

Introduction to Islamic Theology

Lesson 2



The Mu'tazilites

- The Mu'tazilites are one of the earliest theological sects in Islam.
- In order to distinguish themselves from other groups, they highlighted 5 principle doctrines that form their basic creed:
 - **1. The Oneness of God:** Mu'tazilites, like Shia's, believe that God's attributes are identical to His essence. They maintain that God's attributes differ as concepts but they all point to a singular reality. However, they deny the Oneness of God's actions. Mu'tazilites maintained that if all actions exist by the will of God, then a good doer deserves no reward and a sinner deserves no punishment. Thus, they argued that God has delegated full power to human beings and given them full autonomy over voluntary actions.

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- **2. Divine Justice**
- No Muslim denies that God is just. The difference lies in the interpretation of God's justice.
- The Ash'arites contend that everything that God does is just but there is no objective criterion for what constitutes justice. Justice is simply whatever God does. Thus, if God were to punish all the prophets in hell and reward all the tyrants with paradise, that would be just.
- Mu'tazilites argue that justice is an objective matter. The human intellect is capable of independently ascertaining what constitutes justice.

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- The Mu'tazilites highlighted divine justice as a principal doctrine to distinguish themselves who did not believe in the objectivity of morality.
- This led to a deeper discussion on whether or not actions have intrinsic goodness or evil.
- Unlike, the Mu'tazilites, Asha'rites subscribe to "Divine Command Theory". This is a theory which proposes that an action's status as morally good is equivalent to whether it is commanded by God. Hence, what is moral is determined by God's command.

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- Some Muslims had trouble grappling with the idea that God must be just. To them, it felt as though God was subordinate to this “objective morality”.
- However, it is important to note that God is the source of morals as God is Goodness itself.
- What we call good and morals is but a pale reflection of what God is in Himself.
- Morals are not something external to God, or something that He constructs but are a natural extension of Himself into our plane of existence.
- Morals are a reflection of God and NOT a separate part of His creation.

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لَا يُسْأَلُ عَمَّا يَفْعَلُ وَهُمْ يُسْأَلُونَ

“He is not questioned about what He does, but they will be questioned.” Quran 21:23

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- Thus, Mu'tazilites assert that moral actions have intrinsic value and can be identified by the intellect.
- In fact, religion cannot be proven unless you concede to this.
- Why should I believe that someone is a prophet just because they can perform miracles?
 - Reason dictates that God would not support a liar. How can I prove this?
 - Revelation?
 - Reason?
- Reason dictates that a perfect being would never deceive people.

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- Another issue that was debated by early Muslims was whether God's actions served a purpose or not?
- Ash'arites believed that God doesn't do things with purpose because this would imply that God is not free from needs.
- Mu'tazilites and Shia's argued that God surely acts with purpose because He is Wise.
- A wise being either does things to benefit themselves or others and God is from the latter.
- So God does things purposefully so that His creation benefits and this in no way implies any need to Him.

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- **3. The Promise and the Threat:**

- وعد means the promise of reward and وعيد means the threat of punishment.
- The Mu'tazilites believed that God does not break His own promises (all Muslims unanimously accept this) or renounce His threats as the Quranic verse regarding divine promise confirm:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُخْلِفُ الْمِيعَادَ

“Indeed, God does not break the promise.” Quran 13:31

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- Accordingly, the Mu'tazilites say that all threats against sinners will be carried out without fail, except when the sinner repents before death.
- Therefore, pardon without repentance is not possible
- From the viewpoint of the Mu'tazilites, pardon without repentance implies failure to carry out the threats and breaking a promise is intrinsically immoral.

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- **4. The Intermediate Position**

- The Mu'tazilite belief on this matter emerged in the wake of two opposite beliefs in the Muslim world about faith إيمان and disbelief كفر
- The Khawarij were the first group among the early Muslims who stated that committing a major sin was contrary to faith and equal to disbelief . Therefore, the perpetrator of a cardinal sin was considered an infidel.
- And a Muslim who becomes an infidel is an apostate and the punishment for apostasy is death.

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- Since most of the caliphs indulged in cardinal sins, they were naturally regarded infidels by the Khawarij.
- Accordingly, the Khawarij were the adversaries of the political leaders of their day.
- Another group that emerged was that of the Murj'ah, whose position with regard to the effect of cardinal sins was precisely the opposite to that of the Khawarij.
- They held that faith and belief are matters of the heart. One would remain Muslim if one's faith was intact; evil deeds cannot do any harm. Faith compensates for all wickedness.

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- The opinions of the Murji'ah were to the benefit of the rulers.
- They asserted that the station of the ruler is secure, no matter how much they sin. Obedience to the ruler is obligatory.
- The tyrannical caliphs backed this theological sect.
- The Mu'tazilites took the middle path. They maintained that the perpetrator of a cardinal sin is neither a believer nor an infidel but occupies an intermediary state.

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- **5. Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil**
- All Muslims accept that enjoining good and forbidding evil is an essential Islamic duty.
- They differ, however, over the limits and conditions.
- The Khawarij believed in it without any limits and conditions whatsoever.
- Others believed that the two conditions of the probability of effectiveness and the absence of any dangerous consequences were necessary for the duty to be applicable.

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- Some other groups believed that it is sufficient to fulfill the duty of enjoining good and forbidding evil with the heart and the tongue.
- Ahmad b. Hanbal is counted among these groups of Muslims.
- According to him, a bloody uprising is not justified or permitted as a means of struggling against sinful and immoral activities.
- The Mu'tazilites accepted the two conditions mentioned earlier but did not limit it to the heart and the tongue. Instead, they maintained that if sinful and immoral activities become common or if the state was oppressive and unjust, it is obligatory for Muslims to rise in armed revolt.

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- Other Mu'tazilite views and opinions
- **Theology:**
 - The Oneness of God's attributes: His attributes are identical to His essence.
 - Divine Justice
 - The words of God (i.e. the Quran) are created. In other words, God's speech is an attribute of His act, not His essence.
 - Every divine act is for the sake of a beneficial outcome.
 - Forgiveness without repentance is not possible
 - Pre-eternity is limited to God (only philosophers challenged this belief)

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- Placing a burden beyond what one can bear is impossible.
- Human voluntary actions are not created by God; God's providence does not apply to them.
- The world is created and is not pre-eternal (only philosophers opposed this view)
- God cannot be seen with the eyes neither in this world nor the next.

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- **The Human Condition:**

- Man is free and not predetermined.
- Ability; prior to any act, man has the ability to perform it or desist from it.
- A believer is capable of becoming an infidel and the infidel is capable of becoming a believer.
- A perpetrator of cardinal sins is neither a believer nor an infidel.
- Human reason can understand and judge some matters without prior need of guidance from the shariah.
- In the case of conflict between reason and hadith, reason is to be preferred.
- It is possible to interpret the Quran with the help of reason.

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- **Political and Social Issues**

- Enjoining good and forbidding evil is obligatory even if it necessitates the taking up of arms.
- The leadership of the rightly-guided caliphs was correct in the order it occurred.
- Ali was superior to the caliphs who preceded him (this is the view of some of the Mu'tazilites, not all). The earliest Mu'tazilites- with the exception of Wasil b. Ataa'- considered Abu Bakr as the best, but the majority of the latter Mu'tazilites considered Ali to be superior.
- Critical assessment and evaluation of the deeds of the companions of the Prophet is permissible.

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- The Mu'tazilites never submitted to Greek thought and did not accept Greek philosophy indiscriminately, which entered the Islamic empire at the same time as the emergence of the Mu'tazilites.
- On the contrary, they, with great courage, wrote books against philosophy and philosophers, boldly expressing their opinions.

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- During the rule of the Umayyads, the Mu'tazilites did not have good relations with the ruling authorities.
- In the early days of the Abbasids, they took a neutral stand.
- But under Ma'mun (the 7th Abbasid Caliph) they received favorable attention and support.
- The three successive Abbasid caliphs, Ma'mun, Mu'tasim, and Wathiq were staunch supporters of the Mu'tazilites and all three called themselves Mu'tazilites.

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- It was during this period that a heated controversy flared up that ultimately extended to all corners of the Islamic empire.
- The issue under debate was whether God's word is created or eternal.
- The Mu'tazilites believed that the word of God is created and therefore the Quran is created.
- They also maintained that belief in the pre-eternity of the Quran amounted to blasphemy.

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- Opponents of the Mu'tazilites believed in the pre-eternity and uncreatedness of the Quran.
- Ma'mun sent out letters saying that any believer in the pre-eternity of the Quran would be liable for punishment.
- Many individuals were thrown into prison and subjected to torture.
- Ma'mun's two immediate successors, Mu'tasim and Wathiq also followed in Ma'mun's footsteps.

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- One of those who went to prison during that time was Ahmad b. Hanbal.
- This policy remained in force until Mutawakkil assumed power.
- Mutawakkil was not inclined to favor the Mu'tazilites and most of the ordinary people were also opposed to them.
- As a result, the Mu'tazilites and their supporters were persecuted.
- The Mu'tazilites never recovered after this purge, and the arena was left open from then on to their opponents, the followers of the tradition (ahl al-hadith).