Mu’tazilism: Origin, Development and Doctrines

Mu’tazilite: (from a’tazala “to take ones distance, “to remove” oneself or to “withdraw”). A school of thought that was born out of the controversies of the civil war between Ali Talib and the companion’s az-Zubair and Talha, and the absolute black and white condemnery views of the Kharijites. Faced with the conflict between opposing parties, none of whom, could reasonably be considered absolutely reprehensible, the need arose for dogmatic reasons. One response was formulated as: manzila banial manzilatayn (a position between the two positions). This was the answer to questions treated in the circle of Hasan al Basri as to whether a Muslim who had committed a grave sin was believer or not, in which the kharijite’s position was that on who had committed a grave sin was no longer a believer, and therefore could be put to death. Hasan al Basri’s answer was that such a one was a believer but a hypocrite, that of Wasiil bin Ata was that he was neither a believer or an infidel but somewhere between a two, and this marked the beginning of the Mutazilite school, “those who had taking their distance” from Hasan al Basri, as the great teacher reportedly had said.

The other prominent figures of the new school were Amr ibn al Ubayd and later Abu Hudayal and An Nazzam who was the most important formulator of the Mu’tazilite teaching. The school took stock of the philosophic tools of the Hellenistic antiquity and applied reason to the solution of philosophical problem to leading thereby to the birth of Kalam (studies on Islam from the intellectual point of view, in order to project the various aspects of Islam through rational discussions and discourses).

Under the Abbasids there was an intellectual upsurge, and many Greek works were translated into Arabic. The filtration of Greek ideas promoted a rational attitude to the study of Islam. At this stage the intellectual scene came to be dominated by the Mu’tazila. They spearheaded the movement to justify several of the dogmas of the faith of Islam by rational argument.

Kalam now came to mean rational argument of the science of reason. The prominent scholars among the Mu’tazila included Wasil bin Ata (d.753C.E), Huzail bin Allaf (d.851C.E), Nazzam bin Siyyar(d.845C.E), Mamar b. Abbad (d.842.C.E.), Bashar b. Mutamir (d.848C.E.), Jahiz b. Bahr( d.877C.E.), and Abu Ali b. Abdul Wahhab al Jubbai( d.916C.E.). Most of these scholars established schools of their own. These schools of the Mu’tazila differed from one another on minor points. The doctrines common to all the Mu’tazila schools included the doctrines of the supremacy of reason, the unity of Allah, freewill, justice of Allah, the promotion of good and the suppression of evil. They held that the Qur’ān was the created word, though the Holy
Qur’ān was divinely inspired and the word of Allah and not the work of Allah. He also held that reason was to be preferred to tradition. Huzail bin Hallaf held that virtue is attained by rational argument. In which he discussed such matter as divine speech, freedom of will, predestination, reason, and justice. Abu Ali Jabbai also wrote a book Usul in which he laid down principles for rational argument.

The Abbasid caliph Mamun patronized the Mu’tazila, and adopted the Mutazila creed as the State religion. He went to the extent of instituting the inquisition where under those who did not agree with the Mu’tazila creed were persecuted and put to torture. The orthodox were removed from offices under the state, and all high offices under the state came to be monopolized by the Mu’tazila. That created bitter reaction among the orthodox and the Mutazila came to be condemned as heretics. The anti Mu’tazila movement headed by Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. He held that Islam was a matter of faith and not of reason, and that the Holy Qur’ān was the uncreated word of Allah. Mamun and his immediate successors stuck to their support of the Mu’tazila. On becoming the Caliph, Mutawakkil reversed the policy and made orthodoxy the state creed. The Mu’tazila’s were discredited; they were removed from the high offices under the state and the Mutazila works on their creed were publicly burnt.

The Mu’tazilte called themselves “ahl al adl wal-tawhid” (the people of justice and divine unity) and their school was based upon the following five principles.

1. (Tawhid) (Unity)
2. (Adl) (Justice)
3. (Al-Wad Wat waid), the promise and the threat or reward and punishment.
4. (Al- Manzila Baynal-Mnzilatayn), a position between two position.
5. (Al- Amir bil Marif wan nany an-al-munkar), commanding the good and prohibiting evil.

1- By tawhid they meant that the divine Attributes were one and indistinguishable from the divine names and attributes mentioned in the Qur’an places a particular emphasis upon the seven attributes namely a) Life (hayah) b) knowledge (Ilm) c) Power (Qudrah) d) will (Irada) e) Hearing (sam) f) Sight (Bsr) g) Speech (Kalam). The attributes particularly those which in the Quran corresponded to the Divine names, must be situated in reality.
In the orthodox idea, according to which God is both Absolute and Being, there is a continuity of identity between the attributes and the absolute. The attributes are not the Essence; neither are they anything other than the Essence; an inescapable and necessary antinomy.

2- By “adl” (justice) they affirmed that man has free will, which is necessary because of Divine justice. They also asserted that God does what is best (salah or aslah) for the world he had created. The Mu’tazilites asserted that He is the very essence of all that is Holy and Great; and He cannot act in wrong way. Verses from the Quran can be cited in great members, signifying that He is free from all defects and impurities. Qur’ān says, “He is wise and omniscient”, verily, your Lord is Omniscient, wise.

3- By the third principle (power) they meant Heaven and Hell. They believed that if someone went to Hell, he would not leave by reason of Divine mercy or intercession. The Ash’arites believes that sins may be pardoned even in Hell, or that a believer may be withdrawn from Hell once, his sins are forgiven. The Mu’tazilites denied the generally accepted idea that those whom salvation brings into paradise have a “vision” of God, arguing that such “seeing” of God would place Him within space. The Prophet is credited with saying that the inhabitants of paradise would see Allah, when asked how, he said, “As people see the full Moon”.

4- The fourth principle: a position between two positions was one; in one hand they founded it as their philosophical method and on the other, used it due to political outlook in the historic controversies. This was the middle position between the Sunnis and the Shi’ites which made the creed of the Mu’tazilites as the chosen theology of the Abbasid caliph al- Mamun. But although the position between two positions looks vaguely like the ‘Golden mean’ of philosophy, it is nearly far more likely to be the adoption of a Persian metaphysical teaching which regards evil as a composite substance, which is a mixture of two principles.

5- Commanding the good and prohibiting evil; the establishment of this order in society, was not different from the view of the Sunnis.