**KALĀM / MUSLIM THEOLOGY**

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**The Emergence of Kalām (Muslim Theology) in the Classical Period**

**The Term *Kalām***

The term *Kalām* literally means ‘speech’ and ‘word’, and is the counterpart of the term ‘logos’ in Greece, which means ‘reason’ and ‘argument’. It establishes the basics of faith and deed in accordance with the Qur’an, justifies these basics rationally and defends them against challenging ideas. From this definition follows that the subject matters of Kalām are faith and deeds/actions. The three branches of faith are belief in God, His prophets and the day to come. Deeds are ethical and so practical side of Kalām.

Kalām was applied to a particular system of thought which arouse in Islam prior to the rise of philosophy and its exponents simply called *Mutakallimūn*. In its reference by the *mutakallimūn, ‘ilm al-kalām’* is used interchangeably with *‘‘ilm uṣūl al-dīn’* (the science of the basic doctrines of Islam). One of the primary tasks of theology, under this title, is to determine the items that make up the creed and to clarify their cognitive meaning. The titles *‘ilm al-tawḥīd*, ‘*ilm al-jadal* and *‘ilm al-naẓar* are also used to refer to *‘ilm al-kalām* to denote the essentials of Muslim belief as a whole. *Al-Jadal*, the activity of dialectical disputation, is in particular used for instruction and the refutation of false theses. *Al-naẓar*, also, in the sense of disputation is quite common and is used to denote that every single sign and symbol in the outside world is seen as a constituent part of rational thinking.

*Uṣūl al-dīn* generally follows the basic scheme which can rationally be demonstrated. Some topics like status of the Prophet and related questions such as prophetic revelation are not considered by some *mutakallimūn* to be *uṣūl* but rather *furū‘* since they cannot be rationally demonstrated. This is the general scheme of *uṣūl al-dīn*:

* Justified knowledge (*al-‘ilm*) and speculative reasoning (*al-jadal* or *al-nazar*).
* Proof of the existence of the Creator and His attributes.
* God’s governance of the world and the ontological status of human agency (*al-qadā’ wal-qadar* or *halq al-af‘al*)
* Prophets and questions related to Prophetic revelation.
* The world to come or resurrection.
* The status of individuals and the order of society (*al asmā’u wal-ahkām, al-ta’dīl ve tajwīr, al-imāma*, etc.).

Kalām or Muslim Theology is the forerunner to, and foundation for, Islamic thought. When compared with other Islamic sciences, Kalām by far the earliest one to arise because it relates to the very core of religion, i.e., faith and deed. As it was put forward by Ibn Khaldūn, contrary to Fiqh that is related to bodily commitments of the faithful, Kalām is related to the commitments of heart such as the articles of faith which deal with the essence and the attributes of God, resurrection, paradise, punishment and predestination. And Kalām entails discussion and defense of these subjects with the help of intellectual arguments.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, Ibn Khaldūn considers Kalām the first Islamic science to arise and attributes a primacy to it over other Islamic sciences.

**Method in *Kalām***

Islam in fact knew two theologies. The first was the Greeks’ science about God, often called metaphysics. The second was what was called Kalām or dialectical theology. Unlike metaphysics which began with the premises of pure reason, Kalām takes the premises of revelation as its starting point and attempt to demonstrate dialectically and reasonably the conclusions that followed from them. So in describing Kalām, we see the Holy Qur’an as its subject matter and intellectual arguments as its method. It bases itself on rational and Qur’anic principles. It deduces credal principles from the Holy Qur’an and bases them on reason so that they could be conceived by all. In other words, Kalām explains these principles, argues about them and defends them.

Considering both its subject matter and method, *Kalām* is called ‘the speculative science,’ ‘dialectical science,’ or ‘the rational science.’ If directly refers to a priori premises or rational arguments, kalām’s method is considered ‘rational,’ and ‘demonstrative truth’ (*burhanī*). If it refers to the Holy Qur’an in its argumentations, then it is considered as ‘speculative,’ ‘rhetorical’ or ‘dialectical’ truth *(hitābī)*. Although they differs in their reference to reason and scripture, from this it comes out that *Mutakallimūn* make use of both reason and scripture in their argumentation. Understandably, besides their commitment to the Scripture, mutakallimūn were very much celebrated for their free reasoning. This was both because they had to convince non-Muslims in their discussions on the one hand and they had to develop huge amount of evidence from the Holy Qur’an through reasoning on the other. That would finally render any evidence, be it ‘demonstrative truth’ (*burhanī)* or ‘dialectical’ truth (*khitābī*) one and the same. As a result they concentrated on the meaning of the Scripture rather than its literal structure. So they were called as *ahl al-ra’y*, those who are reasoning. As the *Mutakallimūn* considered the source of reason and revelation identical, they tried to make these two compatible with each other rather than clashing one another. Indeed the idea of *tawhīd* (literally *unifying*) requires this kind of compatibility and unification.

In the beginning there were various motivations behind theological discussions. Initially some inner-Islamic debates, which were mainly political created some questions to be answered. Fore and foremost of these were about the destiny of those who waged war against one another after the death of the Prophet. Although there was a warning in the Qur’an for the Muslims saying that “if Muḥammad died or were killed, will you then return back to your habits and practices prior to Islam” (Āl-i ‘Imrān 3.144), civil wars started among people as it were before Islam, and naturally many religious issues accompanied this course. So politically motivated problems at that time triggered many theological issues like the destiny of those who killed one another in these civil wars and the position of those people who committed a grave sin by delving into a mutual killing in this course. Although these problems were not religious but political in nature, religious terms were used by all parts to justify their positions. The practice of discussing political issues in religious context unfortunately triggered a false tradition which many times confused the religious issues with political ones and thus mistakenly turned the temporal political issues of the time into permanent ones.

And secondly at the end of the second century after Hegira, Muslims had a territorial expansion, when they encountered various religions and cultures. And simultaneously discussions started concerning religious doctrines. Understandably it was no point reciting passages from the Holy Qur’an to those people who did not acknowledge it as a holy scripture. So Muslim scholars felt obliged to find a common ground, i.e. reason which would serve as an arbiter to judge between right and wrong. So they developed theological method which uses reason as a common ground to make the religious doctrine understandable and conceivable for all. So it can easily be concluded from these facts that Kalām gained some of its character in its debates with non-Muslim groups and their refutation like Manicheans, Christians, Jews who were the key neighboring religious doctrines at that time. This was carried out especially through Mu’tazilite theologians as a missionary activity. There is no doubt that from the time of the first century of the hegira, the relationship between different religious groups exercised an influence on Muslim Theology by way of polemics. This led to a similarity of problems and method rather than a similarity of solutions. So Kalām started not only as an inner-Islamic discussion when, mainly through political development, the self-confident naiveté of the early days, but also as an encounter with alien religions and cultures.

**The First Prominent Figures and Schools**

The above mentioned inner discussions in Muslim territory caused a hot debate between the rulers and scholars. Although many doctrinal problems were spoken out under the four caliphs, not until the Umayyad took over the caliphate that these problems were discussed in a systematic and argumentative way. The first man who talked publicly about the doctrine of the Qadarites was Ma‘bad al-Juhanī. He lived in the early days of the Umayyads, the brutal times when persistent persecutions for opponents were operated in the country for the Umayyad hegemony. But the rulers claimed that they were not responsible for what they did. It is God who does everything. Soon after the misinterpretation of some doctrinal verses by the Umayyad rulers, some leading adversary figures came up with challenging ideas. Historians report that Ma‘bad al-Juhanī was among these figures. They came one day to the reverend Muslim scholar Ḥasan al-Basrī and said: ‘O Abu Sa‘īd, these rulers shed the blood of the Muslims and do grievous things and say that their works are by the decree of Allah.’

To this Ḥasan replied: ‘The enemies of God, they are liars.’ Thus the first doctrine laid down by the early *mutakallimūn* was: ‘Man is accountable for his own evil doings; these acts should not be ascribed to God.’ This was known as the doctrine of *qadar*; hence the designation Qadarītes given to the early *Ahl al-‘Adl*, that is, the holders of the justice of God, for justice of God can be vouchsafed only by holding man responsible for his actions. Ma‘bad preached these doctrines publicly and was therefore put to death (A.H 80/699 C.E.) by Hajjaj by order of caliph ‘Abdalmalik.

After Ma’bad, Ghaylān al-Dimashqī promulgated similar views. He further added that it was incumbent on every Muslim to urge people to perform right actions and to check them from doing wrong. This addition by Ghaylan overtly interfered with and threatened the maintenance of the Umayyad rule. As a consequence, he met his death at the hands of Ḥishām ibn Mālik the Caliph.

In this regard, the significant figure in Kalām who spoke out the issues in an argumentative manner was Ḥasan al-Basrī and his letter to ‘Abd al-Malik needs scrutinizing. How much al-Ḥasan was appreciated by his contemporaries and how strong was the moral authority he had over them can be seen by the amount of concern the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malīk had for Ḥasan's views. When he heard that Ḥasan had "discussed predestination (*qadar*)" in unusual manner, he thought it necessary to address a personal letter to him. The Caliph demanded that Ḥasan explain his views to him. Ḥasan answered in a long letter which deals systematically with the question of man's moral responsibility in the face of God's fore-knowledge and predestination as mentioned in the holy Qur’an. Ḥasan justifies as follows:

*God has said, "I have created jinn and men only in order that they worship Me. I do not require any sustenance from them; neither will I that they feed Me" (Zāriyāt 51.56-57). Thus He commanded them to worship Him, for which purpose He had created them, and God is not one to create them for a purpose and then intervene between them and it (to prevent them from fulfilling it), because He does not wrong (His) servants (laysa bi-ẓallām li'l-‘abīd) (Āl-i ‘Imrān 3.182) (p. 68, 1. 6-9).[[2]](#footnote-2)*

The argument that according to the Qur’an (Zāriyāt 51.56), God's purpose in creating man was to make him serve Him and that therefore He will not prevent him from this service (by pre-ordaining his disobedience), was used afterward as one of the arguments against predestination.

We have seen that Ḥasan is confident that God will not prevent man from serving Him "because He does not wrong man". Thus we arrive at the central questions of theodicy: Are man's evil acts pre-ordained by God? If so, God could be said to wrong man (in denying him his chance to do good and deserve his reward. This is the meaning implied by al-Ḥasan and stated explicitly by later authors). Is it at all possible that evil proceed from God? Ḥasan's answer is clear:

*Therefore, o Commander of the Faithful, understand what the Book (teaches) you and give up the erroneous opinions (al-ahwā') of those who do not know about God's decree (qadā') and His judgement (ḥukm). Because God says this (i.e. Āl-i ‘Imrān 3.182) meaning that God did not change (i.e. withdraw and replace by its opposite) a favour He had bestowed on people (lam yakun mughayyiran ni‘matan an‘amahā ‘alā qavmin), until they changed what is in their souls. Thus at first favour came from God but the change (taghyīr) came from men (al-‘ibād), because they disobeyed His commandment as He said (Ibrāhīm 14.28-29): "Have you not considered those who have bartered (baddalū) God's favour for infidelity and caused their people to descend into the house of perdition, into Hell". Thus favour was from God, and the barter (tabdīl) from men, because they failed to do (tarakū) what He had commanded and they did (‘amilū) that which He had forbidden them (En‘ām 6.151).[[3]](#footnote-3)*

After these forerunners, in the early second century of Hegira Mu‘tazila came forth as a doctrinal school to discuss many other problems in a systematic way. Wāsıl b. Atā (131/748) and Amr b. ‘Ubayd (144/761) are two important figures to set the backbone of Mu’tazilite doctrine. These two were Ma’mun’s own teachers and he held them in high esteem. Dirār bin ‘Amr (200/815) Abu’l-Huzayl al-‘Allāf (227/841) and Ibrāhim an-Nazzām (221/815), Bisr bin Mu’tamir (210/825) Sumāma bin Ashras (213/828) following them contributed much in establishing and determining the basics of this school and they deserve to be mentioned as the predecessor metaphysicians of Mu‘tazila. The last names to be mentioned are Jubba’īs who presented a splendid epilogue to the movement of rationalism in Medieval Islam.

Thanks to these intellectuals, in the eighth century, at Basra and Baghdad, the so-called Mu‘tazila were engaged in debates on religion, politics and cosmology, as well as the defense of Islamic creed against non-Muslim dogmas. That began to happen during the Umayyad rule based in Damascus (40-132/661-750). And it happened before the Greco-Arabic translation movement in Baghdad was getting well under way during the reigns of the ‘Abbasid Caliphs al-Mansūr and al-Rashīd. The seventh caliph, al-Ma’mun, during whose reign (198-218) the translations from Syriac and Greek in science, medicine, mathematics, and philosophy reached a culminating point, was also a patron of the rationalizing Mu‘tazila. The two Abbasids following Ma’mūn were Wāthiq and Mu‘tasim, who supported Mu‘tazila wholeheartedly. This line continued until it was abandoned by al-Mutawakkil. Mu‘tazila served as a unique school to establish and defends these basics as many as two hundred years until new ones, like Ash‘arī and Māturīdī emerged.

These figures were mostly criticized by mainstream Islam not just because they referred to reasoning in understanding the Scripture but because the segregation they gave rise to in Muslim community. The community was a too young and immature yet to tolerate this segregation, so by labeling them as heterodox the community tried to get rid of them. And this was done in the hands of orthodox (Sunnite) theology.

1. İbn Kaldun, *Muqaddima,* 1967, 2, 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For Ḥasan’s letter see *al-Ḥasan al-Baṣri, Risāla: Studien zur Islamischen Frommigkeit I*, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, ed. H. Ritter, *Der Islam* 21 (1933), pp.67-83. Also see, Schwarz, “'The Letter of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Oriens*, 20 (1972), pp.15-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Op.cit., p.68. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)