# Mu'tazilaism: An Introduction to Rationality in Islam

**Dr. Diwan Taskheer Khan**

*Abstract*— **Rationalism, in the sense of appealing to logical reason and dialectical rhetoric, has been a characteristic of Islamic theological thought since the earliest times. Beyond the discussion on the authenticity and thus the dating of a number of sources, there is a small corpus of very old texts of unquestionable authenticity, in which the doctrinal aspects concerning the opposition between free will and determinism are discussed in a dialectical manner. The use of this genre of argumentation in such early writings attests to the use of logical reason in Islamic religious rhetoric since the earliest period of Islam reaching a climax between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Without a doubt, rationalism has always come up against powerful adversaries throughout the history of Islam, but it has continued to be one of the principal currents of theological thought. Mu'tazilaism is one of the earliest philosophical traditions of rationalist Islam. This is a descriptive paper in which the author tried to give an exposition of rationalism in Islam through Mutazilites philosophy.**

*Index Terms*— **Determinism, Free will, Islam, Reason**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Mu‘tazilites constituted the oldest “school” of Islamic rationalist theology (speculative theology known as *kalām*), which was incontestably one of the most influential doctrinal schools of thought in Islam. The Mu‘tazilites, professing the primacy of human reason and free will (opposed to predestination). They tried to develop an epistemology, ontology, and psychology constituting the foundation of their speculations on the nature of the universe, God, man, and religious phenomena, such as the divine revelation and law. In their ethical doctrine, the Mu‘tazilites maintained that good and evil can only be understood through the exercise of human reason. With their distinctive epistemology, they were able to develop a highly complex legal methodology.

Etymologically the word Mu'tazilah is derived from Arabic word *i'tizal* which means to withdraw or secede. Mu'tazilites are the people who in some of their beliefs were diametrically opposed to the unanimous consent of the early theologians or the People of the Approved Way *(ahl al-sunnah).* The leader of all of them was Wasil bin `Ata who was born in 80/699 at Madinah and died in 131/748. Because of his over emphasis on reason on certain issues of Islamic thought his teacher Imam Hasan Basri said to him, "*I’tazala `anna*," i.e., "He has withdrawn from us." Therefore, Wasil and his followers were called al-Mu'tazilah, the Withdrawers or Secessionists. (Sharif, 1963, p.200)

Therefore, Mu'tazila literally means 'those who withdraw themselves'. The movement was founded by Wasil bin Ata in the second century ah (eighth century ad). Its members were united in their conviction that it was necessary to give a rationally coherent account of Islamic beliefs. In addition to having an atomistic view of the universe, they generally held to five theological principles, of which the two most important were the unity of God and divine justice. The former led them to deny that the attributes of God were distinct entities or that the Qur'an was eternal, while the latter led them to assert the existence of free will.

Subsequent to the times of the Companions of the Prophet of Islam, the Mu'tazilah creed made its appearance. It had its inception nearly two centuries after the migration (Hijrah) of the Holy Prophet to Madinah. The Mu'tazilites were thorough going rationalists. They believed that the arbiter of whatever is revealed has to be theoretical reason.

Mu'tazili were not willing to simply accept what the current political-religious authorities claimed as being the absolute truth or the absolute right moral law. Instead, they believed that the 'words of Allah' require *interpretation* and that man must apply *reasoned* thinking to this task; otherwise, the religious authorities or those who happen to be favorites of the current political regime will dictate their own interpretative views to the people in the guise of absolute God's truth. For without the freedom of reasoning, argument, and debate; the intended meaning of God's Message could be kidnapped or falsified by those claiming to be the righteous authorities of meaning.

Thus, the Mu'tazili were courageous in challenging other theologians, even those with political power or ties, to debating the true meaning of qur’anic statements. But the judge of truth for the Mu'tazili was human reason, in combination also with revelation and with spiritual intuition, because they understood that the only alternative to using reason was religious authoritarianism. However, many of those disagreeing with Mu'tazili conclusions refused to use reasoning in debates, claiming that reason was incapable of knowing the truth of revelation; so they sought to persuade people of their interpretation on the basis of their special religious knowledge and position of simply of knowing what the Quran means. In contrast, The Mu'tazili sought the agreement of others by the power of their reasoning and logic, rather than gaining agreement by either an appeal to being the absolute religious authority or by popularized emotional appeals.

The Mu'tazili sought to ground the Islamic creedal system in reason; though with the Quran and a foundational faith in Islam as their starting point and ultimate reference. Mu'tazilis intentionally applied logic and some aspects of Greek philosophy, but the accusations leveled against them by rival schools of theology that they gave absolute authority to extra-Islamic paradigms reflect more the fierce polemics between various schools of theology than any objective reality.

**Dr. Diwan Taskheer Khan,** Assistant Professor, Business Studies Department, Nizwa College of Technology, Sultanate of Oman

One might then consider the Mu'tazila as 'rationalists', but it is necessary then to show precisely what is to be understood by this term. They are not rationalists in the sense of those who claim to formulate a system solely by the exercise of reason, independent of all revelation. In other words, the Mu'tazili are not building a philosophical system of truths based on just reason. But the Mu'tazila are rationalists, in their belief that spiritual understandings are accessible to man by means of his intelligence and reason. Overall, they believe: that human reason can discover spiritual truths that reason is useful in complementing spiritual intuition, and that reason is actually necessary for rightly interpreting any prophetic revelation. This is why the first of the obligations given to man is for us to use our God-given reasoning.

**Principles of Mu'tazilaism:**

There are five principal doctrines which, according to the Mu'tazilah themselves, constitute their basic tenets:

**(1) *Tawhid:*** *This means the* absence of plurality and attributes.
**(2) Justice *('adl):*** This means that God is just and that He does not oppress His creatures.
**(3) Divine retribution** *(at-wa'd wa al-wa'id): This means that* God has determined a reward for the obedient and a punishment for the disobedient, and there can be no uncertainty about it. Therefore, Divine pardon is only possible if the sinner repents, for forgiveness without repentance *(tawbah)* is not possible.
**(4) *Manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*** (a position between the two positions): This means that a *fasiq* (i.e. one who commits one of the "greater sins," such as a wine imbiber, adulterer, or a liar etc.) is neither a believer*(mu'min)* nor an infidel *(kafir); fisq* is an intermediary state between belief and infidelity.

**(5) Al-*'amr bil ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*** [bidding to do what is right and lawful, and forbidding what is wrong and unlawful]. The opinion of the Mu'tazilah about this Islamic duty is, firstly, that the Shari'ah is not the exclusive means of identifying the *ma'ruf* and the *munkar;* human reason can, at least partially, independently identify the various kinds of *ma'ruf* and *munkar. (*Mutahhar ,Ayatullah Murtadha*)*

The core underpinnings of the Mu'tazilah is that reason or rational thought is an overriding true principle, by which other truths and principles can be established, this came about due to the translations of Greek works on logic. This does not sound abhorrent or particular deviant, however the type and method of reasoning that later came into effect led to some people rejecting the Mu'tazilah and their methods and labeling them as heretics. From the five principles further beliefs are derived:

**Free Will:** The Mu'tazilites accepted totally the theory of indeterminism and became true successors of the Qadarites. (Sharif, 1963, p.200) They address the question of free will and determinism, and they decided in favor of free will, and attributed to creatures the power to carry out their own acts. They argued that if humans did not have the power to choose and create their own acts, there would be no point to the rewards and punishments promised by God to humans in the next life. They claimed that God was a just God and that it was inconceivable that God would reward or punish humans for acts over which they had no power or control. (Qadi, 2012, p323)

Mu'tazilites adopted the creed of Ma'bad al-Juhani and Ghailan al-Dimashqi and said that since God is wise and just, evil and injustice cannot be attributed to him. How is it justifiable for Him that He should will contrary to what He commands His servants to do? Consequently, good and evil, belief and unbelief, obedience and sin are the acts of His servant himself, i.e., the servant alone is their author or creator and is to be rewarded or punished for his deeds. It is impossible that the servant may be ordered to "do" a thing which he is not able to do. Man is ordered to do an act because he has the power to do that act. Whosoever denies this power and authority rejects a self-evident datum of consciousness. (Sharif, 1963, p.205)

God Almighty's justice necessitates that man should be the author of his own acts; then alone can he be said to be free and responsible for his deeds.

The same was claimed by the Qadarites. If man is not the author of his own acts and if these acts are the creation of God, how can he be held responsible for his acts and deserve punishment for his sins? Would it not be injustice on the part of God that, after creating a man helpless, He should call him to account for his sins and send him to hell? Thus, all the Mu'tazilites agree in the matter of man's being the creator of his volitional acts. He creates some acts by way of *mubasharah* and some by way of *taulid. By the* term *taulid is* implied the necessary occurrence of another act from an act of the doer.

Mutazilites believes that man creates guidance or misguidance for himself by way of *mubasharah* and his success or failure resulting from this is created by way of *taulid.* God is not in the least concerned in creating it, nor has God's will anything to do with it. In other words, if a man is regarded as the author of his own acts, it would mean that it is in his power either to accept Islam and be obedient to God, or become an unbeliever and commit sins, and that God's will has nothing to do with these acts of his. God, on the other hand, wills that all created beings of His should embrace Islam and be obedient to Him. He orders the same to take place and prohibits people from committing sins.

Since man is the author of his own acts, it is necessary for God to reward him for his good deeds and this can be justly claimed by him. As Al-Shahrastani puts it: "The Mu'tazilites unanimously maintain, that man decides upon and creates his acts, both good and evil; that he deserves reward or punishment in the next world for what he does. In this way the Lord is safeguarded from association with any evil or wrong or any act of unbelief or transgression. For if He created the wrong, He would be wrong, and if He created justice, He would be just."(Cited in Wensink, A.J. 2008p.62)

It is the creed of most of the Mu'tazilites that one possesses "ability" before the accomplishment of the act, but some Mu'tazilites (e. g., Muhammad b. `Isa and abu `Isa Warraq)

like the Sunnites are of the view that one has ability to act besides the act.

**Good and Evil:** Mu'tazilites believes that "things are not good or evil because God declares them to be so. No, God makes the distinction between good and evil on account of their being good and evil. Goodness or evil are innate in the essence of things themselves". (Sharif, 1963, p.201) They maintain that God is good and just, and that evil and injustice should not be referred to Him. If God creates evil He should be evil, and if He creates justice, then He would be just. But as God is absolutely good and just, evil and injustice cannot be attributed to Him. (Jabbar,1997, p.92)

According to the Mu'tazilites, things are not good or evil because God declares them to be so. No, God makes the distinction between good and evil on account of their being good and evil. Goodness or evil are innate in the essence of things themselves. This very goodness or evil of things is the cause of the commands and prohibitions of the Law. The human intellect is capable of perceiving the goodness and evil of a few things and no laws are required to express their goodness and evil, e. g., it is commendable to speak the truth and despicable to commit oneself to untruth. This shows that the evil and goodness of things are obvious and require no proof from the *Shari`ah.* Shameful and unjust deeds are evil-in-themselves; therefore, God has banned indulgence in them. It does not imply that His putting a ban on them made them shameful and unjust deeds.

The thoroughgoing rationalism of the Mu'tazilites is thus expressed by al-Shahrastani in these words: "The adherents of justice say: All objects of knowledge fall under the supervision of reason and receive their obligatory power from rational insight. Consequently, obligatory gratitude for divine bounty precedes the orders given by (divine) Law; and beauty and ugliness are qualities belonging intrinsically to what is beautiful and ugly." (Cited in Wensink, A.J. 2008p.62-63)

**Allah is not able to be seen by the Eye**: The Mu'tazilites hold that vision is not possible without place and direction. As God is exempt from place and direction, therefore, a vision of Him is possible neither in this world nor in the hereafter. They denied the beatific vision. (Sharif, 1963, p.202)

**The Qur'an is the created speech of Allah**: Mu'tazilites believe that the Qur'an is an originated work of God and it came into existence together with the prophethood of the Prophet of Islam. Al Mamoun, the caliph at the time insisted upon all state scholars acknowledging this before they could practice. Belief that the Qur'an is a created speech of Allah. (Sharif, 1963, p.202)

**God's attributes are not literal**: Pleasure and anger, not attributes, but states. According to the Mu'tazilites, God's pleasure and anger should not be regarded as His attributes, because anger and pleasure are states and states are mutable, the essence of God is immutable. They should be taken as heaven and hell. Essentially Mu'tazilites tried to link the attributes to God's actions rather than to His essence, so God is merciful, but there is not something that is mercy that is part of Him, existing eternally, rather what He does is merciful.

**About Heaven and Hell:** The Mu'tazilites also deny the physical existence of the "Tank" (al-Haud), and the "Bridge" (al-Sirdt). Further, they do not admit that heaven and hell exist now, but believe that they will come into existence on the Day of Judgment. (Sharif, 1963, p.202)

***Conclusion:***

From the above discussion we can conclude that there are scope of rationality in Islam. And the Mutazilites are believed to be the pioneer of rationality in Islam. Muslims generally speak of Wasil's party as the Mu'tazilites, but they latter call themselves People of Unity and Justice (ahl al-tauhid wal `adl). *By* justice they imply that it is incumbent on God to requite the obedient for their good deeds and punish the sinners for their misdeeds. By unity they imply the denial of the divine attributes. Undoubtedly, they admit that God is knowing, powerful, and seeing, but their intellect does not allow them to admit that these divine attributes are separate and different from the divine essence. The reason for this view of theirs is that if the attributes of God are not considered to be identical with the essence of God, "plurality of eternals" would necessarily result and the belief in unity would have to be given up. This, in their opinion, is clear unbelief *(kufr).* Unity and justice are the basic principles of the beliefs of the Mu'tazilites and this is the reason why they call themselves "People of Unity and Justice."

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