RATIONALIST TENDENCIES WITHIN ISLAM IN THE EARLY AND THE MODERN ERA: A STUDY OF THE ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MU'TAZILITE SCHOLASTICISM

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ABSTRACT

At the onset of Islam, Arabs predominantly led a nomadic lifestyle with fewer urban inhabitants, relying on agriculture, trade, and cattle rearing for sustenance. Unlike the intellectual traditions of Greek, Indian, Persian, and Chinese civilizations, the Arab community initially showed less inclination toward philosophical discussions. The Quran played a pivotal role in sparking contemplation on profound metaphysical issues among the Arabs, culminating in a significant intellectual transformation during the early Abbasid era. This era saw the translation movement, wherein Greek philosophical and scientific texts were translated into Arabic and widely distributed across the Islamic Empire. Controversial debates arose during that period, leading to the emergence of the Mu'tazlites as a formidable group dedicated to defending Islamic principles through the use of philosophical, logical, and rational arguments. Likewise, in the contemporary era, Muslim Modernists and Neo-Mu'tazilites have assumed the task of addressing critiques directed at modernity, modern philosophy, and empirical science. This paper highlights the parallels in the methodology and objectives between the two trends: the early Mu'tazilites and modern Muslim Rationalists.

Key Words: Mutazilites, Neo-Mu'tazilites, Modernism, Rationalism, Metaphors, Interpretation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of Greek philosophical ideas in the Arab and Muslim world prompted individuals to engage in profound contemplation of metaphysical matters, triggering the emergence of doubts among Muslims. This intellectual shift gave rise to diverse scholastic and philosophical schools within the Muslim community, each offering different interpretations. To address this challenge and counter the influence of foreign

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philosophies, a compelling need arose for robust polemics to safeguard Islamic doctrines and theology. This was essential to provide answers and dispel doubts among Muslims who had been exposed to a variety of philosophical perspectives.

During the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, there was a notable openness to non-Islamic debates and ideas, allowing scholars the freedom to articulate and discuss their perspectives. One prominent figure exemplifying this exchange was Saint John of Damascus, who authored a comprehensive work countering Islamic critiques of Christianity and vigorously defending his faith. Notably, he sought to establish the divinity of Christ by referencing Quranic passages, Muslim theology, and philosophy. Saint John argued that, similar to the Muslim belief that the Word of God is eternally inherent in God's Essence, Jesus must be eternal since Muslims consider him the Word of God. He viewed Islam as a Christian heresy, akin to other prevalent heresies in the Middle East and the Arab world during that era, such as the Jacobites, Monophysites, and Nestorians.[i]

Likewise, there were anthropomorphists who literally interpreted numerous Quranic verses and hadiths describing God's attributes, suggesting that God is portrayed as sitting on a throne, having hands, and descending towards the heavens. They developed the belief that God possesses the best human shape and form, being imperishable and immortal. This belief, deemed polytheistic by all Muslims despite varying opinions, necessitated efforts to counter their heresy. It became imperative to interpret these seemingly anthropomorphic verses and sayings in accordance with the conventional nuances of language and idioms to address and refute their misconceptions.

Due to various factors, a faction emerged that heavily relied on rationalist interpretations of Quranic texts and Islamic doctrines. Their primary aim was to safeguard the pure unity of God and reject any notion of multiplicity within the divine essence. This group, prioritizing the Quran over traditions, actively contested Islamic ideologies that seemed to compromise the integrity of Islamic doctrines. Strongly embracing the concepts of God's justice and human freedom of will, this faction identified themselves as "*ahl al tawhid wa al 'adl*" or "The people of Monotheism and Justice." This group gained popularity under the name Mu'tazilites.

In the modern era, as diverse ideologies and philosophies gained global prominence, Muslims, particularly the younger generation, became exposed to these ideas, leading to a similar phenomenon. Many Muslim individuals began harboring doubts about various aspects of the conventional interpretation of Islam. The Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment values influenced people in the East to embrace modern values, seeking progress in a more seamless manner for societal and economic development. Additionally, Christian missionaries and orientalists critically analysed Eastern religions, with a particular focus on Islam.

In response to these challenges, a new form of Ilm al Kalam or Scholastic endeavor became essential. Numerous Muslim scholars emerged to counter external threats to Islamic doctrines. To accomplish this, many scholars found it necessary to reevaluate the traditional and medieval understanding of Islamic beliefs and practices. In doing so, they distanced themselves from mainstream scholars, earning the academic label of "Muslim modernists" by some. Some scholars also draw parallels between their approach and that of the Mutazilite group, coining the term "Neo-Mutazilites," as they adopted many rulings and methodologies from the Mutazilite tradition.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the fundamental factors contributing to the emergence, significance, and evolution of Theology, focusing particularly on the Mutazilite School within the realm of Ilm al Kalam. The discussion will delve into the intricate reasons behind the genesis of theological thought, shedding light on its importance in the broader context of Islamic intellectual history. Furthermore, a detailed examination will be undertaken to unravel the nuanced development of the Mutazilite School, emphasizing its unique contributions to the field of Ilm al Kalam. By thoroughly investigating these aspects, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the roots, relevance, and progression of Theology, with a specific emphasis on the Mutazilite perspective.

2. EMERGENCE OF MU'TAZLITES

Following the era of the Companions of the Prophet of Islam, the Mu'tazilite doctrines emerged approximately two centuries post the migration (Hijrah) of the Holy Prophet to Madinah. The Mu'tazilites were committed rationalists, asserting that theoretical reason should serve as the ultimate adjudicator for the interpretation of divine revelations. Though they later called themselves 'The People of Justice and Monotheism' they became popular by the name of Mu'tazilites (Mutazilah) in the circles of Ahl al Sunnah Wa al Jama'ah when one of their leaders, Wasil bin Ata, left the group of Hasan Basri, one of the prominent and early leaders of Sunnis. Hasan al Basri seeing the departure of Wasil bin 'Ata stated, "*I'tazala anna*," i. e., "He has withdrawn from us." From that very day Wasil and his followers were called al‑Mu'tazilah, the With drawers or Secessionists.[ii]

The Mu'tazilites posit the imperative nature of divine retribution, wherein it is deemed obligatory for God to reward the obedient for their virtuous deeds and penalize transgressors for their misconduct as an expression of justice. In the context of unity, they contend with the denial of discrete divine attributes. While acknowledging divine qualities such as knowledge, power, and perception, the Mu'tazilites are constrained by intellectual reservations in acknowledging these attributes as distinct entities from the divine essence. Their rationale for this perspective is rooted in the concern that acknowledging

separateness in divine attributes could engender a "plurality of eternals," thereby compromising the fundamental tenet of unity. According to the Mu'tazilites, such a deviation would amount to clear unbelief (*kufr*). The foundational doctrines of the Mu'tazilites revolve around the principles of unity and justice, prompting their self-designation as the "People of Unity and Justice."[iii]

The concept of divine justice, as embraced by the Mu'tazilites, necessitates that individuals are the architects of their own actions to truly be considered free and accountable for their deeds. This stance aligns with the assertions of the Qadarites. The Mu'tazilites fully endorse the theory of indeterminism, positioning themselves as legitimate successors to the Qadarites. Central to their perspective is the contention that human accountability and deserving punishment for sins hinge upon individuals being the originators of their volitional acts. They assert that if human actions are construed as creations of God, it would be inherently unjust for God to hold individuals accountable for deeds He initiated, rendering them helpless. Therefore, Mu'tazilites universally affirm that individuals are the creators of their voluntary acts, generating some through direct volition (*mubasharah*) and others through consequential causation (*taulid*).

In the context of *taulid*, the term denotes the inevitable occurrence of a subsequent act stemming from the initial action of the doer. For instance, the movement of an individual's finger necessitates the movement of a ring on that finger, even if the individual did not specifically intend to move the ring; nevertheless, the individual is credited as the mover. This process involves the intermediary role of another act. Mu'tazilites assert that humans shape their own guidance or misguidance through *mubasharah*, and their subsequent success or failure results from *taulid*. Significantly, Mu'tazilites emphasize that God is entirely uninvolved in the creation of these acts, and His will plays no part in them. Consequently, if humans are acknowledged as the authors of their actions, it implies that they possess the power to choose between embracing Islam and obedience to God or adopting unbelief and engaging in sinful behaviour, independent of God's will. In contrast, God desires that all His created beings embrace Islam and obey Him, issuing commands and prohibitions accordingly.[iv]

Given that individuals are deemed the architects of their actions, Mu'tazilite doctrine maintains that it is incumbent upon God to justly reward them for their virtuous deeds. This assertion is underscored by the belief that individuals deserve recompense or punishment in the afterlife based on their actions. This perspective safeguards the Lord from any association with evil, wrongdoing, unbelief, or transgression, as it postulates that God's creation of wrongdoing would implicate Him in moral shortcomings, whereas creation of justice would characterize Him as just.

The imperative nature of God's justice, according to the Mu'tazilite perspective, entails a commitment on His part to refrain from any action contrary to justice and equity. A consensus among Mu'tazilites affirms that wisdom dictates that the inherently

wise can only engage in actions that are beneficial (*al-salah*) and morally good. According to this view, God's wisdom consistently considers what is advantageous for His servants, thereby precluding any inclination toward cruelty. Consequently, God is deemed incapable of implementing malevolent deeds, forsaking what is beneficial, or prescribing actions beyond the realm of feasibility for His servants. Additionally, it is asserted, based on rational considerations that God does not impose burdens upon any creature that exceed its capacity to bear.[v]

Regarding the concept of Good and Evil, Mutazilites declared that good and evil are not arbitrarily decided by God but God proclaims the things and actions as good or bad according to their nature which can be discovered by the God given reason as well. This tenet also was contrary to the popular Sunni belief that it is God who decides the good and bad and reason on its own cannot discern that. 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."[vi]

Some examples of their differences from the mainstream creed on the basis of reason and to preserve and assert God's transcendence are i) Denial of the vision of God, ii) Denial of the eternity of the Qur'an iii) Denial of the literal understanding of the seemingly anthropomorphic verses regarding the attributes of God,

2.1 DENIAL OF THE VISION OF GOD

The Mu'tazilites, adhering to their distinct theological stance, notably denied the concept of the beatific vision. In their theological framework, the beatific vision refers to the direct and immediate perception of God by the believers in the afterlife. Contrary to this belief, the Mu'tazilites rejected the notion that humans would have a direct encounter with the divine in the hereafter. This denial stemmed from their emphasis on the absolute transcendence and incomprehensibility of God, asserting that human beings, in their finite existence, were fundamentally incapable of directly perceiving or

comprehending the essence of the divine. The Muʻtazilites maintained a rationalist approach, contending that the beatific vision was incongruent with the principles of reason and justice, as it purportedly implied an anthropomorphic understanding of God that contradicted their emphasis on divine transcendence and the uniqueness of God's attributes. This theological disagreement on the beatific vision became one of the distinctive features of Muʻtazilite thought within the broader landscape of Islamic theological discourse. According to the Muʻtazilites, the ability to perceive relies on the existence of a specific location and direction. Given that God transcends the confines of place and direction, the Muʻtazilites assert that envisioning Him is inherently unattainable, both in the present life and in the afterlife.[vii]

2.2 DENIAL OF THE ETERNITY OF THE QUR'AN

The Muʻtazilites, a theological school of thought in early Islamic history, notably diverged from mainstream beliefs by denying the eternal nature of the Qur'an. Unlike the majority of Islamic scholars who affirmed the Qur'an's eternal and uncreated status, the Muʻtazilites held the view that the Qur'an, while divinely inspired, was created in time. This position stemmed from their commitment to the principles of divine justice and the rejection of anthropomorphism. They contended that if the Qur'an were deemed eternal, it would imply a coexistence of multiple eternals, a notion they considered incompatible with the oneness of God. Additionally, the Muʻtazilites argued that attributing eternity to the Qur'an would imply a form of predestination that contradicted human free will. This theological stance sparked considerable debate and controversy within the broader Islamic community during the classical period, illustrating the diversity of perspectives on foundational beliefs within the Muslim intellectual tradition. This proposition posits that the Qur'an is characterized as the created expression of God. In the communication of His message to angels or prophets, God is understood to generate sound infused with coherent language, attributing this speech to Himself. It is emphasized that speech does not emanate directly from God's Essence and does not share coeternity with God. This standpoint serves as a refutation of perspectives such as that of John of Damascus, who contended that if the Word of God is coeternal with God, then Jesus, also designated as the Word of God in Islam, must likewise share coeternity with God.[viii]

2.3 DENIAL OF THE LITERAL UNDERSTANDING
OF THE SEEMINGLY ANTHROPOMORPHIC
VERSES REGARDING THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

The Muʻtazilites, within their theological framework, notably rejected the literal

interpretation of verses in the Qur'an that appeared anthropomorphic in describing the attributes of God. These seemingly anthropomorphic verses, which ascribe human-like qualities to the divine, presented a theological challenge. The Mu'tazilites, driven by their commitment to affirming the absolute transcendence and uniqueness of God, insisted on a metaphorical interpretation of such verses. They argued that the Qura'nic descriptions of God's attributes, which might include references to physical attributes like hands or face, were symbolic expressions intended to convey profound meanings beyond a literal understanding. By adopting this allegorical approach, the Mu'tazilites sought to safeguard the transcendence and incomprehensibility of God, steering clear of any interpretation that might imply corporeal limitations or human-like qualities to the divine essence. This theological stance contributed to the broader discourse on the interpretation of Qura'nic verses and the nature of God's attributes within the early Islamic intellectual tradition.

The Mu'tazilites acknowledged and affirmed all the beliefs explicitly articulated in the Qur'an but diverged from extra-Quranic doctrines found in the traditions circulating during the formative period of hadith collection. They maintained the Qur'an as the paramount source of Islamic teachings, relying on traditions only when they aligned with Qura'nic principles or were explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. Consequently, the Mu'tazilites rejected widely accepted doctrines prevalent in Islamic traditions, such as the concept of punishment in the grave, the ongoing life of Jesus, the descent of Jesus, and the advent of Mahdi, deeming these beliefs lacking Qura'nic substantiation or consistency. Their approach underscored a critical evaluation of extra-Quranic sources to ensure doctrinal alignment with the Qura'nic text.[ix]

3. RATIONALIST TENDENCIES IN SOME PROMINENT MUSLIM MODERNISTS

The Neo-Mutazilite trends in the thoughts of scholars like Shaykh Muhammad Abduh, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and Fazlur Rahman Malik represent a revival of certain key elements of the early Mutazilite creed within Islamic thought. These scholars, each in their own way and historical context, engaged with the principles of rationalism, emphasis on reason, and reinterpretation of certain theological doctrines.

3.1 SHAYKH MUHAMMAD ABDUH (1849–1905)

Shaykh Muhammad Abduh, an Egyptian Islamic reformer, was instrumental in reintroducing rationalism and a renewed emphasis on reason in Islamic thought. He sought to reconcile Islamic teachings with modernity, advocating for a reinterpretation of religious texts in light of reason and contemporary knowledge. Abduh emphasized the importance of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and believed that Muslims should

adopt modern sciences without compromising core Islamic principles.[x]

3.2 SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN (1817–1898)

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a prominent Indian Muslim scholar, was a key figure in the intellectual revival of Muslims in South Asia during the 19th century. He advocated for a rational approach to interpreting religious texts and encouraged Muslims to embrace modern education. Sir Sayyid was critical of superstitions and unscientific beliefs prevalent in society, aligning with certain rationalist aspects of the Mu'tazilite tradition.[xi]

3.3 FAZLUR RAHMAN MALIK (1919–1988)

Fazlur Rahman Malik, a Pakistani Islamic scholar, contributed significantly to the modernist Islamic thought in the 20th century. He engaged with the Mu'tazilite tradition by emphasizing reason and context in the interpretation of the Qur'an. Fazlur Rahman proposed a method of contextual exegesis, known as "double movement," where he argued for understanding the text in its historical context while extracting universal principles.[xii]

4 SIGNIFICANCE OF NEO-MUTAZILITE THOUGHT

a. **Rational Engagement:** Neo-Mutazilite thinkers engaged with reason as a tool for understanding and interpreting religious texts, encouraging a rational approach to theology.

b. **Reconciliation with Modernity:** In a time of significant intellectual and social change, these scholars aimed to reconcile Islamic thought with the advances of modernity, advocating for the compatibility of reason and faith.

c. **Ijtihad and Independent Reasoning:** The emphasis on *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, reflects a departure from rigid dogmatism and an openness to reinterpretation based on evolving circumstances and understanding.

d. **Promotion of Education:** Scholars like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan emphasized the importance of education and scientific knowledge, seeing it as consistent with Islamic principles and in line with the Mu'tazilite emphasis on rational inquiry.

e. **Cultural and Intellectual Renewal:** The Neo-Mu'tazilite trends contributed to a broader cultural and intellectual renewal within the Islamic world, encouraging critical thinking and a re-evaluation of certain traditional interpretations.

In summary, the Neo-Mutazilite trends represented by figures like Shaykh Muhammad Abduh, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and Fazlur Rahman Malik signify a

modernist approach to Islam, emphasizing reason, reinterpretation, and engagement with contemporary knowledge. Their contributions have had a lasting impact on the trajectory of Islamic thought, fostering a balance between faith and reason within the Muslim intellectual tradition.[xiii]

5 HOW DO MUSLIM MODERNISTS RESEMBLE MU'TAZILITES?

Numerous instances can be cited to support the proposition that Muslim Modernism is not merely a recent development but rather a continuation of the medieval Mu'tazilite Thought and understanding. As previously elaborated, the Mu'tazilites, a rationalist theological school during the early centuries of Islam, employed metaphorical interpretations to navigate the challenges posed by anthropomorphic verses in the Qur'an. These verses, which appeared to attribute human-like qualities to God, prompted the Mu'tazilites to adopt allegorical readings, emphasizing symbolic meanings over literal understanding. Expanding on this historical context, the parallels between Mu'tazilite thought and Muslim Modernism become increasingly evident when examining the intellectual landscape of the latter movement. Muslim Modernism, emerging in the 19th and 20th centuries, aimed at reconciling Islamic teachings with the demands of modernity, science, and reason. Despite the apparent temporal distinction, the roots of this modernist approach can be traced back to the Mu'tazilite legacy. In the face of challenges posed by encounters with Western ideas and scientific progress, Muslim Modernists found themselves grappling with similar dilemmas as their Mu'tazilite predecessors. Both groups shared a common objective: the harmonization of traditional Islamic beliefs with rational thought and evolving cultural contexts. An essential aspect of this convergence lies in their shared propensity for metaphorical interpretations of religious texts, particularly those that might suggest anthropomorphic attributes of God.

For example, the Mu'tazilites allegorically interpreted verses referring to God's "hand" or "face," asserting that these expressions symbolized divine power or presence rather than literal physical attributes. This interpretative strategy, rooted in rationalism, found resonance in the mindset of Muslim Modernists who sought to reinterpret certain Qura'nic verses and hadiths in light of reason, scientific advancements, and contemporary values.

In essence, while Muslim Modernism does not replicate Mu'tazilite thought in a one-to-one manner, the historical continuum is unmistakable. The Mu'tazilite legacy of rationalism and metaphorical interpretation laid the groundwork for the adaptive nature of Islamic thought, evident in the ongoing efforts of Muslim Modernists to synthesize

faith with reason in varying historical and intellectual contexts. This historical continuity underscores the enduring quest within Islamic intellectual traditions to navigate the intersection of religious beliefs and rational discourse.

Let's delve into the examination of a specific Qur'anic verse to highlight the parallels in interpretations between the early Mu'tazilites and the Muslim Modernists, occasionally referred to as Neo-Mutazilites. This comparison aims to emphasize their shared tendency towards metaphorical readings of scripture in order to reconcile religious teachings with contemporary intellectual currents. Stated in the Qur'an, Surah 10, Verse 3: "Indeed, your Lord is Allāh, who created the heavens and the earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne, arranging the matter [of His creation]."

Both the groups separated by the elapse of time without any hesitation reject the literal understanding of the above verse. They opine that God is not an entity which is bound to space or time and hence cannot be lifted by any throne or chair. The verse metaphorically describes the authority and dominion of God over all the creation. That is what is meant by establishment on the throne. God is The King who presides over the Throne of Creation, i.e. He is the only Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.

Likewise, as previously indicated, the majority of contemporary Muslim Rationalists emphasize the Qur'an as the primary source of Islamic guidance, turning to Ahadith only when they align with clear Qur'anic teachings. Consequently, they do not consider numerous beliefs held by *Ahl al Sunnah* as essential components of faith. These beliefs include concepts such as punishment in the grave, the questioning by *Munkar* and *Nakir*, the life of Christ Jesus, his descent, and the advent of Mahdi. Additionally, they outrightly reject several well-known legal rulings acknowledged by *Ahl al Sunnah* and the majority of mainstream Muslims, such as capital punishment for apostates and stoning adulterers to death.

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6. SIR SAYYID AHMAD KHAN AS A PIONEER OF THE NEO-MUTAZILITE MOVEMENT IN THE MODERN ERA

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was born in Delhi on the 17th of October 1817. He was a

prominent Indian Muslim scholar and reformer. Concerned with the decline of Muslims post-1857, he founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh in 1875, later becoming the Aligarh Muslim University. Sir Sayyid advocated for modern education and a synthesis of traditional Islamic and Western scientific knowledge. He promoted a rationalist interpretation of Islam, emphasizing its compatibility with reason and science, and encouraged Muslims to adapt to modernity while preserving their cultural and religious identity. His legacy includes significant contributions to education and the intellectual upliftment of Muslims in India.

In his religious writings and interpretations of the Qur'an, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan consistently advocates for and aligns with Mu'tazilite principles and interpretations. For example Sir Sayyid refuting the allegation of a critic states the following: "Concerning the divine Essence and attributes, there exist from of old three schools among Muslims. One (teaches) that the divine attributes are the very Essence itself, the second that they are not the Essence, the third that they are neither identical with the Essence nor totally different. I consider the (teaching of the) first school to be true. This and not more I have stated."[xv]

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's interpretations of the Qur'an exhibit a distinct Mutazilite influence, reflecting a departure from traditionalist approaches. He champions reason, language, and grammar as primary sources for interpreting the Qur'an, prioritizing them over reliance on traditions.

In his interpretation of miracles mentioned in the Qur'an, Sir Sayyid adopts a metaphorical stance. He contends that the laws of causality, created by God, are unalterable, presenting miracles not as supernatural occurrences but as events interpretable through a naturalistic lens.

An important facet of his interpretive approach is his alignment with Darwinian evolution. Sir Sayyid embraces an evolutionary perspective in describing the emergence of life, a departure from more literal interpretations.

Regarding the story of Adam and Eve, Sir Sayyid employs a metaphorical interpretation, moving away from a literal reading of the narrative. His approach seeks to reconcile religious teachings with the findings of modern scientific thought.

Crucially, Sir Sayyid does not subscribe to the belief in bodily resurrection. Instead, he emphasizes the resurrection of souls, aligning with Mu'tazilite principles that diverge from mainstream views on this theological matter.

In his discussions on the transcendence of God's essence and attributes, Sir Sayyid's perspective closely mirrors that of the Mu'tazilites. He underscores the importance of reason in comprehending metaphysical truths, echoing the Mu'tazilite emphasis on rational inquiry.

Overall, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Mu'tazilite interpretations demonstrate a concerted effort to reconcile Islamic teachings with reason, science, and evolving intellectual paradigms, marking a significant departure from more traditionalist perspectives.[xvi]

7. EXAMPLES OF I'TIZAL IN THE THOUGHT
OF SHAYKH MUHAMMAD ABDUHU

Shaykh Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) was an influential Islamic scholar and reformer in Egypt. He sought to reconcile Islamic teachings with modernity, emphasizing reason and i'jtihad. As the Grand Mufti of Egypt, he implemented educational reforms and played a key role in the establishment of many educational institutes and the reforms in the curriculum of Al-Azhar University. Abduh's legacy lies in his efforts to adapt Islam to contemporary challenges and promote a balanced approach to education. Many of his interpretations and understanding of Islamic beliefs resemble the methodology and principles of early Mu'tazilites.

While Shaykh Muhammad Abduh did not openly claim to be a proponent of Mu'tazilite theology, there are certain points where some elements of his thought may show a resemblance or share common ground with Mu'tazilite interpretations. Here are a few aspects where there might be a parallel:

Both Mu'tazilites and Shaykh Muhammad Abduh emphasized the importance of reason and rationalism in understanding and interpreting religious doctrines. They believed that intellect and rational thinking should be employed to grasp the meaning of the Qur'an and Islamic teachings. Mu'tazilites and Abduh were critical of blind adherence to established legal opinions (taqlid). They advocated for independent reasoning (i'jtihad) and encouraged Muslims to critically engage with Islamic jurisprudence rather than relying solely on traditional interpretations.

Mu'tazilites stressed the concept of human free will, asserting that individuals have the ability to choose their actions. Similarly, Abduh affirmed the significance of human agency and the exercise of free will, aligning with the Mu'tazilite emphasis on moral responsibility. Both Mu'tazilites and Abduh emphasized the universality of ethical principles. They believed that ethical values are inherent in human nature and should be applied universally, transcending cultural and religious boundaries.[xvii]

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of early Mu'tazilite thought alongside the perspectives of modernist Muslims, often referred to as neo-Mu'tazilites, reveals striking parallels that extend beyond historical and cultural contexts. This research has sought to substantiate the claim that both groups share fundamental similarities, particularly in their endeavor to establish a rational basis for the defense of Islamic beliefs. The convergence of early Mu'tazilite principles with the intellectual pursuits of contemporary Muslim reformers highlights a consistent thread of rationalism within Islamic theological discourse.

As this paper has demonstrated, the challenges posed by early philosophical and scientific criticisms of Islam acted as a catalyst for the Mu'tazilites of their time. Similarly, modernist Muslims, facing a new wave of critical scrutiny, have embarked on a parallel quest to reconcile Islamic tenets with reason and logic. The significance of these intellectual endeavors lies in their collective contribution to fortifying the intellectual foundations of Islam.

By formulating reasoned arguments and logical frameworks, both early Mu'tazilites and modernist Muslims have played a pivotal role in responding to external critiques while fostering a deeper understanding of Islamic beliefs and practices within the Muslim community. Their shared commitment to integrating reason with faith not only demonstrates the adaptive nature of Islamic thought across centuries but also underscores the enduring quest for a harmonious coexistence between faith and rational inquiry.

The Mu'tazilite tradition and theology hold great significance, evident in their comprehensive polemics crafted to counter philosophical and theological adversaries of Islam. They created an extensive body of literature during a period marked by the dominance of Greek Philosophy in its early stages and the prevalence of modern philosophy and empirical sciences in the contemporary era. In the face of ideological threats to Islam, the Mu'tazilites effectively utilized sound logical arguments and inferences to safeguard the faith.

While it's true that not everyone requires rational arguments to strengthen their faith, a considerable number of individuals are inclined towards reason and seek satisfaction through logical reasoning. The Qur'an itself places significant emphasis on deep thinking, introspection, observation, and reasoning. Numerous Qura'nic verses suggest that the correct use of intellect leads one to the Absolute Truth – God.

To illustrate this point, even scholars like Allama Ibn Jauzi, who held reservations about certain Mu'tazilite principles, recognized the value of metaphorical interpretation when refuting anthropomorphists. Ibn Jauzi advocated interpreting verses in the Qur'an and Hadith, which seemingly imply physical attributes of God such as Face, Hands, and Fingers, in a metaphorical manner. According to him, adopting the metaphorical interpretation, as the Mu'tazilites did, was preferable for anthropomorphists rather than embracing the belief in the physicality of God, which is unanimously considered unbelief.[xviii]

In essence, the legacy of the Mu'tazilites, revived and evolved by contemporary thinkers, serves as a testament to the resilience of Islamic intellectual traditions. As Muslims grapple with the ever-evolving challenges of the modern world, the rational basis forged by these thinkers continues to be a source of inspiration and a bridge between faith and reason, ensuring that Islamic beliefs remain robustly grounded in both tradition and intellectual scrutiny.

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