

Mu'tazilah: the rise of Islamic rationalism

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The Mu'tazilah was the first Sunni rationalist theological school, founded in Basrah and later developed in Baghdad, in particular during al-Ma'mun's caliphate from 813 to 833 CE. The main figures behind the establishment of the school in Basrah were Wasil b. Atta (d. 748), 'Amr b. 'Ubayad (d. 762), Abu-I-Hudhayl al-Allaf (d. 841), Ibrahim al-Nazzam (d. 845), Mu'ammār b. Abbad al-Jubay (d. 915), and Abu Hashim b. al-Jubai (d. 933). The founder of the school of Baghdad was Bishr b. al-Mu'tamir (d. 825), and thinkers such as al-Askafi, Ahmad b. Daud and al-Ka'bi contributed to the development of the school. Al-Ma'mun, the Abbasid caliph, encouraged the development of rational thinking and philosophy in Baghdad. He also patronised the Mu'tazilah school, and during his time several Mu'tazilah scholars reached positions in government administrations. Under the influence of the Mu'tazilah theology, al-Ma'mun also began an 'Inquisition' on the concept of the createdness of the *Qur'an*, which led to the imprisonment of Ahmad b. Hanbal, who held the opposite view, and the persecution of his followers in Baghdad. But after the death of al-Ma'mun, the political situation gradually turned against the Mu'tazilah and the traditionalist theology represented by the views of Ahmad b. Hanbal was revived during al-Mutawakkil in 847.

The Mu'tazilah school emerged as the result of the ethical and political turmoil of its own time and then ventured into the realm of speculative theology. After the assassination of 'Uthman b. 'Affan, the third successor to the Prophet Muhammad in 35/656, Muslims were divided into various political groups which were fighting each other. This political division continued

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during the Umayyads and the Abbasids, which created a general feeling of bitterness and frustration among Muslims. They wanted to know whether God or human beings were responsible for this bloodshed and, if human beings were responsible for such corruption, what their punishment would be. The traditionalist Muslims, represented by Ahmad b. Hanbal (780–855), relied on the literal interpretation of the *Qur'an*, and the Kharijis maintained that the committer of a grave sin would not possibly be considered a believer (a Muslim). Another group, namely the Marji'is, claimed that the case should be left to God to decide.¹

It is reported that one day in the second century of *hijra* in the city of

Basrah a person came to the mosque of Hassan al-Basri (642–728) and requested his views on this issue. Al-Basri began to think about a proper answer, but before he could give his opinion either Wasil b. 'Atta or 'Amr b. 'Ubayad (both pupils of al-Basri) broke out with the answer, saying: 'The committer of the grave sin is neither a believer nor a non-believer, but is in the state between the states of belief and unbelief.'² It is also reported that Hassan al-Basri did not like the attitude of his pupil and asked him to leave. Wasil b. 'Atta and 'Amr b. 'Ubayad left the circle of Hassan al-Basri and began to teach their own views on different theological problems; they were called the Mu'tazilah.³

Watt states that there are numerous versions of this story. The student who withdrew from Hassan al-Basri's school is often assumed to be 'Amr b. 'Ubayad rather than Wasil b. 'Atta, but some sources say that 'Amr b. 'Ubayad was a student of Qatada, al-Basri's successor.⁴ According to Goldziher, the

name of the Mu'tazilah school derives from the lifestyle of its founders, who renounced the world and abstained from all sorts of material possession and pleasure.⁵ On the other hand, Ahmed Amin tries to connect the name of the school with a Hebrew term, 'pharisses', which was given to a group of Jewish theologians who advocated ideas similar to those of the Mu'tazilah; the Hebrew term also means 'to recede'.⁶

The Mu'tazilah are accused of being dualists and of having their origin in Zoroastrianism because, in terms of their interpretation of goodness and badness, they believe that God is absolutely good and therefore cannot be the source of evil, and that there shall be a source for evil, which is other than God.⁷

Mu'tazilah is the first rationalistic school in the history of Islamic thought. It interprets the dogmas of religion in the light of human reason. The followers of this school are also known as 'Ahl al-'Adl wa al-Tawhid', or 'the people of Divine Justice and Divine Unity', because they advocated the ideas of the Unity of God and Divine Justice. The theological issues discussed by the Mu'tazilah, such as free will and predestination, the relationship between the Divine attributes and the essence of God, were also debated by some Muslim thinkers during the Umayyad period before the rise of Mu'tazilah. These thinkers can be divided into two groups. The first group included al-Jaad b. Dirham⁸, al-Maghira b. Saeed al-Ajali⁹, and Jahan b. Safwan¹⁰, who rejected the reality and eternity of the divine attributes and also believed in the createdness of the *Qur'an*. The second group included 'Umar al-Mqsus, who was accused by the Umayyads of corrupting the mind of young Muawiyah b. Yazid, his pupil, and executed in 699; Ma'bad al-Jahani, who was crucified by Hajaj b. Yousif al-Saqafi in Iraq; and Ghailan al-Dimashqi, who was crucified on the gate of Damascus on the orders Hisham b. Abdul Malik (r. 724–743).¹¹

These thinkers believed in *al-qadariyyah* and rejected the doctrine of *al-jabriyyah* predestination in Islam. The term '*al-qadariyyah*' is used in the converse sense by Muslim thinkers when describing a doctrine of free will or *al-ikhtiyar*. '*Al-qadar*' stands for something quite the opposite of free will in the literal sense. But at the same time the term is associated with a cluster of Muslim thinkers advocating a doctrine whose philosophical trend is distinct from the literal meaning of the term.

It is worth mentioning that the problem of free will was even discussed by Saint Augustine (354–430 CE) in *The City of God* before the rise of Islam, and it is possible that the ideas of this Christian thinker later influenced Islamic theology. Saint Augustine's idea was developed in response to Cicero (106–143 BCE), who rejected God's foreknowledge of the future,

meaning there would be no prediction of events, and human actions would be free. Cicero's argument is quite simple to understand, as it asserts that if predestination prevails, then there can be no free will. Against Cicero, Saint Augustine argues that God, as the Creator of all beings, has bestowed power in them to will, but that all wills, ie wicked wills, are human products because wickedness cannot be ascribed to God; that it is not then the case that since God foreknows what will happen to an individual there is therefore nothing in the power of our wills; and that:

'Prayers, also, are of avail to procure those things which He foreknew that He would grant to those who offered them; and with justice have rewards been appointed for good deeds, and punishments for sins. For a man does not therefore sin because God foreknew that he would sin. Nay, it cannot be doubted but that it is the man himself who sins when he does sin, because He, whose of foreknowledge is infallible, foreknew not that fate, or fortune, or something else would sin, but that the man himself would sin, who, if he wills not, sins not. But if he shall not will to sin, even this did God foreknow.'¹²

The problem as to whether human beings were free to determine their own destiny or whether their being was determined by the Creator was also one of the central disputes in a rift within the Kharijis movement. For the first time the Ajaridi-Kharijis split into two sub-groups, the Maimuniyah and the Shu'aibiyah.¹³ The reason for this division originated in an argument between Maimun and Shu'aib (the leaders of the groups). Shu'aib had some money belonging to Maimun, and when Maimun demanded repayment Shu'aib said to him: 'I shall give it to you, if God wills.' Maimun replied: 'God has willed that you should give it to me now,' and Shu'aib said: 'If God has willed it, I could not have done otherwise than give it to you.' Maimun continued by saying: 'Verily, God has willed what he commanded; what He did not command, He did not will; and what He did not will, He did not command.' They wrote about their dispute to their leader Abdul Karim b. Ajarrad, who was in prison. Abdul Karim responded with: 'What God willed came about, and what He did not will did not come about; and we do not fix evil upon Him.'¹⁴ Maimun and Shu'aib both believed that their leader had approved their view and they therefore separated, forming two different groups. The followers of Maimun, the Maimuniyah, were known for their belief in free will and claimed that although God was omnipotent, no evil should be attributed to Him. Therefore, the Shu'aibiyah, followers of Shu'aib, became the forerunners of the adherents to fatalism in Islamic theology.

The theological doctrine of the Mu'tazilah,

however, is crystallised in five major theses, such as the Unity of God, or the relationship between the Divine attributes and the essence of God; *al-qadar* or human free will; the createdness of the *Qur'an*; the intermediate position of the grave sinner; and commanding the right and forbidding the wrong. One of the major theological issues discussed by the Mu'tazilah was the reality and eternity of the divine

attributes and their relationship with the essence of God. Before we begin to explain the views of the Mu'tazilah, it is necessary to understand the roots and the background of this issue in Judeo-Christian theology. The belief in the reality of the divine attributes is generated by the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and was discussed by Christian theologians before the rise of Mu'tazilah. Yahya b. Adi, one of the Christian theologians, remarked that the triad of the Trinity — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — corresponds to three attributes of God, namely life, wisdom and power; however,

there are different opinions on the nature of the last two attributes.¹⁵ Some Christian thinkers believe that they are mere names or qualities of God and not real things as such, whereas the orthodox Christians accept these two attributes as real things, distinct from God but not independent of Him. The problem that arises is the question of whether these attributes are created by God or co-eternal with Him. The orthodox Christians admit that, as God is eternally living, eternally omniscient and eternally omnipotent, there is no reason for the denial of the eternity of the second and third attributes. On the other hand, other Christians reject this claim on the grounds that anything eternal is to be called God, therefore the three attributes shall be called three gods, which is polytheism. (14) Hence we conclude that the Christians are divided into two groups: the first group believes in the reality and eternity of the three attributes, and the second rejects this belief and argues for the unity of God.¹⁶

The claim that the Mu'tazilah was inspired by Christian theology comes from this similarity between the views of their school and some Christian theologians, but this is unjust, because a similar influence is traceable even on the theological views of the traditionalist Muslims. It may be true that the Mu'tazilah followed the heretic Christians in their views, but the traditionalist Muslims followed the

Orthodox Christians, believing in the reality and eternity of the divine attributes. To the traditionalist Muslims, the unity of God is a relative term; they accept the eternity of the attributes, recognising the ontological status of each attribute as something that really exists eternally and is in the essence of God. Subsequently, the essence of God becomes a container for many eternal, real entities apart from Him; this

view accepts the plurality of eternals. Against this view, the Mu'tazilah explain a new relationship between the essence of God and the attributes by saying that God does not possess the attributes and they are not in His essence, but rather that the divine essence and the attributes are identical and the same. For example, we cannot say that God's knowledge is something other than God and is eternal, or else knowledge will become another independent, eternal being. In this way, the Mu'tazilah believe in the unity of God. This concept of unity is used for two purposes:

- i) It is used in the sense of numerical unity or absolute unity, which is the denial of the existence of more than one God. This meaning of the unity is in agreement with the *Qur'anic* notion of monotheism.
- ii) It is used in the sense of internal unity and simplicity, as that God's essence is free from essential plurality and composition.

If we go back to the history of Judeo-Christian theology, we find that the argument for the unity of God was propounded by Judaeus Philo (20 BCE–40 CE), and then restated by Spinoza (1632–1677 CE) in his pantheistic philosophy, for the same purposes. For Philo, eternity is an essential quality of God; no other kind of being except Him is eternal. This view represents the established Judeo-Christian and Islamic principle of monotheism. Its denial is the rejection of these three Semitic religions. Spinoza supported the Philonic principle by putting the argument into a better logical form, saying that if there are two substances like immaterial God and the world, either they should be absolutely different or absolutely same. If there are two absolutely different substances with nothing in common, one cannot become the cause of the other.¹⁷ If the existence of two different substances is not possible, then we must consider the case of the existence of two substances that are absolutely alike. But such substances cannot be called two unless, in addition to their

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common qualities, they possess some other quality in which they differ, 'and then two substances would be granted as having the same attribute, which is absurd.'¹⁸

The arguments of the Mu'tazilah and Spinoza are no different from the Philonic principle. All of them emphasise the eternity of God and reject the attribution of this quality to another kind of being. The Mu'tazilah have developed another argument in support of their conception of divine unity, based on the nature of each positive predicate or proposition which involves negation. When we describe God and mention one of His attributes we implicitly negate another attribute. For example, the proposition 'God is merciful' means 'God is not revengeful', and then that negation signifies that God is limited to that attribute, which is not possible with regard to the unlimited nature of God.¹⁹ Hamdan b. al-Hazil al-Alaat, one of the Mu'tazilah, states: 'If you say God is all-knowing then you negate ignorance to be predicated of God, and in this way whenever you talk about one of His qualities you negate some other quality in Him.'²⁰ According to al-Shahrastani, this argument has been borrowed from Greek philosophy and is not founded by the Mu'tazilah.²¹ Al-Nazzam, a Mu'tazili thinker, has provided another argument for the rejection of God's will as a separate entity, by giving an equivalent meaning to 'will', like 'need', which results in action. He says that need is the state of imperfection and lack and it should not be ascribed to God.²² Mu'ammār b. Abbad al-Sulami, another Mu'tazili thinker, believes that God knows neither the world in which we live, nor Himself, because if He has knowledge then that knowledge is either within or without God. In the first case there will be no distinction between the knowing subject and the known object; both of them become one and the same, and that is not possible; the subject and object must be different. And if we accept that knowledge is not within God — that the known object is something distinct from the knowing subject — it simply means that the subject is dependent upon the object for acquiring knowledge. On the other hand, there will be two different things in the essence of God. For this reason, knowledge should not be predicated to God.²³

The denial or the acceptance of the divine attributes has led to another problem in Muslim theology with regard to the nature of the *Qur'an* — whether it is eternal or created. The traditionalist Muslims argued that the *Qur'an* is the Word of God and existed before its revelation and even before the creation of the world — this is a belief in the pre-existent *Qur'an*, which is prior in time to the creation of the world and human life. There are two arguments developed by the traditionalist Muslims in support of this view.

First, they claim that the eternity of the *Qur'an* is a logical consequence of the acceptance of the divine attributes as something real and eternal. The speech of God is an attribute, which is real and eternal and subsists in the essence of God and for this reason we need to pronounce the co-eternal characteristic of God and His speech. Ahmad b. Hanbal, representing the views of the traditionalist Muslims, states that: 'Whatever is between the covers of the *Qur'an* is the speech of God, and whatever we hear, read and write is the speech of God. Since the speech of God is eternal, then the words are uncreated and eternal too.'²⁴ It is also reported by al-Shahrastani that the Hanbalis do not say that the *Qur'an* in this physical form as a printed book read by Muslims is eternal and uncreated: 'We should not assert the eternity of the letters and sounds, which subsist in our tongues.'²⁵ The position of Ahmad b. Hanbal, however, requires further clarification, because he asserts the eternity of the *Qur'an*, and at the same time, as it seems, he does not attribute eternity to the copy of the *Qur'an*, which we read in the present book form. In this regard one can conclude that Ahmad b. Hanbal distinguishes between two *Qur'ans* of the same kind. The first *Qur'an*, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, is eternal, having its own existence and reality before the creation of the world, and the *Qur'an* comes into existence whenever we recite it. I shall explain this view in more detail later, in my discussion on Ash'arism.

The second argument developed by the traditionalist Muslims for the reality and the eternity of the *Qur'an* is based on the verses in the *Qur'an* itself. It is written that:

'Indeed this is a glorious *Qur'an*, in a preserved tablet.'²⁶

'I swear by the shelters of the stars a mighty oath, if you but knew it that this is glorious *Qur'an* in a hidden book which none may touch except the purified; a revelation from the lord of all creatures.'²⁷

'*Ha mim*. By the Book which makes plain [right and wrong], We have revealed the *Qur'an* in the Arabic tongue that you may understand. It is in the Mother Book with Us, sublime and full of wisdom.'²⁸

These verses, which contain expressions such as 'in a preserved tablet', 'a hidden book', and 'in the Mother Book with Us', for the orthodox Muslims, signify that the *Qur'an* existed in heaven prior to its revelation. There is nothing contradictory in such a view according to the Mu'tazilah, because the *Qur'an* describes itself as the Word of God: 'If an idolater seeks asylum with you, give him protection so that he may hear the Word of God, and then convey

him to safety.²⁹ Still, this does not assert the eternity of the *Qur'an*, simply because eternity belongs to God only, and nothing else can be eternal or uncreated. If we accept the eternity of anything except God then we approve polytheism and negate monotheism.

In our discussion of the problem of the divine attributes, we said that the Mu'tazilah reject the eternity as well as the reality of the attributes. The issue of the uncreatedness of the *Qur'an* seems to be different. No doubt, the Mu'tazilah do not agree with the traditionalist Muslims on the eternity of the Word of God, but they do

not deny the reality of the *Qur'an* and admit that there was a real *Qur'an*, which existed before its revelation in a preserved tablet. They also insist that God even created it before it was revealed, and hence there was no room for the belief in its eternity. It was also inferred from the *Qur'anic* verse 'thus we narrate to you the accounts of what has gone before', in order to prove that

the *Qur'an* was produced after the events mentioned in this text.³⁰ In addition to this view, al-Nazzam and al-Mu'ammam have gone further by advocating the idea that God's word is not communicable. Al-Nazzam also denies the preservation of the *Qur'an* on a tablet, saying that the word is created in air in the form of a combination of articulate sounds at the time of its revelation. Al-Mu'ammam believes that the *Qur'an* is neither the Word of God nor His work, but the production of nature, because God creates only substances and not accidents, and the substances are capable of producing accidents.³¹ If the *Qur'an* is an accident, it is not created by God but produced by a natural body, which is located in space and time. Al-Baghdadai also reports that al-Mu'ammam does not ascribe to God the eternal attributes, nor can he believe that God's word is His work, because God does not create accidents.³² In this way, for al-Mu'ammam, God created bodies, and the accidents are the products of the bodies, as fire produces burning, and the sun heat, and the moon coloration of things; things are produced by this, or by choice, like animals produce motion and rest, aggregation

and segregation. To reiterate, the act of producing a word or the speech of God is either mediated by nature (for example the sound came from the bush to Moses), or by choice, as in the case of other prophets, who have been given power by God to express the divine law. Relying on al-Mu'ammam's view, the *Qur'an* belongs to the second category, a human production but divine in its characteristics as it reveals the will of God.

Another theological problem to be discussed here is free will: whether human beings are free or

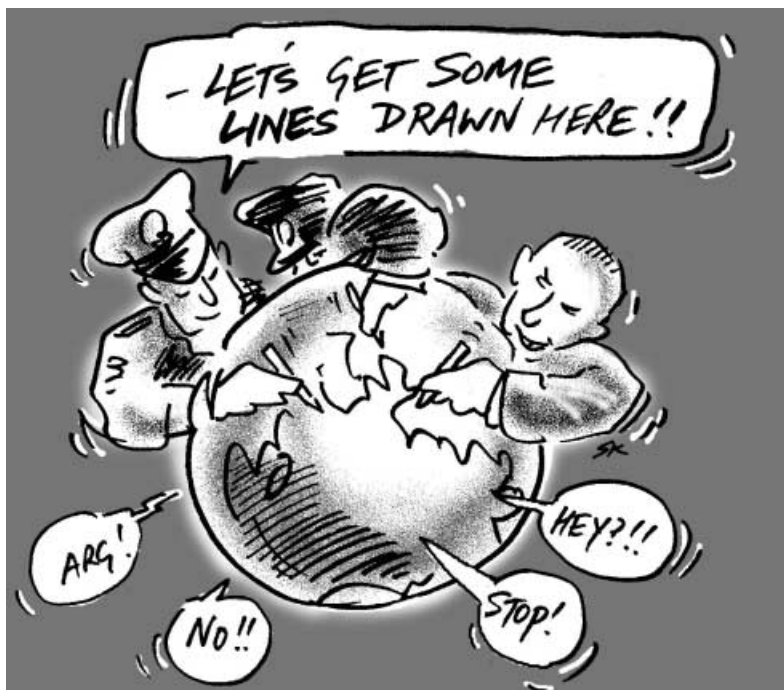
their actions determined by God; whether Islam is compatible with the doctrine of free will or not. Majid Fakhri states that most Muslim historians believe that this problem is the first abstract issue on which the theologians began to argue.³³ The confusion regarding human freedom arose because the Muslim theologians found verses in the *Qur'an* for as well as against predestina-

tion. It also happened that in the history of political Islam, in particular during the Umayyad period, the predestinarian verses were given preference over the verses in favour of free will, for political reasons. The predestination theory does not hold human beings responsible for their actions and consequently the doctrine, with its political implication, provides a ground for the justification of any kind of oppressive measures and actions taken by the rulers against the people. Many Muslim rulers were able to suppress the voices of the intellectuals and the movements against social injustice with the help of some Muslim scholars by putting emphasis on the verses in support of predestination.

In the *Qur'an* there are verses that affirm predestination, for example:

'Those who disbelieve, whether you forewarn them or not, they will not have faith. God has set a seal upon their hearts and ears; their sight is dimmed and grievous punishment awaits them.'³⁴

'Say: "I possess no power [to give] benefit for myself, nor power to hurt save by God's leave. Had I the



knowledge of the unknown, I would have acquired much good, and evil would not have touched me. I am but a warner and a bearer of good tidings for people who believe.”³⁵

‘Say: “Nothing will befall us except that God has ordained. He is our Guardian. In God, let the faithful put their trust.”³⁶

‘And had your Lord willed, whoever is in the earth would have believed all together. Will you then coerce the people to become believers? No one is to believe save by God’s leave. And He shall lay His scourge on those who have no acumen.’³⁷

‘No misfortune befalls but by God’s leave; whoever believes in God, He shall guide his heart; God is Knowing of everything.’³⁸

‘It is He who has created you from clay. He has decreed a term for you and another one set with Him. Yet you are still in doubt.’³⁹

‘All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God, for He is the Mighty, the Wise. To Him belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and earth. He brings to life and causes to die; He is Omnipotent over everything. He is the First and the Last; the Manifest, and the Unseen; He is Omniscient of everything.’⁴⁰

‘There is not a creature on the earth whose sustenance is not provided by God. He knows its resting-place and its repository.’⁴¹

There are also certain verses that emphasise free will:

‘When we give a man a taste of our mercy, he rejoices in it; but when through his own fault evil befalls him he is ungrateful.’⁴²

‘And say: “(It is) the truth from your Lord. Hence whoever will, let him then believe; and whoever will, let him disbelieve. Surely we have prepared for the iniquitous a fire whose pavilion enwraps them.”⁴³

‘Momentous signs have come to you from your Lord. He that sees then shall himself have much to gain, but he who is blind to them shall lose much. I am not your keeper.’⁴⁴

‘Say: “Men! The truth has come to you from your Lord. He that follows the right path follows it to his own advantage, and he that goes astray does so at his own peril. I am not your keeper.”⁴⁵

The argument for predestination propounded by the traditionalist Muslims is based on the notion of causal determination by God of physical events and human activities. These theologians draw no distinction between natural events in the physical world

and the events that take place as the result of rational choices made by human beings, for both are considered to be predetermined by God. This argument also suggests that human essence is something fixed and created in its completed form, and that human beings are not capable of changing their own nature: if a person is created strong and ruthless, he/she remains as he/she is, without having the choice and ability to change that. For example, it is reported by Muslim in *Sahih* that the Prophet Muhammad said, ‘As for any one of you, his generation in the womb of his mother is affected in the course of forty days, afterwards an angel is commissioned to breathe the living spirit into him.’ The angel is said to ask God, concerning the destiny of the seed, ‘O my Lord, miserable or blessed?’ Whereupon one or the other is written down. Then, ‘O my Lord, male or female?’ Again, one or the other is written down. He also writes down the child’s manner of conduct, deeds, term of life and sustenance. Then it is said to the angel, ‘Roll up the leaves, for no addition shall be made thereto, nor anything taken there from.’⁴⁶ Although the traditionalist Muslims, in advocating the doctrine of predestination, base their views on the *Qur’an*, this does not mean that the *Qur’an* has left no grounds for the belief in free will. This is a source of confusion among Muslims, and the Mu’tazilah attempt to provide logical ground for the doctrine of free will without relying completely on the *Qur’anic* verses.

However, there is no difficulty in understanding predestination as far as it implies that God, who is the Creator of the universe, controls everything, including human actions. The problem arises when we believe in free will as well as the existence of God. This issue brings to mind the attitude of the Western philosophers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), towards theism. For these philosophers, theism is incompatible with the doctrine of free will. As Sartre remarks: ‘Everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He cannot start making excuses for himself.’⁴⁷ In Sartre’s view, freedom is possible only when one accepts atheism. In this case atheism becomes a philosophical conviction and a practical attitude, for whoever accepts the existence of an omnipotent being above his/her own power will nor remain free and cannot become the author of his/her own life. It is also written in the *Qur’an* that God has left the non-believers to themselves and does not guide them.⁴⁸ Human freedom, for Nietzsche and Sartre, presupposes the denial of the existence of God, but how does a Muslim thinker argue for human freedom? How can human beings be free when they believe in the existence of an

omnipotent Being, who is capable of controlling human actions?

In opposition to the doctrine of predestination, the Mu'tazilah, perhaps under the influence of Ma'bad al-Jahani and Ghailan al-Dimashqi, who advocated the doctrine of free will before the rise of the Mu'tazilah school, try to discuss the possibility of free will under the umbrella of theism. They believe that predestination is a mere absurdity because it implies imperfection in the essence of God, and describes God as being unjust. Also, it contradicts the notion of Divine retribution. Before we begin this argument, let's examine how the Mu'tazilah explain the causal relationship between God and the world. This is analysed in two ways: some of the Mu'tazilah agree on the direct causal relationship between God and the world, whereas al-Nazzam and al-Mu'ammam believe in the existence of a chain of intermediaries between God and the events that take place in the world. But both groups exclude human action from this causal relationship, applying the law of causation only to the physical phenomena and events in the world. Unlike the traditionalist Muslims, they have made a distinction between human actions and the events in the natural world, and kept the latter only under the domain of the causal determination. All actions made by human beings, for the Mu'tazilah, flow out of human will and an awareness of the situation. Human beings, unlike animals and physical objects, know themselves and know what they are doing. On the basis of this description, human beings will be held responsible for their bad deeds. In brief, the arguments for free will made by the Mu'tazilah can be summarised as follows:

The first argument deals with the conception of Divine Justice, which can be subdivided into two parts:

a) The Mu'tazilah 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.⁴⁹ The moral perfection of God, however, does not signify that God has no power to do evil, but consists in this, that He has power to do everything, and exerts this power only in doing what is good; if we were to

say that God has no power to do evil then it would mean His power is limited.

b) Divine Justice postulates human freedom, for if human beings are not the authors of their lives then they should not be held responsible for their deeds. God promises to punish the sinners and this signifies that human beings are free. Otherwise, it would be unfair for God to punish human beings

for sins not created by them, or that they were compelled to commit. If we were to believe that human action is determined by God, human beings would deserve no blame and no punishment. Human freedom is then a logical requirement of Divine Justice. Human beings are capable of acting freely and hence they are morally responsible. In *Kitab al-Usul al-Khamsa*, 'Abd al-Jabbar states that: 'It is the knowledge that God is removed from all that is morally wrong (*qabih*) and that all His acts are morally good (*hasana*). This is explained by the fact that you know all human acts of injustice (*zulm*), transgression (*jawr*) and

the like cannot be of His creation (*min khalqih*). Whoever attributes that to Him has ascribed to Him injustice and insolence (*safah*) and thus strays from the doctrine of justice.'⁵⁰

The second argument, which is originally given by Wasil b. 'Atta, emphasises the ability of human beings to think and to choose: 'Man knows that he possesses capacity and actions within himself and whoever denies that, he denies necessity.' Human capacity is interpreted as will and knowledge, which are the only distinctions between man and the other living beings and non-living entities in the world. Then, as Wasil says, 'It is possible for a man who is seated to stand up, for the man in motion to come to rest, and for the man who is speaking to remain silent.'⁵¹

Thirdly, human beings are conscious, can choose, but other kinds of beings are deprived of this privilege. The natural objects and events are determined by transient causation. For example the chair is moved by my hand, which is moved by me. The movements of the chair and my hand belong to two different kinds of causation, and the latter can be called immanent because it is by me as an agent. Wasil's idea is similar to Aristotle's concept of the Prime Mover, which describes God to be in a position, as an agent, to make the events happen; the agent is not determined by a transient cause.

'Human freedom, for Nietzsche and Sartre, presupposes the denial of the existence of God, but how does a Muslim thinker argue for human freedom?'

The fourth thesis concerns the position in Islam of the grave sinner and was raised due to the eruption of civil war and political unrest in the Muslim world. The Kharijis believed that the committer of the grave sin was an unbeliever and the Marji' is preferred the case stating that no judgement should be made by human beings. The Mu'tazilah held the view that the committer of the grave sin is neither a believer nor an unbeliever, but that he/she is in the intermediate position, in a state between belief and disbelief.

The fifth thesis, commanding the right and forbidding the wrong, has moral and political significance as it considers obligatory measures to prevent social injustice in society and elevate morality. As 'Abd al-Jabbar remarks, 'It is necessary, if possible, to reach a point where evil (*al-munkar*) does not occur in the easiest of circumstances or lead to something worse, for the goal is for evil simply not to happen.'⁵²

Although the Mu'tazilahs discussed these five theses, they disagreed with each other on some points in their analysis of the theses' meanings. Some members of the school of Baghdad, such as al-Ka'bi and Abu al-Qasim al-Balkhi, also incorporated the theory of atomism into their theological doctrine.

References

- 1 Al-Shahrastani, op. cit., p139.
- 2 Ibid, pp48-49.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Watt, Montgomery, W *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1997, p47.
- 5 Zuhdi, Hassan Jarallah *Al-Mutazila*, Matbaah Misr, al-Qahirah, 1947, p3.
- 6 Amin, Ahmed. *Fajir al-Islam*, Vol. 1, Mektab al-Nehza al-Missriah, al-Qahirah, 1950, pp344-345.
- 7 Zuhdi, Hassan Jarallah, op. cit., p8.
- 8 Al-Jaad b. Dirham was from Damascus. He was arrested and sent to Iraq by Hisham b. Abdul Malik, the Umayyad caliph (r. 105/724-125/743). He was beheaded by the Iraqi ruler Khalid b. Abdullah al-Kisri, who was the uncle of Hisham in 125/742.
- 9 Al-Maghira b. Saeed al-Ajali was killed by the ruler of Iraq, Khalid b. Abdullah al-Kisri, in 119/737.
- 10 Jahan b. Safwan was killed in 128/745 (See al-Tabari, Vol. 9, p69).

- 11 Al-Dainuri, op. cit., p166.
- 12 St. Augustine *The City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods, London, p169.
- 13 Watt, M *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam*, Luzac Co., London, 1948, p49.
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- 16 Ibid, pp128-131.
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- 19 Al-Shahrastani, op. cit., p50.
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- 25 Ibid, p314.
- 26 *Qur'an*, 85:22.
- 27 Ibid, 56:78.
- 28 Ibid, 43:1-3.
- 29 Ibid, 9:5.
- 30 Al-Tabari, Vol. 10, pp285-287.
- 31 Al-Baghdadai, op. cit., p152.
- 32 Al-Shahrastani, al-Milal w al-Nihal, Vol. 1, p72.
- 33 Fakhri, Majid, op. cit., p57.
- 34 *Qur'an*, 1:5-6.
- 35 Ibid, 7:188.
- 36 Ibid, 9:51.
- 37 Ibid, 10:100.
- 38 Ibid, 64:11.
- 39 Ibid, 6:2.
- 40 Ibid, 57:2-3.
- 41 Ibid, 11:7.
- 42 Ibid, 41:48.
- 43 Ibid, 18:29.
- 44 Ibid, 6:104.
- 45 Ibid, 10:108.
- 46 Muslim *Sahih*, IV, p2036, II 6-8.
- 47 Sartre, Jean-Paul *Existentialism as Humanism*, The Wisdom Library, New York, 1957, p22.
- 48 *Qur'an*, 16:103.
- 49 'Abd al-Jabbar 'Kitab al-Usul al-Khamsa' in *Defenders of Reason in Islam*, Richard C Martin and others, Oneword, Oxford, 1997, p92.
- 50 Al-Shahrastani, op. cit., Vol. 1, p47.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 'Abd al-Jabbar, op.cit., p93.

