach, which became a distinct Islamic science in opposition to Greek philosophy. It was used as a method to defend Islam and the counter - historical movement waged by atheists and heretics as religious and political movements hostile to Islam and Muslims. Although the Mu'tazila's rational thought focused on religion and politics -power.

- their approach also encompassed the humanities and social sciences, considering the organic relationship between them. This was achieved by making them scientific-epistemological -by subjecting them to the laws of politics, economics, ethics, and sociology. Therefore, they examined the related issues reflected in their five fundamental principles. In politics, they raised the issue of the imamate and its related conditions, duties, and rights of government and subjects, as well as administration. In economics, they raised the system of taxation and disbursement of funds. In society, they raised the application of freedom and justice among the subjects. In ethics, they promoted the promotion of good and the prevention of evil. Therefore, it can be said that the Mu'tazila were the first to establish the foundations of sociology, which would later emerge at the hands of Ibn Khaldun.

Research Methodology:

In this research, we traced the intellectual rational approach of the Mu'tazila, and why they prioritized reason over the text despite its sanctity, and what their authority was in this regard, and how they applied this approach to the issues they discussed, especially religious and political ones. In addressing this topic, we relied on the writings of prominent Mu'tazila scholars and what was written about them by their opponents, using multiple approaches, including narrative, analytical, deductive, and comparative.

1. Definition of the Mu'tazilites:

The Mu'tazilites are a distinguished Islamic theological sect noted for their robust emphasis on rationalism as a cornerstone of epistemology. They emerged during the tumultuous transition between the first and second centuries AH, a period marked by profound theological controversies instigated by groups such as the Murji'ah, Qadariyyah, and Kharijites. These debates revolved around critical issues like qadar (divine decree) and iman (faith)¹, as well as the status of individuals who commit grave sins (murtakib al-kabirah)². Wasil ibn Ata (d. 131 AH/748 CE) and Amr ibn Ubayd (d. 143 AH/760 CE) are credited as the foundational figures of this movement³, which articulated its doctrines through five principal tenets known as the *usul al-khamsa*. These tenets serve not only as the theological pillars of Mu'tazilism but also as the criteria for affiliation with this school⁴.

The nomenclature "Mu'tazilite" has been the subject of various interpretations. It is, however, a misapprehension to link the term with the Sahabah (companions of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) who abstained from participation in the first Islamic civil war, such as Abdullah ibn Umar, Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, and Usamah ibn Zayd, who maintained neutrality during the conflicts surrounding Ali ibn Abi Talib⁵. Nor should it be associated with Al-Hasan ibn Ali's withdrawal from the caliphate in favor of Mu'awiyah in 41 AH/661 CE⁶. This abstention was a response to specific political crises, distinctly separate from the Mu'tazilites' theological stances. The most plausible explanation for the term "Mu'tazilite" is their departure from Sunni orthodoxy on key theological issues, particularly concerning tawhid and 'aqidah.

2. The Dissemination of Mu'tazilite Thought and Doctrine

The proliferation of Mu'tazilite thought extended well beyond its foundational stronghold in Basra, reflecting a strategic commitment by its leaders to propagate their rationalist interpretations across the Islamic world. Notably, Wasil ibn Ata spearheaded this expansion by deploying emissaries to key regions. These missionaries included Al-Qasim ibn Al-Sa'di, sent to Yemen; Ayub ibn Al-Awtan, to Al-Jazira; and Hafs ibn Salim, who was dispatched to Khurasan with the task of debating Jaham ibn Safwan on issues of determinism (*jabr*) and predestination (*qadar*). Additionally, Al-Hasan ibn Dhakwan and Sulaiman ibn Arqam were sent to Kufa, and Uthman ibn Abi Uthman Al-Tawil, who later mentored Abu Al-Hudhayl, to Armenia⁷.

Efforts to spread Mu'tazilite thought reached as far as the Maghreb, where Abd Allah ibn Al-Harith carried texts to advance the movement's principles. Following the death of Bashir Al-Rahhal during the rebellion against Caliph Abu Ja'far Al-Mansur in 145 AH, some of Al-Rahhal's followers joined the Mu'tazilites and came to be identified as the *Wasiliyyah* faction⁸.

Persia, in particular, emerged as a stronghold of Mu'tazilite influence, with significant presence in regions such as

¹Al-Qasim al-Rassi, 'Usul Al-'Adl Wa al-Tawhid [The Principles of Justice and Divine Unity]', in *Rasa'il al-'Adl Wa al-Tawhid*, ed. Muhammad 'Amarah, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1988), 148.

²Al-Sahib Isma'il ibn 'Abbad Al-Sahib, *Al-Ibanah 'an Madhhab Ahl al-Haqq Bi-Hujaj al-Qur'an Wa al-'Aql [Clarifying the Creed of the People of Truth with the Proofs of the Qur'an and Reason]* (n.e, n.d), 24.

³Al-Nashi' al-Akbar, *Masa'il al-Imamah Wa Muqattalat Min al-Kitab al-Awsat Fi al-Maqalat [Questions on the Imamate and Excerpts from the Middle Book in Doctrines]*, ed. van Ess (Beirut, 1971), 17.

⁴Al-Khayyat al-Mu'tazili, *Al-Intisar Wa al-Radd 'ala Ibn al-Rawandi al-Mulhid [The Triumph and Refutation Against Ibn al-Rawandi the Heretic]*, ed. Nyberg Nyberg, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Al-Dar al-'Arabiyyah lil-Kitab, 1993), 126.

⁵Al-Nawbakhti, al-Hasan ibn Musa, *Firqat Al-Shi'ah [The Sects of the Shi'a]*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Manshurat al-Ridwan, 2012), 34.

⁶Al-Malati, Muhammad ibn Ahmad, *Al-Tanbih Wa al-Radd 'ala Ahl al-Ahwa' Wa al-Bida' [A Warning and Refutation of the People of Desires and Innovations]*, ed. Muhammad Zahid ibn al-Hasan al-Kawthari (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma'arif, 1968), 28-29.

⁷Nashwan al-Himyari, *Al-Hur al-'Ayn 'an Kutub al-'Ilm al-Sharif [Al-Hur al-'Ayn from the Noble Books of Knowledge]*, ed. Kamal Mustafa, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Azal, 1985), 262.

⁸Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Fadl Al-'Izzat Wa Tabaqat al-Mu'tazilah [The Merit of the Mu'tazilite School and the Ranks of the Mu'tazilites]*, ed. Fu'ad Sayyid, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2017), 193-94.

Ahwaz, Herat, and Istakhr. The doctrine also found resonance among various other Islamic groups including the Zaydis, particularly in Yemen, as well as among the Shi'a and the Ismaili Batiniyyah¹. In these areas, Mu'tazilite adherents were actively engaged in theological debates, not only with Sunni scholars but also with groups such as the Ibadiyya from the Kharijites and various Shi'a factions that shared some doctrinal commonalities.

3. The Schools of Mu'tazilite Thought

3.1. The Basra School

The Basra school served as the cradle of Mu'tazilite doctrine, where Wasil ibn 'Ata and his son-in-law, 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd, first articulated its foundational principles. Subsequently, several prominent figures emerged, including Abū al-Hudhayl al-'Allāf, Ibrāhīm ibn Sayyār al-Nazzām, Ibn 'Abbād al-Sulamī, and Hishām ibn 'Amr al-Fūfī. On the one hand, these scholars gravitated toward theoretical and scientific inquiry. Consequently, their pronounced focus on abstract rational speculation gave rise to secondary doctrinal disputes between the Basran tradition and its eventual counterpart in Baghdad.

3.2. The Baghdad School

The Baghdad school, established in the late second century AH, arose as an extension of the Basra school. Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir (d. 210 AH/825 CE), a graduate of the Basran tradition, played a pivotal role in introducing Mu'tazilite thought and the five foundational principles (*usul al-khamsa*) to Baghdad. He acquired this knowledge from Bishr ibn Sa'īd and Abū 'Uthmān al-Za'farānī, both direct disciples of Wasil ibn 'Ata. Under Bishr's guidance, Mu'tazilite doctrines spread widely, influencing scholars such as Abu Musa ibn Subayh, known as Mirdar (d. 226 AH/841 CE), revered as the "Monk of the Mu'tazilites." By the third century AH (ninth century CE), under the patronage of Abbasid Caliphs al-Ma'mun, al-Wathīq, and al-Mu'tasim, the Baghdad school flourished. Within this milieu, leading Mu'tazilite authorities emerged, including Ja'far ibn Mubashshir al-Thaqafi (d. 234 AH/848 CE), Ja'far ibn Harb al-Hamadani (d. 236 AH/850 CE), and Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Iskafi (d. 240 AH/854 CE), all distinguished for their contributions to *kalam* (dialectical theology) and disputation².

Although both the Basran and Baghdadi schools adhered to the same fundamental principles, they diverged significantly in their subsidiary doctrines. The historical and intellectual context of Baghdad, as the Abbasid capital, proved instrumental. The caliphs there cultivated an environment supportive of *kalam* and philosophy and encouraged the translation of Greek thought, thereby granting Mu'tazilite scholars greater proximity to political authority and formal patronage. Consequently, the Baghdadi Mu'tazilites addressed political, social, and ethical issues with heightened pragmatism and depth. Their elevated status is evident in their engagement during the *mihna* (inquisition) under Caliph al-Ma'mun (198–218 AH/814–833 CE), who imposed the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an in 218 AH/833 CE. Known as the "Year of the Mihna," this event led to the persecution of Sunni scholars, including Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal³.

The range of subsidiary matters on which the two schools differed was extensive. On the one hand, some disputes were philosophical, involving concepts such as accidents (*a'rad*) and states (*akwan*). On the other hand, theological questions emerged, including the role of divine grace (*lutf*), assessments of the Prophet's Companions, and inquiries into the status of those who doubted the disbelief of a nonbeliever. Indeed, the Baghdadi Mu'tazilites went so far as to accuse their Basran counterparts of heresy for not categorically denouncing anyone uncertain about the disbelief of a disbeliever⁴.

Moreover, the Baghdad school's Mu'tazilites played a prominent role in refuting dualists (*thanawiyyah*), naturalists (*dahriyyah*), and heretics (*zanadiqah*), as well as in critiquing the literalist approach of Ahl al-Hadith. They even challenged the Basran legacy of Wasil ibn 'Ata, rejecting earlier simplistic speculative interpretations that predated the sophisticated contributions of Abu al-Hudhayl al-'Allaf (d. 235 AH/849 CE) and Ibrahim al-Nazzam (d. 221 AH/834 CE). Instead, Baghdadi scholars endeavored to construct a cohesive intellectual framework granting reason broader scope and depth in engaging the unseen (*ghaybiyyat*). Beginning with rational contemplation of metaphysical realities inaccessible without intellectual scrutiny, they subsequently extended their inquiry into social and political domains, ultimately calling for the establishment of a polity rooted in justice (*'adl*) and monotheism

¹Zahid 'Ali, *Haqiqat Madhhabina Al-Isma'ili Wa Nizamuh [The Reality of Our Isma'ili Madhhab and Its System]*, 2nd ed., 2020, 126.

²Al-Malati, Muhammad ibn Ahmad, *Al-Tanbih Wa al-Radd 'Ala Ahl al-Ahwa' Wa al-Bida' [A Warning and Refutation of the People of Desires and Innovations]*, 34, 38–39.

³Hanbal ibn Ishaq al-Shaybani, *Al-Mihnah [The Inquisition]*, ed. Mustafa ibn Muhammad al-Qabbani, 1st ed. (Riyadh: Markaz al-Malik Faysal lil-Buhuth wa al-Dirasat al-Islamiyyah, 2019), 82.

⁴Al-Malati, Muhammad ibn Ahmad, *Al-Tanbih Wa al-Radd 'Ala Ahl al-Ahwa' Wa al-Bida' [A Warning and Refutation of the People of Desires and Innovations]*, 40–41.

(*tawhid*)¹.

4. The Mu'tazilites and the Rationalization of Thought

The emergence of the Mu'tazilite movement coincided with the early Abbasid era, a period during which caliphs actively fostered scholarship, encouraged the pursuit of knowledge, and provided patronage to learned figures. These rulers presided over a far-reaching translation movement that introduced into the Islamic intellectual milieu a wide array of works from Greek, Persian, and other traditions. Consequently, disciplines such as medicine, philosophy, astronomy, and geography gained unprecedented prominence within the Islamic world.

Notably, this intellectual efflorescence can be traced to the reign of Harun al-Rashid (170–194 AH/786–808 CE), and it reached new heights under his son al-Ma'mun (198–218 AH/813–833 CE), during whose era the Baghdad Mu'tazilite school emerged. By the close of the second century AH (eighth century CE), rational sciences and methodologies had permeated scholarly life, reshaping the contours of Islamic intellectual traditions. The Mu'tazilites, on the one hand, distinguished themselves as pioneers in applying rational inquiry to theological principles and metaphysical concerns. On the other hand, they extended these approaches into various scientific fields, thus placing themselves at the forefront of the rationalization of Islamic thought.

4.1. Definition of 'Aql (Intellect)

The term '*aql*' (intellect) has elicited numerous definitions and interpretations among both philosophers and theologians, including the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites. On the one hand, Al-Farabi² highlights that a widely accepted initial understanding of '*aql*' views it as the common, preliminary perception shared by most observers at the outset. On the other hand, some scholars regard '*aql*' as the faculty that enables one to distinguish the self from other entities and to differentiate one object from another. According to this perspective, the sensory intellect is termed "intellect" only insofar as it transforms the sensible into the intelligible, thereby rendering perceptible phenomena into rational concepts³.

Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, however, defines '*aql*' more functionally, characterizing it as a compendium of certain necessary and indispensable forms of knowledge. Once these essential cognitions reside within a morally accountable individual (*mukallaf*), they validate rational inquiry (*nazar*) and inferential reasoning (*istidlal*) and thus empower that individual to fulfill religious obligations⁴⁵.

Al-Jurjani offers yet another nuanced understanding. He portrays '*aql*' as an immaterial essence that, although not composed of matter, nevertheless operates in conjunction with it. Often identified with the rational soul (*al-nafs al-natiqah*), it is that which a person refers to as "I." Some authorities conceive of '*aql*' as a spiritual substance fashioned by God and connected to the human body, while others describe it as a luminous faculty in the heart, discerning truth from falsehood. Still others view it as a purely immaterial entity, transcending matter but exercising governance over the body. Within this view, the soul serves as the agent, and '*aql*' its instrumental faculty. Some even equate '*aql*', *nafs* (soul), and *dhihn* (mind), arguing that the difference lies not in substance, but in function: '*aql*' as the faculty of comprehension, *nafs* as the faculty of volition and governance, and *dhihn* as the capacity for cognition.

The question of '*aql*'s locus also remains contested. While some maintain that the intellect resides in the head, others locate it in the heart 'drawing on the Qur'anic verse: "Have they not traveled through the land so that they may have hearts by which to reason?" (Al-Hajj: 44). Ultimately, Al-Jurjani concludes that '*aql*' is best understood as an incorporeal substance, one that apprehends transient phenomena through intermediaries and perceives sensible realities through direct observation⁷.

¹Abd al-Sattar 'Az al-Din al-Rawi, *Thawrat Al-'Aql - Madrasat Baghdad al-I'tizaliyyah [The Revolution of Reason - The Baghdad Mu'tazilite School]*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Khulud lil-Turath, 2006), 11.

²Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al-Farabi, *Risalah Fi Al-'Aql [A Treatise on the Intellect]*, ed. Fr. Maurice Bouyges S.J. (Beirut: Al-Matba'ah al-Kathulikiyyah, 1983), 7–8.

³Albert Nasri Nader, *Falsafat Al-Mu'tazilah: Falasifat al-Islam al-Asbaqin [The Philosophy of the Mu'tazilites: The Earliest Philosophers of Islam]*. (Alexandria: Dar Nashr al-Thaqafah, 1951), 34.

⁴Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Tathbit Dala'il al-Nubuwwah [Confirming the Proofs of Prophethood]*, ed. 'Abd al-Karim 'Uthman (Cairo: Dar al-Mustafa, n.d.), 375.

⁵Abd al-Karim 'Uthman, *Nazariyyat Al-Taklif: A Ra' al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Kalamiyyah [The Theory of Moral Responsibility: The Theological Views of Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar]* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, n.d.), 74.

⁶Al-Baji Abu al-Walid, *Al-Hudud fi al-Usul [Definitions in Usul]*, ed. Nazih Hammad, 1st ed. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Za'bi li al-Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr, 1973), 34.

⁷Al-Jurjani, 'Ali ibn Muhammad, *Al-Ta'rifat [The Definitions]*, ed. Ibrahim al-Abyari Ibrahim al-Abyari (n l : . Dar al-Rayan lil-Turath, n d), 197.

4.2. The Significance and Status of ‘Aql (Intellect)

In Mu‘tazilite thought, the intellect (‘aql) is conceived as a divinely endowed necessity, serving as the foundational criterion for moral responsibility (*taklif*). Indeed, there is a consensus among adherents of the Islamic tradition that reason undergirds the obligation to believe and act¹. Consequently, the Mu‘tazilites accorded primacy to knowledge acquired through rational contemplation (*nazar*) and inferential reasoning (*istidlal*). Had awareness of the Divine been wholly innate, they argued, the charge to seek and affirm such knowledge would be voided. Rather, humans are endowed initially with only the preliminary capacity that, through rational endeavor, leads to the acquisition of further, more nuanced forms of understanding.

This prioritization of reason above scriptural texts emerges from the Qur’an’s own appeals to human cognition. It is, after all, the intellect that God addresses in numerous verses, as in “Indeed, in that are signs for a people who reason” (Al-Ra’d: 4). Through ‘aql, one distinguishes opposing truths², weighs various considerations, and discerns underlying realities. For the Mu‘tazilites, reason stands as a sovereign arbiter, the ultimate reference point in argumentation and decision-making.

Their veneration of intellect was predicated, moreover, on its divine origin, ensuring that no genuine contradiction could exist between reason and revelation. On the one hand, intellect precedes revelation in the order of human cognition; on the other hand, it continuously guides human beings, as noted by the philosophers recorded by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi³, illuminating the proper path in both theoretical and practical matters. Consequently, the Mu‘tazilites applied rational judgment to sense-based knowledge, recognizing that the senses could mislead without the critical oversight of reason.

In theological and doctrinal matters, the Mu‘tazilites maintained that the intellect can attain general principles regarding the Divine Being and His attributes—principles of oneness (*tawhid*), justice (*‘adl*), the obligation to express gratitude to the Creator, and the innate discernment of moral right and wrong. However, they acknowledged that independent reasoning cannot ascertain the precise measures and temporal requisites of religious duties, such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These particularities remain the prerogative of the Shari‘ah and cannot be deduced solely through the intellect⁴.

4.3. Rational Knowledge

The Mu‘tazilites accorded ‘aql (intellect) significant authority as a means of epistemic discernment, viewing it as a divinely endowed faculty capable of apprehending truths beyond mere sensory perception⁵. Although direct sensory awareness marks the initial stage of understanding, it remains, in their estimation, an incomplete precursor to true intellectual cognition. Consequently, they elevated reason to the status of an ultimate arbiter of truth, insisting that revelation itself must withstand rational scrutiny.

Prior to the formal promulgation of divine law (*shari‘ah*), the Mu‘tazilites upheld the view that the intellect could independently discern moral values—determining good and evil through rational inquiry alone⁶. They reasoned that that what is initially conveyed through *sam‘* (hearing) must first be rationally validated, since God, by definition, does not commit or endorse wrongdoing⁷.

When apparent inconsistencies arose between revelation and rational judgment, the Mu‘tazilites, on the one hand, never hesitated to reinterpret the text in accordance with reason. Thus, attributes of the Divine that might imply anthropomorphism—such as bodily limbs, divine “descent,” or “coming”—underwent recontextualization, aligned instead with meanings consistent with Arabic linguistic conventions. On the other hand, they argued that the authenticity of both the Qur’an and the Sunnah presupposed an antecedent rational understanding that God is just and incapable of absurdities. Without this initial intellectual certainty, no scriptural claims could be deemed reliable⁸. In this hierarchical relationship, reason thus precedes revelation, not vice versa. Some Mu‘tazilites even

¹Al-Jurjani, ‘Ali ibn Muhammad, *Sharh Al-Mawaqif [A Commentary on “Al-Mawaqif”]*, ed. Mahmud ‘Umar al-Dumyati, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1998), 49–50.

²Al-Ash‘ari Abu al-Hasan, *Maqalat al-Islamiyyin wa Ikhtilaf al-Musallin*, ed. Muhammad Muhyi al-Din ‘Abd al-Hamid, (Sidon-Beirut: Al-Maktabah al-‘Asriyyah, 1990), 62.

³Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, *Al-Imta‘ Wa al-Mu‘Anasa [Delight and Conviviality]*, ed. Haytham Khalifah al-Ta‘imi, n.d., 171.

⁴Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd., *Al-Ittijah al-‘Aqli Fi al-Tafsir: Dirasah Fi Qadiyyat al-Majaz Fi al-Qur’an ‘ind al-Mu‘tazilah [The Rationalist Trend in Exegesis: A Study of the Issue of Metaphor in the Qur’an According to the Mu‘tazilites]*, 3rd ed. (Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-‘Arabi, 1996), 60.

⁵Albert Nasri Nader, *Falsafat Al-Mu‘tazilah: Falasifat al-Islam al-Asbaqin [The Philosophy of the Mu‘tazilites: The Earliest Philosophers of Islam]*, 34.

⁶Al-Jurjani, ‘Ali ibn Muhammad., *Sharh Al-Mawaqif [A Commentary on “Al-Mawaqif”]*, 49–50.

⁷Al-Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Tathbit Dala’il al-Nubuwwah [Confirming the Proofs of Prophethood]*, 173.

⁸Al-Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar, 151.

posited the infallibility of reason, suggesting that since intellect is universal, what one rational mind affirms, all must affirm¹.

Even apparent errors of reason, they contended, stem from the soul's contingencies rather than intrinsic flaws in the intellect itself. After all, God, in imposing moral responsibility (*taklif*), endowed humanity with reason as the primary instrument for discerning His will.

Several scholars maintain that the Mu'tazilites' extensive reliance on rational methodologies in interpreting revelation arose precisely because scriptural texts frequently present meanings amenable to multiple interpretations². By engaging the intellect to plumb these depths, the Mu'tazilites expanded the scope of religious epistemology. Consequently, they elevated reason to a central position as a criterion (*mizan*) and authoritative proof (*hujjah*) in matters of theology³. Ultimately, reason ascended to prominence as the foremost source of knowledge.

5- Rational Deliberation in Mu'tazilite Theology

The notion of *nazar* (rational deliberation) occupies a central position within *kalam* (Islamic dialectical theology), and its significance is particularly evident in Mu'tazilite thought. This concept, however, gave rise to considerable debate between the Mu'tazilites and Ahl al-Sunnah, due in part to its direct implications for two other issues: the acquisition of knowledge concerning God's existence and attributes, and the legitimacy of faith professed by the *muqallid* (the one who adheres to religious beliefs without independent reasoning).

The validity of the *muqallid's* faith remained a contentious matter extensively examined by the Mu'tazilites and periodically revisited throughout Islamic intellectual history. For instance, the tenth-century AH Maghribi scholar Ibn Abi Jum'ah al-Wahrani (d. 929 AH/1523 CE) addressed this issue, delineating the divergent perspectives of the Mu'tazilites, the Ash'arites, and Ahl al-Sunnah⁴. Although the nuances of this debate are intricate, this paper will focus solely on those elements most pertinent to our present topic.

5.1. Definition of Nazar

Nazar—often translated as “contemplation” or “rational deliberation”—refers to the reflective examination of a subject's nature and the comparison of that subject to other entities. Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar describes *nazar* as the mental process of considering a given matter and drawing analogies to others⁵. Al-Baqillani, for his part, characterizes *nazar* as a form of knowledge emerging from inferential reasoning, reflection, or recalling a prior consideration⁶. Al-Jurjani similarly regards it as a cognitive effort directed toward attaining certain knowledge or, at the very least, a preponderant opinion⁸.

The Mu'tazilites assigned paramount importance to *nazar*, deeming it not merely obligatory but, in fact, the foremost of all religious duties. On the one hand, this prioritization follows from their principle that rational obligation precedes obligations derived from revelation. On the other hand, it reflects the necessity of knowing God's existence, unity, and justice prior to affirming the authenticity of His revealed texts and the veracity of His words. Indeed, they argued that knowledge of divine oneness and justice must predate the validation of scripture, for it would be incoherent to use revelation as proof for truths that can only be established rationally in the first instance⁹. If revelation later confirms this rational necessity, it merely reinforces what reason has already determined¹⁰.

Moreover, by affirming that human beings create their own acts, the Mu'tazilites concluded that such actions are

¹Hasni Zina, *Al-'Aql 'inda al-Mu'tazilah: Tasawwur al-'Aql 'inda al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar [Reason in the View of the Mu'tazilites: The Concept of Reason According to Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar]* (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadidah, 1978), 50.

²Karim Azkoul, *Al-'Aql Fi al-Islam [Reason in Islam]*, 1st ed. (Beirut, 1946), 17.

³Ignaz Goldziher, *Al-'Aqidah Wa al-Shari'ah Fi al-Islam [Creed and Sharia in Islam]*, ed. Muhammad Yusuf Musa (Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Qawmi lil-Tarjamah, 2013), 102.

⁴Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah [Commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah]*, ed. Muhammad Ibrahim, 1st ed. (Baghdad: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 2007), 37.

⁵Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Al-Mughni Fi Abwab al-Tawhid Wa al-'Adl [Al-Mughni on the Chapters of Tawhid and 'Adl]*, ed. Ibrahim Madkur (Al-Dar al-Misriyyah lil-Ta'lif wa al-Tarjamah, n.d.), 4.

⁶Al-Baqillani, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib, *Al-Tamhid*, ed. Fr. Richard Joseph McCarthy Fr. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beirut: Al-Maktabah al-Sharqiyyah, 1957), 8.

⁷Al-Baqillani, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib, *Al-Insaf Fima Yajibu I'tiqaduhu Wa La Yajuzu al-Jahl Bihi [Impartiality in What Must Be Believed and May Not Be Ignored]*, ed. Muhammad Zahid ibn al-Hasan al-Kawthari, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Azhariyyah lil-Turath, 2000), 14.

⁸Al-Jurjani, 'Ali ibn Muhammad., *Sharh Al-Mawaqif [A Commentary on "Al-Mawaqif"]*, 196.

⁹Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Al-Mughni Fi Abwab al-Tawhid Wa al-'Adl [Al-Mughni on the Chapters of Tawhid and 'Adl]*, 126.

¹⁰Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Tathbit Dala'il al-Nubuwwah [Confirming the Proofs of Prophethood]*, 142.

realized either through direct causation or what they termed “generation.” Nazar, as a human act, falls under the category of direct human engagement. This emphasis on rational deliberation is not exclusive to the Mu‘tazilites. The Ash‘arites—whose epistemological method bears notable similarities to Mu‘tazilite thought—and the Zaydiyyah—who closely resemble the Mu‘tazilites in their theological stances—also assert the obligatory nature of nazar¹.

5.2. Establishing the Obligation of Rational Deliberation

The Ash‘arites maintain that the obligation to engage in rational deliberation (*nazar*) is established through revealed authority (*sam‘*)², whereas the Mu‘tazilites argue that it derives from the intellect (*‘aql*)³. In support of their stance, the Mu‘tazilites contend that if rational deliberation were mandated solely by scriptural evidence, prophets (*anbiya*) would find themselves unable to substantiate their claims in the context of debate. After all, when a prophet invites an individual (*mukallaf*) to reflect upon his miracle—indeed, upon all matters requisite for affirming the Divine Creator’s existence and attributes—the individual might respond, “I am not obliged to deliberate unless this obligation has been previously established.” Thus, absent a preexisting rational obligation, the interlocutor could refuse to examine the prophet’s proofs.

Consequently, the very moment the prophet commands reflection, rational deliberation must already be obligatory. Were it not, the prophet would lose all argumentative advantage in persuading the individual to accept his message. This predicament reveals a logical impasse: revelation cannot be authenticated without prior rational inquiry, yet that inquiry cannot be imposed without validating revelation. Each condition depends upon the other, creating a vicious circle that effectively nullifies the prophet’s argumentative leverage⁵.

Moreover, the Mu‘tazilites highlight that God frequently addresses human cognition in the Qur’an, as in: “Have they not considered the dominion of the heavens and the earth?” (Al-A‘raf: 185) and “Do they not then reflect upon the Qur’an?” (Muhammad: 24). Such divine injunctions to contemplate the cosmos and scripture imply that God, by commanding rational deliberation, also intends the pursuit of knowledge. On the one hand, if God obligates reflection, He must, on the other hand, obligate the acquisition of understanding. Thus, the requirement to engage in *nazar* necessarily entails a corresponding obligation to attain knowledge⁶.

Since this rational deliberation is divinely mandated, God, through His graciousness (*lutf*), provides the requisite evidences that enable the believer to recognize the imperative of knowing Him. According to the principle that whatever is indispensable to fulfilling an obligation is itself obligatory⁷.

5.3. Rational Deliberation as a Catalyst for Knowledge Acquisition

Within Mu‘tazilite thought, the concept of *tawallud* (ontological generation) posits that one action undertaken by an agent may give rise to another action. This is exemplified by the movement of a hand causing the subsequent movement of a key. Consequently, correct rational deliberation (*nazarsahih*) “generates” and imparts knowledge, functioning as a direct causal precursor to intellectual certainty⁸. Moreover, the Mu‘tazilites categorically rejected the notion that theoretical knowledge of the Divine Essence and His attributes could revert to an innate or immediate form of understanding. Since the servant is morally obligated to acquire such knowledge, it must remain attainable through deliberate intellectual effort. Were it otherwise, imposing this duty would be incongruous with the principles of moral responsibility¹⁰.

5.4. The Rejection of Taqlid (Uncritical Imitation)

The Mu‘tazilites decisively repudiated *taqlid*, insisting that the laity must engage in rational inquiry to establish

¹Al-Qasim al-Rassi, *Al-Dalil al-Kabir Fi al-Radd ‘ala al-Zanadiqah Wa al-Mulhidin [The Great Proof in Refutation of Heretics and Atheists]*, ed. Imam Hanfi ‘Abd Allah, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Afaq al-‘Arabiyyah, 2000), 30.

²Al-Baqillani, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib., *Al-Insaf Fima Yajibu I’tiqaduhu Wa La Yajuzu al-Jahl Bihi [Impartiality in What Must Be Believed and May Not Be Ignored]*, 21.

³Al-Iji, ‘Adud al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Ahmad ‘Adud al-Din, *Al-Mawaqif fi ‘Ilm al-Kalam* (Beirut: ‘Alam al-Kutub, n.d.), 28.

⁴Al-Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Tathbit Dala’il al-Nubuwwah [Confirming the Proofs of Prophethood]*, 3.

⁵Al-Iji, ‘Adud al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Ahmad, *Al-Mawaqif fi ‘Ilm al-Kalam*, 32.

⁶Al-Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Al-Mughni Fi Abwab al-Tawhid Wa al-‘Adl [Al-Mughni on the Chapters of Tawhid and ‘Adl]*, 490.

⁷Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi, *Al-Bahr al-Muhit Fi Usul al-Fiqh [The Comprehensive Ocean in Usul al-Fiqh]*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Abd Allah al-‘Ani, 2nd ed. (al-Ghurdaqah: Dar al-Safwah, 1992), 37.

⁸Al-Hakam al-Jushami, *Tahkim Al-‘Uqul Fi Tashih al-Usul [The Arbitration of Intellects in Verifying the Principles]*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salam ibn ‘Abbas al-Wajih, 2nd ed. (Sanaa: Mu’assasat al-Imam Zayd ibn ‘Ali al-Thaqafiyyah, 2008), 37,43.

⁹Al-Iji, ‘Adud al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Ahmad, *Al-Mawaqif fi ‘Ilm al-Kalam*, 27.

¹⁰Al-Iji, ‘Adud al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Ahmad, 147.

God's existence and to comprehend the evidential bases underpinning belief. This requirement, as previously noted, directly implicates the faith status of those who rely solely on unexamined imitation. According to the Mu'tazilites, an individual cannot be deemed a true believer without attaining full cognizance of all doctrinal conditions they deemed essential for sound faith. Consequently, they pronounced that ordinary Muslims who refrained from rational investigation lacked genuine faith and thus fell outside the fold of believers¹.

II. The Mu'tazilites and Political Authority: Governance

Scholars of Mu'tazilite thought frequently focus on the intellectual dimension of their legacy, particularly their foundational role in the emergence of *'ilm al-kalam*—a discipline unknown during the Prophet's era and that of his Companions². Many also portray them as rationalist thinkers who elevated reason over revelation, with textual evidence relegated to a subsidiary status³. In this manner, the Mu'tazilites granted reason extensive interpretive authority, enabling rational exegesis and metaphorical interpretation. Yet, their intellectual endeavors were not confined to metaphysics and cosmology—such as divine attributes, the creation of the universe, celestial mechanics, and human destiny in the afterlife. They also addressed the terrestrial domain, examining the responsibilities of morally accountable agents (*mukallafin*) in this world and their relationship to the unseen realm.

Consequently, matters of *imamah* (leadership), moral responsibility (*taklif*), ethics, and justice figured prominently in their discourse. Indeed, several of these considerations underpin their Five Principles (*usul al-khamsah*).

1. Imamah in Mu'tazilite Thought

A review of the Five Principles reveals at least three with political implications: divine justice (*'adl*), enjoining right and forbidding wrong (*amr bilma'ruf wanahy 'an al-munkar*), and promise and threat (*wa'dwawa'id*). Although "justice" here primarily refers to absolving the Divine of any wrongdoing, it implicitly suggests that the ruler (caliph) must likewise embody justice and integrity. The Mu'tazilites emerged during the Umayyad era, which they perceived as epitomizing a hereditary and coercive mode of governance ever since Mu'awiyah designated his son Yazid as successor. Some scholars have argued that the Mu'tazilites' engagement with concrete, worldly problems—exemplified by Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar's works—reflects a politically liberal inclination⁴, especially given their emphasis on freedom, responsibility, and the concomitant allocation of reward and punishment.

1.1. Electing the Imam

Most Mu'tazilites, as well as the Ash'arites and Ahl al-Sunnah, concur that the *imamah* is not a foundational matter of faith and creed, unlike the Shi'a and Batiniyya. Rather, it concerns the acts of the morally responsible, making the appointment of an imam a communal obligation grounded in transmitted proofs (*sam'i*). The Companions' establishment of a successor after the Prophet's PBUH death substantiates this obligation. The imam's appointment serves the public interest by preventing potential harm, for averting harm is mandatory. By ensuring both religious and worldly benefits, the *imamah* stands among the highest public interests and foremost objectives of the religion.

Some Mu'tazilites and Zaydis viewed the appointment of an imam as rationally incumbent (*wajib 'aqlan*), while others—such as al-Ka'bi, al-Jahiz, and Abu al-Husayn—deemed it obligatory by both reason and revelation (*wajib 'aqlan wasan'an*)⁵. The *imamah* is established through selection by the *ahl al-hall wal-'aqd* (leading authorities qualified to choose or depose a ruler)⁶, a point of consensus between Mu'tazilites and Ahl al-Sunnah. They also concur on the requirement that the imam hail from the Quraysh, though the Mu'tazilites inclined toward the Hashimites rather than the Umayyads, unlike the Khawarij who disregarded lineage as a criterion. However, genealogical considerations are less essential than the governance itself.

¹Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Maqatil al-Talibiyyin*, ed. al-Sayyid Ahmad Saqr al-Sayyid, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lamiyy, 1998), 66.

²Abi Khumayr al-Subti, *Muqaddimat Al-Marashid Ila 'Ilm al-'Aqa'Id [Introductions of Al-Marashid to the Science of Creeds]*, ed. Ahmad 'Abd al-Rahim al-Sayih., 1st ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafah al-Diniyyah, 2008), 30.

³Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi, *Tashnif Al-Masami' Bi-Jami' al-Jawami' [The Ears' Adornment through Collecting Al-Jawami']*, ed. Sayyid 'Abd al-'Aziz and 'Abd Allah Rabi' (Maktab Qurtubah lil-Bahth al-'Ilmi wa Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami, n.d.), 145.

⁴Al-Yafi'i, 'Abd Allah ibn As'ad, *Marham Al-'Ilal al-Mu'dilah Fi al-Radd 'Ala A'Immat al-Mu'tazilah [A Remedy for Difficult Ills in Refuting the Leaders of the Mu'tazilites]*, ed. Mahmud Muhammad Hasan Nassar, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1992), 56.

⁵Hasni Zina, *Al-'Aql 'inda al-Mu'tazilah: Tasawwur al-'Aql 'inda al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar [Reason in the View of the Mu'tazilites: The Concept of Reason According to Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar]*, 102.

⁶Al-Jurjani, 'Ali ibn Muhammad., *Sharh Al-Mawaqif [A Commentary on "Al-Mawaqif"]*, 383.

⁷Al-Jurjani, 'Ali ibn Muhammad., 383.

1.2 Rebellion against the Imam: Mu'tazilite Revolutionary Thought

Islamic political thought has devoted considerable attention to the religious qualifications and conduct of the caliph. The Mu'tazilites invested deeply in these discussions, not merely due to their rational social, economic, and religious aims—which sought justice and stability, goals common to all Islamic groups—but also because they raised a critical and potentially destabilizing question: the permissibility, or even obligation, of rebellion against an unjust ruler.

The Zaydi-leaning Mu'tazilites maintained that it was permissible—or obligatory—to depose tyrannical leaders. Yet they were more prudent and pragmatic than the Khawarij. They stipulated two conditions: first, a just imam worthy of leadership must call for rebellion, one who enjoins right and forbids wrong and summons people to pledge allegiance. Second, adequate strength and resources must be available to confront the unjust ruler. They reasoned: “If we are a group and believe we can prevail over our adversaries, we would pledge allegiance to an imam, rise, kill the oppressor, depose him, and compel people to our doctrine—i.e., belief in divine oneness (*tawhid*), justice (*'adl*), and predestination (*qadar*). If they refuse, we would eliminate them, thus making it incumbent upon the people to depose the ruler whenever possible”¹². Some even specified a number equivalent to the warriors at Badr (approximately three hundred fighters) or any sufficient force³, in line with the Qur'anic directive: “And prepare against them whatever you are able” (al-Anfal: 60).

1.3. The Mu'tazilite Stance on Umayyad Rule

The Mu'tazilites regarded Umayyad governance as illegitimate and coercive, undermining free choice⁴. They viewed Mu'awiyah's conflict with 'Ali, followed by his bequeathing the caliphate to Yazid, as usurpation and the establishment of a hereditary monarchy. Furthermore, they accused the Umayyads of monopolizing communal wealth unjustly, contradicting Mu'tazilite principles. Thus, deposing them and, if feasible, inciting revolution became necessary to address tyranny, economic mismanagement, and injustice.

Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar employs rational and logical arguments to justify their position, stating: “If a governor displays rebellion (*baghy*), the imam must remove or restrain him. Likewise, the Muslims must eliminate the oppressor and establish an imam”⁵. He makes no distinction between lower-ranked officials and the caliph himself, since injustice remains injustice regardless of the perpetrator's rank.

The Mu'tazilites reserved their harshest criticism for Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan and the Umayyads collectively, regarding them as leaders of tyranny and sources of misguidance⁶. Some went as far as accusing Mu'awiyah of impiety or disbelief. Al-Jahiz (d. 255 AH/869 CE), a prominent Mu'tazilite figure who flourished during the movement's golden era, severely denounced Mu'awiyah in multiple works. Under Abbasid patronage—or at least tolerance—al-Jahiz countered the efforts of pro-Umayyad partisans active in the third century AH with treatises like *al-Nabīyah* and *al-'Uthmaniyyah*. In one instance, he asserts: “Then the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) appointed after him Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan as a scribe, who became the first to betray his imam and attempt to unravel the bonds of faith through his sins”⁸. The Shi'i Mu'tazilite Ibn Abi al-Hadid deemed even the Khawarij superior to Mu'awiyah, for at least they enjoined right and forbade wrong, whereas Mu'awiyah neither pursued truth nor justice, but indulged in vain pursuits and squandered public wealth on personal desires⁹. Similarly, Al-Khayyat reaffirms the Mu'tazilite position on the Umayyads and especially Mu'awiyah, stating: “As for the allegiance and mercy extended to all the Companions, and seeking closeness to God by loving them, there is no dispute among them except for those who supported the deviant faction from Syria. The Mu'tazilites vehemently oppose them”¹⁰. Thus, the Mu'tazilites considered Mu'awiyah as a usurper who rendered the caliphate hereditary,

¹ Abu Bakr Ibn Furak, *Maqalat Abi Al-Hasan al-Ash'ari [The Doctrines of Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari]*, ed. Daniel Gimaret (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1987), 191, 197.

² Al-Ash'ari Abu al-Hasan, *Maqalat al-Islamiyyin wa Ikhtilaf al-Musallin*, 140, 156.

³ Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Sharh Al-Usul al-Khamsah [Commentary on the Five Principles]*, ed. 'Abd al-Karim 'Uthman, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1996), 752.

⁴ Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Tathbit Dala'il al-Nubuwwah [Confirming the Proofs of Prophethood]*, 281.

⁵ Al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, 203–4.

⁶ Al-Qasim al-Rassi, *Al-Dalil al-Kabir Fi al-Radd 'ala al-Zanadiqah Wa al-Mulhidin [The Great Proof in Refutation of Heretics and Atheists]*, 246, 355.

⁷ Al-Jahiz Al-Jahiz, 'Amr ibn Bahr, *Al-Rasa'il al-Siyasiyyah [Political Epistles]*, ed. 'Ali Abu Milhim (Beirut: Dar al-Hilal, 2002), 38.

⁸ Al-Jahiz, 'Amr ibn Bahr, *Rasa'il al-Jahiz [The Epistles of Al-Jahiz]*, ed. 'Abd al-Salam Muhammad Harun (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, n.d.), 189.

⁹ Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj Al-Balaghah [Commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah]*, 51.

¹⁰ Al-Khayyat al-Mu'tazili, *Al-Intisar Wa al-Radd 'ala Ibn al-Rawandi al-Mulhid [The Triumph and Refutation Against Ibn al-Rawandi the Heretic]*, 139.

compounded by oppression and tyranny, warranting resistance against his regime.

The Mu'tazilites' preference for the 'Alids of the Hashimite clan over the Umayyads is evident. They placed their hopes in figures like Zayd ibn 'Ali or 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan. When Wasil ibn 'Ata and 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd supported Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan after the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid ibn Yazid's death in 126 AH/743 CE, they gathered in the house of 'Uthman ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Makhzumi in Basra, deliberating upon injustice. On that occasion, 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd asked who was fit to assume this authority, to which Wasil ibn 'Ata replied that Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan was worthy¹. In this manner, the Mu'tazilite stance on the Umayyads indirectly contributed to their downfall at the hands of the Abbasids.

Since injustice ranks among the core concerns of the Mu'tazilites—justice, after all, is an attribute of the Divine—human injustice, especially by rulers, posed an unacceptable peril. Consequently, they deemed its eradication an obligation, even by force if possible. They linked this imperative to the principle of enjoining right and forbidding wrong. Although 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd did not directly rebel against the Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur when invited by Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan to pledge allegiance, he openly expressed discontent with Abbasid policies. His admonitions to al-Mansur often addressed injustice, warning the caliph that God would hold him accountable for every atom's weight of good or evil. He thereby urged the ruler to establish justice and eschew tyranny². Moreover, the Mu'tazilites would only pledge allegiance to one who embraced their principles, as shown by 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd's refusal to support Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan without first testing his justice⁴.

Mu'tazilite Resistance to Umayyad Rule:

Although the Mu'tazilites opposed the Umayyads, they did not instigate armed uprisings against them, unlike the Khawarij. Their restraint stemmed from their stringent conditions for rebellion—possessing sufficient force and capability—which they never attained. Informed by historical precedents, including the failures of Khawarij and Shi'i revolts, they refrained from initiating their own insurrections. Instead, they persisted through peaceful advocacy to safeguard their mission and their lives. Nevertheless, they supported uprisings led by certain Alawites and Zaydis who shared their beliefs. Among these, Zayd ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn's revolt in Kufa in 122 AH/740 CE against the Umayyad Caliph Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik stands out. Some even described this uprising as more Mu'tazilite than Alawite, making it the first genuinely Mu'tazilite-inspired revolution.

In essence, the Mu'tazilites consistently espoused a revolutionary ethos—intellectually in their epistemological endeavors and, at times, politically through their rationalist, freedom-oriented principles.

Conclusion

The Mu'tazilites represent a transformative episode in Islamic intellectual history. They were the first group to engage with metaphysical and cosmic questions—and their related phenomena—in a rational and analytical manner. This study of Mu'tazilite thought leads to several observations and conclusions:

- The Mu'tazilites were centuries ahead of their time, tackling subjects now classified among the natural sciences—physics, atomic theory, material studies, motion, color theory, optics, and light. In some cases, their explanations approximate modern scientific interpretations.
- Their rationalization of knowledge marks the earliest serious attempt to apply intellectual rigor and scientific reasoning in the Islamic tradition. Had they endured, their intellectual “revolution” might have anticipated the European Renaissance by centuries, serving as an Islamic scientific awakening.
- Their principal shortcoming may have been their divergence from the majority of Muslims on several theological matters. By subjecting all religious issues—especially those grounded in explicit Qur'anic and Prophetic texts—to rational scrutiny, they posited that true faith stems from rational proof, not the other way around. This stance, asserting that certain knowledge is accessible only through reason, provoked censure and critique.
- Despite these criticisms, the Mu'tazilites endowed Islamic thought with a rational character, contributing to the evolution of systematic and methodical inquiry.
- Their introduction of *'ilm al-kalam* and dialectical debate engendered a tradition of theological disputation. This methodology spread beyond the Mu'tazilites, influencing all Islamic sects, including Ahl al-Sunnah, who employed these strategies against Mu'tazilites, Shi'a, and Khawarij alike.

In conclusion, scholarship on Mu'tazilite rationalism and scientific thought remains limited, despite a wide field

¹Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Maqatil al-Talibiyyin*, 258.

²Al-Zubayr ibn Bakkar, *Al-Akhbar al-Muwafiqiyat [The Muwafiqi Reports]*, ed. Sami Makki al-'Ani, 2nd ed. (Beirut: 'Alam al-Kutub, 1996), 130.

³Al-Bayhaqi, Ibrahim ibn Muhammad, *Al-Mahasin Wa al-Masawi' [The Merits and Demerits]*, ed. Muhammad Badr al-Din al-Na'sani (Egypt: Matba'at al-Sa'adah, 1906), 28.

⁴Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Maqatil al-Talibiyyin*, 187.

awaiting exploration. Reviving this intellectual heritage—particularly regarding applied and pragmatic issues—may foster a resurgence of informed inquiry that could contribute to a contemporary scientific renaissance in the Islamic world. As for the theological matters where the Mu'tazilites diverged from the mainstream, one may view them as earnest, if controversial, attempts to advance intellectual discourse and thus pardonable in their historical context.

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