RATIONALIST CURRENTS IN ISLAM:

Mu'tazilism

Alias: Ana POPESCU

ABSTRACT

This study aims to expose the fundamental features that constitute the main rationalist current within Islam: Mu'tazilism, which, given the type of exegesis it applies, namely that based on reason or opinion (tafsīr bi-r-ra'y), is often defined in opposition to the majority of traditional schools which are based on textual exegesis (tafsīr bi-r-riwāya). Thus, Mu'tazilism had a defining role in the development of Islamic thought, with reverberations even in the contemporary period. Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar is the one who managed, in a first stage, to summarize the principles of this school in a consistent and organized manner. By virtue of the ideas presented by him, it can be stated that Mu'tazilism represents a doctrine as coherent as possible, which manages to explain its religious foundations by resorting to science and logic, emphasizing at the same time the necessity and obligation of every believer to exercise reason in order to fully know God.

Keywords: Mu'tazilism, God, rationalist current, Islam, schools, theology.

Definition

Mu'tazilism, a rationalist theological trend that was established in Iraq in the 8th century (Campanini, 2012), is characterized as one of the most important theological schools within early Islam and known especially for its priority to the intellect (*'aql*) and free human will. It reached its peak during the Abbasid[1] Caliphate and until 1252, when it was consecrated by the Caliph al-Ma'mun[2] (786-833) as the official state doctrine (Cakmac, 2017).

Later on, Zaydism took over certain ideological aspects. Moreover, Rationalism has enjoyed a growing interest among modernist Muslim thinkers, taking on, as various observers assert, including Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward, "the spirit of Mu'tazili speech", through the emphasis placed on intellect and dialogue (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

Contemporary expressions of this current can be noticed within modern Islam, for which Harun Nasution[3] (1919-1998) is seen as "a contemporary manifestation of *mu'tazilism*", in other words, a representative of the so-called "neo-*Mu'tazilism*" (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

It is worth mentioning that Massimo Campanini[4] does not consider appropriate to describe Mu'tazilism as a theological school, since its doctrine has never developed in an organized framework and has never had a single unifying center or a single founding leader. On the contrary, there were some divergent opinions among the thinkers within this current, even on some defining ideas of a central importance. According to Campanini, *mu'tazilism* is rather "a collection of common tendencies held in common, sharing both a vocabulary and political and cultural views" (Campanini, 2012, p. 41).

History

The debut of the Mu'tazili theology is attributed to the teachings of al-Hasan al-Basri[5] (642-728), who writes a treaty (*risāla*), addressed to Caliph 'Abd al-Malik[6] (646/647-705), in response to the theme of free will and divine predestination, explaining that people are responsible for their acts, as they have been granted freedom of choice. The Mu'tazili school in Basra is shaped around this thinker. The school's promoters are both Wasil ibn 'Ata'[7] (700-748) and Amr ibn 'Ubayd[8] (d. 761) (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

The origin of the term designating the movement also goes back to Al-Hasan al-Basri. Therefore, according to tradition, al-Basri, asked whether anyone who commits a serious sin can still be considered faithful, hesitated, and Wasil ibn 'Ata answered instead, saying that the person in question is in an intermediate position (*al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn*). That moment he withdrew ("*i'itzāl*") himself from Hassan's circle, followed by other former disciples, including 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd (Martin & Woodward, 1997). However, as Massimo Campanini claims, this event can also be a mere legend. As such, Van Ess (1979, *apud* Campanini, 2012) states that Wasil ibn 'Ata withdrew himself from Hasan al-Basri's circle rather because of terminological and methodological misunderstandings. On the other hand, some observers suggest that the name originally referred to those who chose a middle way between the Orthodox and the Kharjite routes, at the time of the schism between Ali[9] and Mu'awiya[10] (Nallino, 1940, *apud* Campanini 2012).

Subsequently, two Mu'tazili centers are outlined, one in Basra and another in Baghdad, the difference between them being reflected in the predilection shown by the Baghdad school for 'Ali ibn Abi Talib in the context of his conflict with Mu'awiya, while Basra school keeps closer to the Sunni political theology of the time. Abu l-Hudhayl[11] (d. 841) has the merit of providing an organized form of Basra school's doctrine. He edits the five principles of the Mu'tazili theology (*al-'Uṣūl al-Ḥamsa*); Bagdad school is shaped under the care of the poet and theologian Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir (d. 825) (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

With the Baghdad school's location in the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, which enjoys an immense political success, Mu'tazilism becomes the official state doctrine. Al-Ma'mun Caliphate institutes a so-called "inquisition" (*miḥna*), making mandatory for the aspirants to the title of judge to undergo a theological examination and publicly adhere to the Mu'tazili doctrine on the created character of the Quran (*ḥalq al-Qur'ān*) (Martin & Woodward, 1997). Later, with the Caliph al-Mutawakkil[12]'s installation (822-861) at the head of the state, both schools fall into disgrace, Ahmad ibn Hanbal[13]'s (780-855) traditionalist vision becoming more representative for the Islamic society at that time (El-Merheb & Berriah, 2021).

From the 19th century onwards, the Mu'tazili theological school became a real anathema in most Islamic circles, the Ash'ari theological school along with Maturidi school being predominantly recognized and accepted within Sunni Islam. However, with the emergence of central figures of what is known as "Islamic modernism", such as Muhammad 'Abduh in Egypt and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), there is again a new growing interest for Mu'tazilism among Muslim scholars within a trend of challenging Islamic traditionalism (and its postmodern successor, fundamentalism). The Muslim theologian who contributed the most to the renewal of the interest in Mu'tazili Islamic school is Muhammad 'Abduh, who tried to articulate a vision of Islam in a world full of non-Muslim intellectual changes and challenges, responding to the challenge posed by modernity and the encounter with the West perceived as superior both economically and politically (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

Rationalism and Traditionalism

In general, Mu'tazilism and Rationalism are defined in opposition to the traditionalist theological schools – more specifically those that apply text-based exegesis (also called *muḥaddiṯūn*, from *ḥadīṯ*), Hanbali school being the leading one (Esack, 2005 & Saeed, 2006). Richard C. Martin (1997) defines the traditionalist Islam as the counter-tendency of renewal and revitalization of the *status-quo*, looking towards an idealized past, while rationalist Islam designates the tendency of scholars to adjust the Islamic message to the intellectual and social context of the moment (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

The divergence between traditionalist and mu'tazili scholars is represented by the emphasis placed by the traditionalists on the authority of *ḥadīṯ's* (called, otherwise, *ahl al-ḥadīṯ*) (Martin & Woodward, 1997). This does not deny the applicability of tradition among mu'tazilites, but from their point of view, considering they practice exegesis based on reason or opinion (*tafsīr bi-r-ra'y*) (Alak, 2016), it is the rational meanings of their content (*matn*) that accredit the validity of the *ḥadīṯ*, in addition to the chain of transmitters, and texts that contradict reason must be reinterpreted (Alak, 2016, Martin & Woodward, 1997).

Therefore, while the traditionalists practice text-based exegesis (*tafsīr bi-r-riwāya*) and recognize the authority of the Qur'an, the Sunna, alongside the scholars' consensus (*iğmā'*) and analogous reasoning (*qiyās*), the mu'tazilites, while accepting the authority of the two sacred texts, consider their own judgment as the first criterium for deciphering the meanings of the Qur'an or the *ḥadīṯe*, without questioning, in any way, the importance of the two texts (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

As a consequence, it can be deduced that the traditionalists do not deny that people enjoy the ability to exercise reason, but what rather distinguishes between the two theological classes is that traditionalists place revelation on the forefront, while the Mu'tazilites display a predilection towards logical thinking (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

Principles

According to Binyamin Abrahamov (1998), the basis of Rationalism lies in the notion that God and the world can be perceived through the intellect with which God endows the man. Therefore, he emphasizes the necessity of reason in order to know God, the fact that, for everything, a rational explanation can be identified, everything being subjected to the laws of reason, including God. These ideas are contrary to the traditional perception that God can only be known and understood with the help of Scripture.

The basis of Rationalism is the notion that God and the world can be perceived through the intellect which God creates in man. Concerning God, this perception means that God's existence, His unity and His attributes can be known through reason. Concerning the world, it means that the creation of the world and its structure, man and his actions can be logically understood. From this foundation, it follows that the world is directed according to rational rules and that, hence, even God is subject to these rules. We shall immediately see that according

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[1] Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) came after the Omeyyade Caliphate (661-750) in Damascus. During the Abbasid dynasty, the Islamic civilization reached the peak of its development (Abbasid Caliphate, 2023).

[2] Al-Ma'mun (786-833) was the seventh caliph in the Abbasid dynasty, known for his desire to impose a rationalist system of faith (Sourdel, 2022).

[3] Harun Nasution (1919-1998) was a Muslim scientist born in Indonesia, known for his rationalist works in Islam (Saleh, 2001).

[4] Massimo Campanini (1954-2020) was an expert in Islamic studies.

[5] Al-Hasan Al-Basri (642-728) was an important Muslim theologian and a central personality in early Islam (Ede, 2022).

[6] Abd al-Malik (646/647-705) was the fifth caliph of the Omeyyade dynasty, having the capital in Damascus (Khalidi, 2022).

[7] Wasil ibn 'Ata' (700-748) was a Muslim theologian considered the founder of the Mu'tazili school (Wasil ibn 'Ata', 2022).

[8] Amr ibn 'Ubayd (d. 761) was a Muslim scholar and central personality in the Mu'tazili school (Donner, 1988).

[9] Ali ibn Abi Talib (600–661) was the fourth rightly-guided caliph and the first Shia imam (Afsaruddin & Nasr, 2023).

[10] Mu'awiyah I (602-680) was a caliph between 661-680 a. Hr. and was part of the Omeyyade clan which belonged to the Quraysh tribe (Little, 2023).

[11] Abu l-Hudhayl (d. 841) was one of the most important theologians in the Mu'tazili school (Abu l-Hudhayl, 2020).

[12] Al-Mutawakkil (822-861) was one of the Abbasid dynasty's caliphs (Al-Mutawakkil, 2023).

[13] Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855) was Muslim theologian and an expert in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), who founded the Hanbali school that was named after him (Makdisi, 2023).

to some Mu'tazilites, God is logically obliged to act in a certain manner. It is no wonder, thus, that God's first obligation on man is to speculate (or reflect) in order to attain the knowledge of God (al-nazar al-mu'addī ilā ma'rifat Allāh). Contrary to the view of the traditionalists, one can know God without the support of the Scripture, and even without a teacher. However, the motive which causes man to reflect is a warning (ḫāṭir) made by God to the effect that if he does not reflect, he will be punished (Abrahamov, 1998, p. 32).

Since very few mu'tazili works have survived to the present moment, the central points of the doctrine in question are collected by Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar[14] (935-1025), characterized by J. Peters (1976) as follows:

He knew the history of his school and its ideas and became the great <compiler> of the Mu'tazili ideas as developed in former centuries by his great predecessors. But he did more than that: he built a comprehensive, coherent, and closed system of theological thinking on the foundations laid for him by the older generations of Mu'tazili. He himself considers his greatest merit to be the making of a systematic approach to theological questions and the elaboration of argumentation in general (Peters, 1976, pp. 14-16, apud Martin & Woodward, 1997, p. 46).

Therefore, Qadi 'Abd al Jabbar expresses in "Kitāb al-'Uṣūl al-Ḫamsa"[15] the five basic principles, the first being that of God's uniqueness (tawḥīd). As Farid Esack (2005) states, this is the focal point of the Mu'tazili theology, people considering themselves as "the people of divine unity and justice" (ahl at-tawḥīd wa-l-'adl) (Esack, 2005, p. 107).

According to al-Aš'ari[16]'s (873/874-935/936) description of the Mu'tazilites, they express the statement that:

The Mu'tazili agree that God is one; there is no thing like him; he is hearing, seeing; he is not a body (jism) not a form, not flesh and blood, not an individual, not substance nor attribute... not begetting nor begotten; magnitudes do not comprehend him nor veils cover him; the senses do not attain him; he is not comparable with men and does not resemble creatures in any respect... he is ceaselessly first, precedent,

going before originated things, existent before created things; he is ceaselessly knowing, powerful, living... not as [men are] knowing, powerful, living... he may not experience benefit or harm, joy or gladness, hurt or pain... he is too holy to be touched by women or to have a consort and children (al-Aš'ari, Maqalāt, pp. 155-156, tr. Watt, 1998, pp. 246-247, apud Martin & Woodward, 1997, p. 68).

In other words, the Mu'tazilites avoid attributing God certain features, being rather content to define God in relation to what there is not (Martin & Woodward, 1997), considering an act of polytheism attributing God some qualities distinct from His essence (Campanini, 2012). This way, they choose to metaphorically (ta'wīl) interpret the divine attributes mentioned by the Quran, God's eye meaning His knowledge, His face, His essence, so on and so forth. Abu l-Hudhayl had said that God is knowing by virtue of a knowledge that identifies with Himself, and He is powerful by virtue of a power that represents Himself, without implying certain eternal traits that are distinct from His essence, therefore, his attributes cannot be coeternal with Him. (Martin & Woodward, 1997, p. 69).

As Massimo Campanini observes, mu'tazilites such as Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'i[17] make the difference between the attributes of His essence (ṣifātuhu li-ḏatihi) and the attributes of action (ṣifāt al-'af'āl). The latter, God can use them or not, more precisely He can create or not, depending on His will (Campanini, 2012). Mu'tazili label those who take all the references to God within the text literally as "mušabbiha", which means those who do "tašbīh"[18] (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

The second main principle of the doctrine is theodicy, more specifically, the idea that the existence of evil in the world does not contradict divine goodness. This principle argues that God does not act in an unethical manner, and man is morally responsible to the Divinity for his actions, being free to choose between good and evil (Campanini, 2012). He is guided on the right path, but he is not forced; for this reason, man has free will, whereas it would be unfair for God to punish him for actions He has created (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

Furthermore, according to al-Nazzam, it can be attributed to God the power (qudra) to do evil, for it belongs only to him to carry out the act of justice ('adl):

As al-Nazzam sees it, if God were able to prevent

an evil act taking place, he would be bound to prevent it, since [even] consenting to an evil happening is a vile and blameworthy act. Therefore, [given that in fact God does not prevent the evil] He can only act according to justice ('adl) and it is impossible to attribute to Him the ability (qudra) to act unjustly (al-Shahrastani 1977, p. 57, apud Campanini, 2012, p. 44).

An accusation often made against this assertion is the denial of God's omnipotence, and as most Mu'tazilites claim, just because God does not wish to do harm does not mean He does not have the ability to do so (Campanini, 2012).

Moreover, in the Mu'tazili's vision, man can intuitively know that acts such as injustice, theft, murder are morally wrong, therefore revelation is not mandatory in order for a person to know what is good. Man, even non-Muslim, can live on the basis of revealed teachings, exercising reason, so man is not automatically destined for the eternal punishment, as Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'i states. At the same time, it goes without saying that this statement has caused controversy and opposition from the traditionalist Muslims, as what it entails is, after all, the futility of the revelation (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

Furthermore, Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar discusses the social and eschatological consequences of sin (al-wa'd wa-l-wa'īd) (Martin & Woodward, 1997). According to this principle, God promises man, where appropriate, either a reward or an adequate punishment in the afterlife (Campanini, 2012). He claims that serious sin (fisq, kabīr), such as murder, debauchery or denial of religion, leads to punishment in the flames of hell. However, in certain situations, when it comes to one of the deadly sins, God can accept the divine intervention of the Prophet or the saints in the name of the sinner, claims 'Abd al-Jabbar (Martin & Woodward, 1997).

According to the referred question: if those who sin are considered faithful or unfaithful, a person who has committed serious acts (fāsiq) is not considered unfaithful (kāfir), as Islamic Law does not treat him such as. Therefore, they are not obliged, as unbelievers or the Scripture's People are, to pay tribute (ğizya) (Martin & Woodward, 1997). Moreover, accepting the principle above mentioned, they leave to God the act of justice regarding the conflict of 'Ali and Mu'awiya (Campanini, 2012).

The fifth principle concerns the enforcement of good and the prohibition of evil (al-'amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-n-nahī 'ani l-munkar), thus the obligation of any believer is to defend religion even with his life (Campanini, 2012, Martin & Woodward, 1997). This obligation is imposed in order to ensure the well-being and harmony of the society, being both a public and personal duty (Corbin, 2005).

Conclusion

Mu'tazilism played a defining role in the development of the Islamic world with reverberations in the contemporary period. Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar is the one who manages, in a first stage, to summarize the principles of this school in a concise and organized manner. According to his ideas, mu'tazilism is a very coherent doctrine, which succeeds in explaining the religious foundations through science and logic, emphasizing the need and obligation of every person to exercise reason in order to be able to know God.

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[14] Abd al-Jabbar (935-1025) was a Mu'tazili theologian and follower of the Shafi'i school who resumes Mu'tazilism's principles in his work *Kitāb al-'Uṣūl al-Ḫamsa* (McAuliffe, 2003).

[15] The author's translation: "the book of the five principles".

[16] Abu al Hasan al-Aš'ari (873/874-935/936) was a Muslim theologian and leader of the school named after him who succeeds in including rationalist notions into the traditionalist Islam (Allard, 2014).

[17] Abu 'Ali Muhammad al-Jubba'i (d. 915) was a Muslim Mu'tazili theologian and philosopher of the 10th century (Al-Jubba'i, n.d.).

[18] This term refers to the action of attributing human features to God (anthropomorphizing).

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