

MU‘TAZILA AND THE THEOLOGY OF TANZIH

In this chapter I shall attempt to set out the metaphysical principle lying behind the theological system of *Mu‘tazila* as a whole. While agreeing with previous studies that the Five *Usul* encompass the whole of *Mu‘tazila* theology, a position also held by the scholars of *Mu‘tazila* itself – “Nobody will deserve to be called *Mu‘tazili* until he holds all five *usul* together [and not separately, not holding this or another one while rejecting that or another one]: *Tawhid*, *Adl*, the promise and the threat, the intermediate position, and commanding the right and forbidding the wrong”¹ this study suggests that besides these *Usul* there is an overarching metaphysical principle, by defining which we shall have a better understanding of this theology and be able to explain its elements and put them in their proper context. To achieve this we need to go through a number of steps, the first of which is to define Islamic theology, *ilm al-kalam*. Muslim scholars use this term to define a specific field of Islamic knowledge. The word *ilm* means science, and *kalam* means speech; here, science is not used in the strict sense of the word but as a branch of knowledge. In its traditional form, this *ilm* is a defensive activity. Muslim scholars also agree that the subject of this branch of knowledge is the divinity, “Its subject is the Divinity [Allah]: it investigates the attributes of Allah and

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His actions in this world, such as the creation, and in the next world, such as bringing people to judgement";² like any branch of knowledge, any field of study, *ilm al-kalam* has its own subject. In philosophy, for example, the subject is existence, so philosophers have to aim at investigating the nature of existence by means of reason and the senses. The subject to which Muslim theologians have to devote their inquiry is the divinity: to defend their faith in it against the adversaries of this faith. It is said that religion is the story of God; this can be precisely applied to Islam. *Ilm Al-kalam*, as we have pointed out earlier, is a defensive activity, "It is an *ilm* by which we prove religious beliefs to others." This definition is demonstrably one of the earliest statements of Islamic theology. According to it, the essential task of the Muslim theologian is to defend one article or another of his belief against others who do not share it, or who have a different view of it. This is exactly what individual theologians did during the early debates of Islamic theology. They devoted their efforts to the defence of tenets such as Free Will, Predestination and Reward and Punishment, and many other articles of faith. But starting with the rise of *Mu'tazila*, and the later one of *Alash'aria*, there was a transition in the nature of Islamic theology manifesting itself not just

in a defence of this or that article, but in the establishment of a school of thought: here we are not talking about individuals but a complex of thought that was followed by, shared, and developed by a number of theologians. What characterises this transition is that *Mu'tazila*, or to be precise, its founder *Wasil*, looked at the subject of its study, i.e. the divinity, selected one aspect of it and regarded it as the absolute truth and went on to interpret the elements of existence in accordance with it. Thus absolute truth is not the whole of divinity but only one aspect of it. The *Qur'an* is a book about Allah; it is full of verses describing different aspects of this One God, His essence and acts in this world and the next. In this scripture there are the Ninety-Nine Most Beautiful Names of Allah, attributes from which we can form a complete conception of divinity. From reading the *Qur'an*, Muslims can grasp what Allah wants of them and what He gives them. The message of Islam is to tell people about Allah in a manner transcending time and place. What happened at various times during early Islamic history, however, was that, of this

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complete conception of divinity, at any one time theologians tended to emphasise some aspect or another in response to what they believed to be a deviation from the true faith, and this happened to *Mu‘tazila* especially. If we go back to the *ilm Al-kalam* and its subject, we could say that from an early stage the theologians of *Mu‘tazila* devoted their efforts to a defence, not of the complete conception of divinity provided by the *Qur’an*, but of a single aspect of this divinity, the *Tanzih*. It must be noted that the concept of *Tanzih* has its place in the *Qur’an*; Allah stresses this sense in different verses. The one that *Mu‘tazila* holds to be the best *Qur’anic* authority for *Tanzih* is “that there is nothing like unto Him”.³ Here, God negated similarity; first He negated a defect, then He affirmed perfection. The word “nothing” is an indefinite pronoun, which is used to negate, and therefore is all-inclusive. So nothing is ever like Him, the Mighty and Sublime. What this verse means is that any creature, however tremendous it is, is not like Allah, because to liken what is not perfect to Allah implies that Allah Himself is imperfect. The negation of a

defect should come before the affirmation of perfection. Besides that, some of the Most Beautiful Names of Allah lend their weight to this concept, for example, the Holy, i.e. the spiritual attribute of holiness is of such perfection and wholeness that is incontestably beyond all measure of description, sensibility, thought or comprehension. The Holy imputes His Divine Veracity, being absolutely unlike all other abstractions which are in themselves imperfections as associated with His creatures. Then there is the One, He is the Immutable Deity, there is no second such, there is no partner. He is the Absolute One from eternity and infinity for ever to come. Nothing is like Him in His Unique Veracity, or His Divinity, and His Dispensation of Providence. And then there is the Transcendent, He is the Highest, and most Sublime and Exalted. This is how *Tanzih* appears in the *Qur’an*, but what should be mentioned here is that the *Mu‘tazila* did not just take this as it stood, but in later days enriched it from their access to Greek philosophy and furthermore, from their knowledge of the etymology of Arabic.

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At this stage of the chapter it is better to explain and define what is meant by *Tanzih*, and the appropriate way to do this is to examine this term, first linguistically and then in the context of Sharia. To start with language:

in Arabic the word *Tanzih* means 'distance'. In Arabic one says that somebody is *nazeeh* if he or she is far from wickedness, one says that somebody *nazehe* (distances) himself from evil, and one also says that a place is *nazeeh* if it is remote and free of dirt and pollution. In *Sharia Tanzih* also means distance, it means to distance Allah from any defect or from any characteristic of imperfection. If this word is used to describe Allah it means that Allah has no partner, no like, no helper. It also means to distance Allah from any inabilities or imperfections under which men may suffer. As in its purely lexical meaning, the one it has in *Sharia* is that Allah is totally removed from doing evil or injustice to His people; on the contrary, He is supremely just. *Tanzih* consists in the denial of any similarity between Him and His corporeal creatures so, according to *Tanzih*, both *Tamthil* (representation) and *Tashbih* (assimilation) should be negated in reference to Allah.

At this point it is important to stress the need to differentiate between the concept of *Tanzih* in the *Qur'an* that all Muslims accepted, and the theological one developed by *Mu'tazila*, one with which many Muslims do not agree. To begin with the *Qur'anic* one: there are many verses in the *Qur'an* that characterize the concept of *Tanzih*. In the *Qur'an*, for

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example, Allah transcends (*nazehe*) having a son or a supporter: "All the praises and thanks be to Allah, Who has not begotten a son, and Who has no partner in (His) dominion." (17, 111). Allah does not accept the Jewish saying that Ezra is His son, and at the same time He does not accept the belief of some Christians that Jesus is His son: "And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: Messiah is the son of Allah. That is a saying from their mouths. They imitate the saying of the disbelievers of old. Allah's curse be on them, how they are deluded away from the truth!" (9, 30). In another verse Allah transcends having a partner in divinity or worship: "*Allah! La ilaha illa Huwa* (None has the right to be worshipped but He, the Ever-living, the One Who sustains and protects all that exists)" (2, 255). Another characteristic of *Tanzih* in the *Qur'an* is that sight cannot take in all of Allah, for He is above sight: "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision. He is the most Subtle and Courteous, Well-Acquainted with all things." (6, 103). Another verse characterizing the *Tanzih* is the one that Allah distances Himself from the Christian

claim that God, the Holy Spirit, are One God: "The Messiah, son of Miriam, was (no more than) a messenger of Allah and His word, (Be! And he was) which He bestowed on Miriam and the spirit created by Him." (4, 1712-). In the *Qur'an*, too, Allah distances Himself from doing evil and attributes perfect justice to Himself: "Surely! Allah wrongs not even of the weight of an atom." (4, 40). The last one is that Allah transcends having a like or an equal: "There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearer and the All-Seer." (42, 11). "And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him." (112, 4). I would say that in the *Qur'an* itself *Mu'tazilah* broaden their *Qur'anic* version of *Tanzih*; what Muslims accepted of the *Tanzih* in the *Qur'an* was not enough for *Mu'tazilah*. They looked in the *Qur'an* and found other verses that should be included in their version of *Tanzih*; for example, in the *Qur'an*, Allah talks about His hand: "*Allah* said, *O Iblees*, what prevented you from prostrating yourself to that which I created with My hands." (38, 75). When we come to *Mu'tazila's* theological concept of *Tanzih*, we should bear in mind that these theologians accepted this *Qur'anic* version of *Tanzih*, while at the same time developing a theological version of it. Thus in its theological version, *Tanzih* can be explained by the following points:

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- 1) *Allah* is not a body, a substance, or an accident.
- 2) Allah is in no particular part of the universe, and not in any place.
- 3) There is no corporeality in *Allah*, which involves the negation of the hand, face, eye etc. in *Allah*.
- 4) *Allah* does not move.
- 5) *Allah* has no attributes.
- 6) Believers cannot see *Allah* in the next world – this is the denial of the beatific vision.
- 7) *Allah* is the only eternal; everything else is created, including the Holy Book.
- 8) *Allah* is just, He does no evil. From this there follows that man creates his own actions, including the wicked ones.
- 9) *Allah* is faithful in His promises; He rewards the just and punishes the evil-doers.
- 10) *Allah* is the absolute Good.

An essential question is, how *Mu'tazilah* applied these characterisations of *Tanzih* to the

faith and then constructed their own theology. To answer this, we should repeat that Islamic theology is a field of inquiry concentrated on the divinity, so these characterisations are of the divinity, which in turn means conceiving Allah only in accordance with these characterisations. To break that down, we can say that Allah has from the theological point of view been seen in two different ways, one of these being in His essence, and the other in His actions. The first is related to His divine nature and His divine qualities, for example being One, Eternal and so on; the second one is related to what He does to His people, to His relation to believers and unbelievers in this and the after-life. Thus if the second manifestation consists of two agents, i.e. Allah and Man, the first one consists of Allah alone, His divine essence. *Mu'tazilah* theologians were aware of these manifestations and thus had to apply their concept of *Tanzih* to them. In other words, they had to conceive Allah both as essence and agent, in accordance with a belief that excluded any similarity between Allah and His creatures, specifically man.

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These manifestations are reflected in *Mu'tazilah's* Five *Usul* or, more precisely, in the first two of them, and *adl* (unity and justice), the latter, *Adl*, encompasses the other three, as *Mankedim* stresses: "Sending prophets and sharia is part of *adl* because, if He knows that it is in our interest that He send prophets and that it is also in our interest that we follow sharia, then He should send them and we should follow it; it is just that He should not go back on His obligation. Promise and threat are also part of *adl* because if Allah promised to reward believers and threatened unbelievers with punishment then He should do that, and should not go back on His promise and His threat. The intermediate position is part of *adl* because if Allah knows that it is in our interest that He should teach us about names and judgments then He should do that; it is not just that He should neglect His obligation. It is the same with commanding the right and forbidding the wrong."⁴ The first of these *usul*, i.e. *Tawhid*, relates to the divine essence of Allah. It stresses a very important aspect of the divine essence, i.e. that He is one. The second, *Adl*, relates to Allah's actions towards people in this life and the next, and it also stresses the importance of justice. While it can be concluded from this that though *Tanzih* has two dimensions, each centred on one aspect

of Allah, these dimensions are both centred on one identity, the divinity. From this we should understand why *Mu'tazilah* preferred to be called *Ahl al-Adl wal Tawhid* (the Partisans of Justice and Unity): it was simply because the concept of *Tanzih* centred on these two aspects of the divinity. It is to *Mu'tazilah's* credit that they, for the first time in Islamic theology, introduced this division which resulted in two *usul*, i.e. *adl* and *Tawhid*. They did this because this approach, that of *Tanzih*, obliged them to do so. I shall now explain how the concept of *Tanzih* is manifested in the *Tawhid*.

Tawhid (Unity)

Tawhid is the first of *Mu'tazilah's* five *usul*. As I have said, this principle is related to the divinity as essence: the divinity as characteristics and attributes. In this principle, *Mu'tazilah* conceives Allah's characteristics and attributes according to *Tanzih*, so whatever is said about Allah's attributes and characteristics in the *Qur'an* and in the

tradition should be construed according to *Tanzih*. It seems to me that *Mu'tazila* chose this term *Tawhid* (Allah's being One) to stress that the most important characteristic of Allah is His being One and Unique in His essence.

In the *Makalat al-Islameein*, *Al-Ash'ari* gives a very clear account of *Mu'tazilah's* belief in the *Tawhid*. Here there is a lengthy, detailed account that I have found to be most useful for the purposes of this study. *Al-Ash'ari* says that the theologians of *Mu'tazilah* were agreed that: "Allah is not a body, is not a picture, is not of blood or flesh. He is not person, not substance, and not accident. He has no colour or taste or smell. He does not have heat, cold, wetness or dryness. He has no length, no width, no depth. He is not composed, is not decomposed, He does not move or stand still. He is not made of parts or senses or organs. There is no side or direction in relation to Him, no front or back, no over or under, and there is no place containing Him. Time does not apply to Him, and we cannot describe Him by the transient characteristics of His creatures. He should not be described as transitory or determinate in His dimensions, He is illimitable, He neither begets nor is born, His holiness raises Him above touching woman or having a partner or children. He is not perceived by the senses and He is not

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conceived according to human yardsticks, He does not resemble His creatures in any way, and He is not subject to sickness or trouble. He is still the First and has preceded all His creatures. He was and still is the Capable, the Omniscient and the Ever-living, in a way that is unlike humans. Eyes cannot see Him and sight cannot perceive Him. He is not heard by hearing, He is unlike all other things. He is the only eternal, and there is no eternal besides Him, there is no god, there is just Him, He has no partner in His possession, His lordship has no minister, He has no helper in His creating. He is not concerned with utility, pleasures and enjoyments are not in His nature, and harm and sorrow do not reach Him.” (Watt, p. 246-7) When we look at this long text, the first impression we get is that it is full of negations, which means that *Mu'tazila* used this means to exclude false, commonly held characteristics rather than to attribute true ones to the divinity. The second one is that what is common to the false characteristics that *Mu'tazila* tried to exclude here is that they are of human origin. This means that its theologians realised that people had become accustomed to think of Allah in the same way they thought of themselves. Our human judgements seep into our judgement of the divinity, our mistake in regard to the divinity, *Mu'tazila* were

convinced, was that Allah and man were alike. It seems to me that *Mu'tazila*, from their very beginnings, recognised this error and had to produce a theological position in response not just to this error but to how widespread it was. Each line of this negation defines one aspect of *Tanzih* from the viewpoint of *Tawhid*, each line determines the pure essence of Allah by denying a similarity between Allah and His creatures in general and man in particular. Since it defines the divinity by negation, this text implies that we do not know very much about the pure essence of divinity; we know, however, that many human characteristics are attributed to this divinity, and that the purpose of *Tanzih* is to purify the divine essence of such accretions.

The early theologians of *Mu'tazila* seem to have constructed *Tanzih* as a theological concept to begin with and then to have read the whole of the Islamic faith from it. This means that for the emergent school of *Mu'tazila*, *Tanzih* becomes the true Islam; as *Al-kasim bin Brahim al-Rasi* says: “If everybody describes Allah by His people’s appearance, or assimilates Him to his own characteristics,

Mu'tazilah* conceives Allah’s characteristics and attributes according to *Tanzih

or says He is in a place, or that veils conceal Him, then he negates Him, and denies Him, and believes in two gods and worships, not *Allah*, but another.” (Amarah, Muhammad, p. 187) Hence any article of faith about *Allah* should be interpreted in accordance with *Tanzih*: “If any verses in the *Qur'an* imply assimilation (*Tashbih*) [of Allah to man] they should be interpreted, because utterances are full of uncertainty, while rational proof is certain.”⁵ The task that *Mu'tazila* set itself was to prove that not only was their theology based on the *Qur'an*, but that the *Qur'an* offered no basis for any other concept of divinity. In the *Qur'an* itself there are many verses that conflict with *Tanzih*, there are those that imply similarity between Allah and His creatures, for example, that Allah has a face “Everything will be destroyed except His face”(28.88), that *Allah* has a hand “The hand of *Allah* is over their hands”, that *Allah* is somewhere in the heavens “To Him ascends good speech, and righteous work [is] raise[d by *Allah*]”, that *Allah* is in the heavens “Do you feel secure that He who is in the heaven would not cause the earth to swallow you and suddenly it would sway?”, and that *Allah* has a throne “Indeed, your Lord is *Allah*, who created the heavens and earth in six days and then established Himself above the throne”, “And the angels are at its edges.

Our human judgements seep into our judgement of the divinity

And there will bear the throne of your Lord above them, that Day, eight [of them]”.

Tanzih in justice

In previous pages we set out how *Tanzih* is manifested in *Mu'tazila's* first principle, i.e *Tawhid*. We have seen that in this principle theological *Tanzih* consists of characteristics regarded as intrinsic to the essence of Allah. In justice, *Mu'tazila's* second principle, *Tanzih* is manifest but in quite a different way from the first. Nevertheless they have both essentially to do with Allah; each of them concerns a different aspect of Him. The first one is about His essence only, not His actions. The second one is about Allah as a doer, what he does in regard to His creatures, man especially, in this world and the next. The theologians of *Mu'tazila* had to construct a complete theory of *Tanzih* centred on Allah's actions only. Were we to characterize justice, *Adl*, from the *Tanzih's* point of view, we should say Allah only acts justly, so whatever He does in this world or the next must be based on justice. Allah knows what is evil and does not do it,

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and also knows what is good and does it. In this regard Allah is far from man, His actions are not like his. Man can be just on occasions, he can be good, but he can also be wicked; even the good man is capable of doing evil, and this cannot be said of Allah.

If, in the *Tawhid*, conceiving Allah as an essence, a divine identity, the theologians of *Mu'tazila* were able to exclude all human elements from their attempt to establish the uniqueness of this identity, in *Adl*, by contrast, their task was a different one. For both in Allah and man we are talking about an actor, man too is an actor, we have here a relation: on the one side is Allah and on the other side is man, the common element in this relation is action. To defend their belief in *Adl*, *Mu'tazila* had to adduce proofs from the human sphere: this is the pitfall into which they had fallen. Though they tried to exclude any similarity between man and *Allah*, they found themselves having no choice when it came to defending His *Adl*; they had to take their proofs from man's actions. *Mu'tazila*, however, were aware that even if man can be good, his goodness is not

like that of *Allah*: "*Allah* knows why evil is evil and that He does not need to do it, and He knows why He does not need it, and from all this He does not choose it at all."⁶

Being just, as regarded by *Tanzih*, means that in His actions *Allah* distances Himself from evil, from which we conclude that this theory of *Tanzih* is a moral one; it deals with actions and values. It follows that in the *Qur'ān* Allah's actions in this world or the next are various, so this theory should just include good actions; furthermore, being a perfect Good, Allah should do even more than He says about Himself in the *Qur'ān*. Let us now introduce a quotation from *Al-Qāzī*, *Abd al-Gabbār*, which sets out in detail this theory of *Tanzih* about Allah's actions: "His acts are all good, He does no evil, He does not fail to perform what is obligatory on Him. He does not lie in His message nor is He unjust in His rule; He does not torment the children of pagans for the sins of their fathers, He does not grant miracles to liars and He does not impose on people obligations that they neither bear nor have knowledge of. Far from it, He enables them to accomplish their duties He has imposed on them and acquaints them with the qualities of these duties so that he who perishes, perishes in the face of clear signs, he who is saved, is saved in the face of clear signs. If obligation is

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imposed on a person and he fulfils it as he is bidden to, then He will necessarily reward him. And when He – glory to Him – afflicts people with pain and sickness, He does so in their interest and for their benefit. For otherwise He would be failing to perform what is obligatory.” (Vasalou, p. 5)

It is clear from the above that this conception of justice is one arrived at by *Mu'tazila* which is not necessarily compatible with what Allah says about Himself in the *Qur'an*. In many of its verses Allah says He does what He wants, which has been understood by some Muslim schools as meaning that as a divine power, Allah acts freely and in His actions is not subject to any authority, especially that of reason. It is in this light that the previous text should be understood: as a justification of the *Tanzih* in regard to the actions of Allah. Against the total belief in what Allah does in this world and the next according to the *Qur'an* – especially taken in its literal sense - *Mu'tazila* had to present a “rational” Sharia. Since the belief that Allah does what He wants without regard to any moral rules conflicts with their rigorous concept of *Tanzih*, *Mu'tazila's* task here is to establish these moral rules determining what Allah does and does not do. In this context, we should understand why *Mu'tazila* hold that the truths of morality are apprehensible by reason,

so what determines whether any action is good or bad is not Sharia but reason. Allah's actions themselves fall under this criterion; in Sharia itself, however, there are texts that maintain that Allah's actions are above any criteria, a belief in conflict with *Mu'tazila's Tanzih*. To defend *Tanzih*, *Mu'tazila* had to maintain that the actions of both man and Allah must be judged by the same authority, that of reason. What man regards as good must also be the case for Allah. If Allah does what He wants He is no longer *Adl*. Evil being part of our nature, people, or some people at any rate, can do as they like as long as they have the power to do so. Allah is not like us, though He has the power to do evil, He only does good. In this context I do not agree with this statement of Sophia Vasalou's: “If the principle of unity emphasized the unlikeness of God to human being, the principle of justice laid greater stress on the likeness.” (Vasalou, p. 5) If there is any likeness in the principle of justice, it is, as I said earlier, because in this principle *Allah* is a doer, like man. He rewards, and man rewards as well, He punishes, and

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man punishes as well, but what is essential to stress is that *Allah* is unlike man, and His deeds are, unlike those of man, all good.

In both principles, *adl* and *Tawhid*, *Mu'tazila* attempted to describe *Allah* as being devoid of any likeness to a human being. In *Tawhid*, the attempt was based on negating any human characteristic in *Allah*; in *Adl*, however, it was slightly different. In *Tawhid* we are dealing with the pure deity, so any human characteristics should be excluded; in *Adl*, on the other hand, *Mu'tazila* was not able to justify *Tanzih* without comparing Allah's deeds to man's. To achieve this, *Mu'tazila* had to use deduction from a known, man, to an unknown, Allah: "To use *kalam* terms: something absent (*al-ghāib*) from something present (*al-shāhid*)." (Wolfson, 8)

Wāsil ibn-'Atā'

At this stage of our study I need to provide more evidence for my approach to *Tanzih*. I find that the study of *Wāsil ibn-'Atā'*, the founder of *Mu'tazilism*, will provide support for my contention that there is a metaphysical principle, i.e. *Tanzih*, underlying the structure of this theology. First of all we should emphasize that this man was born in the last quarter of the first century of Islam and died in the middle of the following century. In his

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twenties he left his home city of Medina and went to Basra. In this study the focus will not be so much on his history in general as on his role as a scholar and the founder of *Mu'tazilism*. Heresiographers and historians say that no-one had more knowledge of other religions and sects, that "He knew all about the Shia faith, the *Khārijite*, the theological discourses of *Zandiks*, *Murji'a'* and of all his other adversaries, and how to rebut them."⁷ We also know that *Wāsil* sent his emissaries to several places such as Maghreb, *Khurasan*, the Yemen, *Kufa* and Armenia. He is also said to have written many books, all of which were centred on religious and theological matters; the first chapter of one of these, the Book of the One Thousand Propositions to Rebut Manichaeism, contains more than eighty propositions. Regarding his theological views, *Ash-shaharastani* said that *Wāsil* held to four main positions:

- 1) He denies that *Allah* has attributes.

- 2) *Al-manzila bayn al-manziltayn*, “the intermediate position”, is a valid position.
- 3) Man creates his actions, he is responsible for evil.
- 4) One of the sides in the *Jamel* was wrong.⁸

Ash-shaharastani says that these four positions constitute *Wāsil's* contribution to *Mu'tazilism*; I would say that the first and the third of these constitute his founding contribution to *Tanzih*. *Tanzih*, as I have said earlier, is manifested in *Tawhid* and *Adl*, and it is *Wāsil* who here establishes an embryonic conception of it in these first and third formulations. They both deal with the divinity and express *Wāsil's* position on it; in the first one he was motivated by the wish to safeguard the absolute unity of *Allah*, and in the third one the justice of *Allah*. By doing that he planted the seeds of *Tanzih* in a very inchoate state.

It is true that all that *Wāsil* said about *Tawhid* was to negate *Allah's* attributes; he did, however, set out the path for succeeding generations of *Mu'tazila* theologians to elaborate upon it. His role as a founder was to produce the nucleus of the *Tanzih* in its simple form, and in this context we can understand why *Ash-shaharastani* described *Wāsil's*

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theology as raw and unsophisticated (*Ash-shaharastani*, p. 40).

When we spoke of *Wāsil's* four positions we established that his introduction of *Tanzih* is evident in its first and third positions; the question that arises here is – what happened to the other two? Are numbers two and four related to the *Tanzih* or are they not? To answer that, I should say that numbers one and three deal with the subject of *Kalam* itself, they deal with the divinity: the first one is about His essence, His characteristics, and the third one about His actions. Numbers two and four, on the other hand, have nothing to do with the subject of *Kalam*. They dealt with political polemics from the religious point of view. They expressed *Wāsil's* position on the social and political issues facing the Muslim community in his time. In contrast to the other two, these two positions will lose their importance over time simply because Muslims will be faced with new circumstances. This will not be true of numbers one and three, simply because they

are centred on the divinity, where the concept of *Tanzih* is manifest. The history of *Mu'tazila* demonstrates that their theologians devoted most of their efforts to the enrichment of *Tanzih* and its bringing to its logical conclusion.

To better understand the innovation represented by *Wāsil's* introduction of *Tanzih* one should try to visualize the intellectual circumstances of his time. This task will certainly not be an easy one, since we do not have enough materials to go on; as Montgomery Watt has suggested, it is a "matter of conjecture" (Montgomery, p. 183). We have already mentioned that, right at the start of the second century of the Islamic calendar, *Wāsil* moved to Basra and there became acquainted with a wide range of religions such as Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and others, including Islamic sects and the activities of prominent theologians. From what we know of him, *Wāsil* was very well known for his grasp

He knew all about the Shia faith, the *Khārijite*, the theological discourses of *Zandiks*, *Murji'a'* and of all his other adversaries, and how to rebut them

of all these faiths; the available materials emphasize that he had a detailed knowledge of each of these faiths. It is not without reason that the heresiographies credit him with this virtue. Furthermore it looks as if *Wāsil* presided over a theological institute from which he sent emissaries to many places to preach his doctrine.

What is being attempted here is to make a connection between *Wāsil's* theology of *Tanzih* and the foregoing. Possessing as he did an intimate knowledge of these religions and sects, he realized that in one point or another none of their doctrines of divinity fully conformed to the essence of *Tanzih* as he understood it. As we shall clarify later, *Wāsil's* disputes with these adversaries were not all on the same level: that with other religions was based on their infidelity, while that with Muslim sectaries was based on interpretation. Both of them nevertheless constitute a threat to true Islam from *Wāsil's* point on view. In his *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism*, Alister McGrath attributes the rise of doctrine to four causes; one of these is the threat posed by unbelievers and dissenters: "doctrine arises in response to threats to religious identity, which may be occasioned socially (through encounters with other religious systems) and

temporally (through increasing chronological distance from its historical origins and sources of revelation).⁹

The second century formed a turning-point in Islamic history; after passing through the period of acceptance of the new belief, Muslims moved into a period of reflection on it. In its early stages we witness the existence of schools and theologians who try to find answers in their faith to the dramatic, sometimes bloody conflicts that erupt in this emergent community. Historians tell us of a theological debate within Islam in which Muslims divided into sects and parties. Parties such as Shia and *Khārijites* had to justify their foundation on a theological basis. Apart from this there was *Jahm ibn-Şafwān*, who says that human actions good and bad come from Allah, man has nothing to do with them: “Actions are of Allah in reality, He is the only actor. Actions are ascribed to people only in allegory.”¹⁰ He also says that “Allah should not be described in the same manner as people are.” (loc. cit.) It is in this period, too, that the anthropomorphic interpretations and theologies become widespread, especially in Medina where *Wāsil* spent his youth.

When he moved to Basra in Iraq, which was the place where Arabs had come into contact with Indian and Persian religions,

especially Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, he became so aware of the danger presented to Islam by Manichaeism that he wrote one of his longer works to refute it. In his opinion, both Muslim sects and these two religions posed threats to Islam, and he had to make an intellectual stand against them by countering with a new theological position. It seems to me that *Wāsil*, who was well acquainted with these sects and religions, had to defend his faith from a specific point of view, one to which he was compelled by the socio-cultural context. Common to these Muslim sects and these religions, *Wāsil* realised, was their double misconception of the divinity: they misconceived it in their consideration of it as essence and in their consideration of it as actor. A true Islam for *Wāsil* is one in which Allah is a unique being, with no-one like Him. All these sects and religions violate this, each of them in a different way.

We have seen that, as defined by Muslim scholars, *Kalam* is an intellectual practice based on an adversarial defensive model. That implies that there are opponents, and

His role as a founder was to produce the nucleus of the *Tanzih* in its simple form

doctrine arises in response to threats to religious identity

that the function of the theologian is to confront these for the sake of the faith. What is more, the question whether the theologian, while defending his faith in intellectual debate, will be affected by one opponent or another will depend on the presupposition with which the theologian begins. This precisely explains how the theology of *Tanzih* was constructed by *Wāsil*. The principal Arab cities of *Wāsil*'s time were full of different schools, doctrines and religions *Wāsil* did not agree with; we know from history that Muslims once knew different doctrines, all of which were concerned with the divinity in one way or another. According to *Wāsil* these doctrines were innovative in one respect or another, and it is in this context that we understand *Ibn-Al Murtādā* when he tries to defend *Mu'tazila*'s disagreement with them: "If they (*Mu'tazila*) disagreed with anything, it was with innovative sayings, and they eschewed them."¹¹ We said earlier that these doctrines introduced one novelty or another into *Tanzih*, but to qualify this one has to say that they did not violate it completely; some of these doctrines, Islamic ones in particular, contained tenets compatible with *Tanzih*. *Jahm ibn-Şafwān* can stand as a good example of

this: he held that "*Allah* is not a thing because a thing is created, it has a like, while Allah has none". (*Al-Ashari*, vol. 1, p. 181) In the same context *Jahm*, as *Wāsil* was later to do, denied divine attributes; he says that *Allah* "should not be described by any attribute used to describe people, because that ascribes assimilation (of man and *Allah*)." (*Ash-Shaharastani*, p. 73). These statements have been understood to be compatible with *Tanzih*, and motivated by defensive considerations. On the other hand, *Jahm* himself held a determinist position on human action: man is not the author of his deeds, in reality the only author is Allah. This even includes evil actions' being performed by *Allah*. This last statement, which is clearly incompatible with *Tanzih* because Allah, unlike man, is a pure good, was one which *Wāsil* had to reject. The other example is the *Qadari* movement, which had appeared before *Wāsil* and was still there in his time. Their main thesis was that man's actions are not predestined, he is responsible for them. Good and evil are man's own doing. This thesis is completely in harmony with *Tanzih* as long as *Allah* is essentially precluded from doing evil. So it was no wonder that *Wāsil* adopted this thesis in his theology, or that Muslim heresiographers made a connection between *Wāsil* and *Qadaria*, on the one hand, and,

According to *Wāsil* these doctrines were innovative in one respect or another

later, between it and *Mu'tazilism*, for which this name came to signify a pejorative epithet. Speaking of *Wāsil's* belief in *Qadar*, *Ash-shahrastani* maintains that he “walks in the footsteps of *Al-jahni* and *Gailan Al-damashqi*” (*Ash-shahrastani*, p. 41), the principal figures in *Qadaria*.

If in Islam there were some doctrines containing tenets in harmony with *Tanzih*, some other religions were in conflict with it, and with *Tawhid* in particular. Reflecting on what we know about *Wāsil*, one has to conclude that his main battle was with the dualist religions Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism and Mazdaism. In order to confront these religions *Wāsil* had to maintain that it is impossible for two eternal gods to coexist, and anybody who affirms an eternal attribute affirms two gods. This could imply that *Wāsil* was confronting Christianity, particularly its belief in the Trinity, but we do not have enough material to prove this. Nevertheless he undoubtedly realised the urgent threat of Manichaeism, and he had to make a specific intellectual stand against

it with his principle of *Tawhid*, a principle consisting purely of the assertion that there are no two eternal gods.

This, then, is *Wāsil's* concept of *Tanzih* in embryo. It is true that this concept is a rudimentary one, which may be due to the fact that, as the originator of *Tanzih*, *Wāsil's* knowledge of philosophy did not enable him to develop it; originator as he was, his contribution usually is to mark the path along which future generations will be able to enrich this concept. The history of this school demonstrates this. A prominent theologian such as *Abū-Hudhayl* will take this concept to its logical conclusion. This man is credited with the formulation of the five *usul*; equipped as he was with a good knowledge of Greek philosophy, he was, for example, able to expand the principle of *Tawhid* beyond its original, simple form: he stood against what he regarded as false doctrines of *tashbīh*, ‘anthropomorphism’, and *tajsīm*, ‘corporealism’.

Tanzih and man

in Islam there were some doctrines containing tenets in harmony with *Tanzih*, some other religions were in conflict with it

For *Mu'tazila*, *Tanzih* is absolute truth. All elements of existence *Mu'tazila* should be conceived and explained in accordance with it. Our conception of these elements should not just be concordant with this absolute truth but should support it. Our conceptions of divinity, man and universe should be harmoniously organized to reflect the distance between Allah and man. In what follows I attempt to explain *Mu'tazila's* concept of man according to *Tanzih*. Let us remember that the relation between man and *Allah* is found in *Adl*; according to *Adl*, all *Allah's* actions are good, He is pure good, He does not do evil. *Mu'tazila* had to say that in man's sphere, evil is of his own doing. Man is not predestined to do evil, he is able to choose between it and good. He is free to choose between them. In this *Mu'tazila* did not, as many believe, wish to emphasize man's freedom: their priority here is the divinity. Their main motive here was to show *Allah's* transcendence of human evil. In this context *Mu'tazila* theologians, following *Tanzih* to its logical conclusions, questioned whether or not Allah is capable of doing evil; looked at fundamentally from *Tanzih's* perspective, the only answer for their theologians was that *Allah* never does evil. They, however, divided into two groups on this question: the first group, of which *Abū-Hudhayl*

was the most prominent figure, maintained that *Allah* is capable of doing evil, but never does it: "It is permissible to describe Allah as capable of doing good and bad because this is the reality of an agent free to do or leave alone." (*Ash-Shaharastani*, p. 48). However, *Allah* never does evil because He is perfect. Though the second group, of which *Al-Nazam* was the most prominent figure, agreed with the first group that Allah never does evil, they believed that it is not permissible to say that *Allah* is capable of doing evil. According to them, though man is capable of doing good and evil because his free will enables him to do so, Allah is incapable of doing evil because, unlike man, His will is directed at absolute good only. *Al-Nazam* says "*Allah* is incapable of increasing the torments of those in hell, of decreasing the delights of those in heaven, or of taking anyone out of it."¹²

One of the tenets regarding the relation between *Allah* and man is that of the intercession of *Muhammed*. To begin with, *Mu'tazila* disagreed with a wide range of

In this *Mu'tazila* did not, as many believe, wish to emphasize man's freedom: their priority here is the divinity

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Islamic sects on this: most Muslims believed in the Prophet's intercession for all believers, including those who deserved hell. Some Muslims, Shia in particular, extended this intercession so that it could be made not just by *Muhammed* but by other holy persons such as his daughter, her husband and their children. Although *Mu'tazila* accepted *Muhammed's* intercession they did not accept that it could be made even for great sinners: "In our faith, intercession is confined to believers who repent." (*Ash-Shaharastani*, p. 60). The reason why *Mu'tazila* took this remarkable line was to safeguard *Allah's* transcendence and uniqueness. Accepting that intercession made for all believers entails *Allah's* becoming like a man on the Day of Judgment, the day He rewards and punishes; men may intercede for one another, but this is not the case with *Allah*. According to *Mu'tazila*, reward and punishment must be based on Sharia, on what *Allah* says in the *Qur'an* and what *Muhammed* says in tradition; believers should go to heaven and unbelievers to hell. Intercession my cause man to change his mind about this matter or another, man may act or judge in this or that way as a consequence, but this can never be the case with *Allah*. This is an ugly defect that *Allah* transcends.

In *Adl*, we have said, *Allah* is an actor

whose actions, according to *Mu'tazila*, should fall under the rational law of good and evil. Here we see a similarity between *Allah* and man, both are actors and their actions should both be judged according to a rational moral law. However, they differ in this in that there is always a gap between our actions and the law, while in the case of *Allah* His actions are in entire agreement with the law. Though in our actions we try to act in harmony with the law, complete compatibility between them is impossible, whereas with *Mu'tazila*, *Allah's* actions are themselves the law. As long as we are talking about moral laws, we have no choice but to apply the term 'obligation' to His actions as well. From this we can conclude that, like man, *Allah*, too, is subject to obligation. Obligation, according to *Mu'tazila*, is "such that if any [entity that is] enabled to act thus fails to do so it deserves blame." (*Al-Kadi Abd-Al-Jabar*, p. 213). There are five ways in which *Allah* is obliged:

- 1) To choose the better for His creatures, especially for man.
- 2) To reward obedience.
- 3) To punish disobedience.
- 4) To be kind.

In our faith, intercession is confined to believers who repent

5) To compensate for His creatures' pains and sorrows.

Let us take the first of these: all *Allah's* actions are good, they are aimed at the good of His people. *Mu'tazila* maintains that though obedience is hard, it is for the good of man; it helps him to secure heaven. It also maintains that if there are two goods, one of which is close to the Absolute Good, *Allah* should choose that one. *Allah* spares no effort in helping people to achieve His will: "*Allah* has done what is best for people to follow His faith; if there is anything in His knowledge that will help people to believe or to be good and He has not done it, then He has wanted them to stray" (*Ash-Shaharastani*, p. 66), and this is not applicable to *Allah*. Though all *Mu'tazilites* agree that *Allah* has to choose what is better for His people, they disagree on whether this includes religious and secular matters: the *Mu'tazila* of Baghdad maintain that *Allah* has to choose the better in both, while those of Basra maintain that He has to make this choice in religious matters only.

***Tanzih* and the Universe**

***Allah* has done what is best for people to follow His faith**

Mu'tazila scholars adopted an explanation of becoming, how things exist, an explanation that brings about harmony with their doctrines. It seems to me that to continue in his life, any human has to believe in ideas that provide him with tranquillity and inner security. What is important about these ideas is not whether they are right or wrong, or whether or not they are compatible with external reality, but their function in our conception of the world: the picture of the world that man makes for himself is a confirmation of himself, it is an ordering of the world so that he can live in it spiritually and materially.

In the previous pages the attempt was made to explain how the doctors of *Mu'tazila* conceived the sphere of man in accordance with *Tanzih*, which means *Allah's* endowment of man with all the means to act and to choose between good and evil, which makes man responsible for these choices. Hence any evil in the sphere of man is his choice, so this distances *Allah* from the evil in this sphere. It seems to me that these doctors, motivated as they were by the principle of *Tanzih*, had to adopt a certain theory of physics to explain the "decisive principle of activity inhering in things" (*Fakhry*, p. 200) that makes each of them act differently from other things. In doing this some *Mu'tazila* scholars introduced the

notion of nature, (*ṭaba'*) *Al-Nazzām* held that “whatever happens outside the sphere of (man’s) power is caused by God through an act of creative necessity or by necessity of nature, thus when a stone is propelled it is made to travel, neither through the power of its propeller nor through the direct action of God, but rather through the nature (*ṭaba'*) imprinted on it by God since the beginning of creation.” (*Ash-Shaharastani*, p. 49). *Mu’ammār bin ‘Abbād* is another *Mu’tazila* scholar who adopted the notion of *ṭaba'*, arguing that “The existence of bodies is to be ascribed to God; whereas the existence of accident must be ascribed to the ‘action’ of bodies themselves, either by way of natural necessity (*ṭab ‘an*), as in the case of inanimate things such as fire; or in a voluntary manner (*ikhtiyāran*) as in the case of animate beings such as man.” (*Ash-Shaharastani*, 58). The third *Mu’tazila* scholar who held the notion of *ṭaba'* is *Al-belkhi*, who used to say “Bodies have natures by which they can act...wheat has a characteristic that never grows barley as long as there is nature and characteristics, and the semen of man is such that God will never create another animal from it.” These texts clearly prove that *Mu’tazila*, unlike some theologians, adopted the concept of *ṭaba'*, and they did not do so without a theological purpose. The purpose

to continue in his life, any human has to believe in ideas that provide him with tranquillity and inner security

behind this was to distance Allah from the action of things. *Mu’tazila* theologians had to find intermediaries, such as the necessities of nature, on which the responsibility for evils will fall instead of on Allah. Fire burns because of its burning nature, not because Allah makes it burn at any particular moment at which we come in contact with it. *Mu’ammār* was perhaps being extreme in this regard when he ascribed the existence of accidents not to Allah but to the action of bodies themselves; in doing this he was attempting to eliminate any relation between *Allah* and the actions of bodies. Thus his motive was “obviously the desire to relieve God completely of any responsibility for evil in the world” (Fakhry, 216).

The theory of creation

Most *Mu’tazila* theologians subscribed to a theory of creation called “continuous creation” based on five fundamental beliefs:

- 1) *Allah* created bodies consisting of substances and accidents. They agreed

his motive was “obviously the desire to relieve God completely of any responsibility for evil in the world

that *Allah* created the world from nothing, and that substance cannot exist separately without accident. According to this, *Allah* did not create the world once only, and from this is concluded that some bodies were created before others.

- 2) Substances were without motion when they were created. *Mu'tazila* theologians agreed among themselves that motion is an accident and that bodies were at rest when they were created.
- 3) *Allah* imprinted natures and activities in the existent in a manner that resulted in accidents, characteristics and actions in accordance with immutable laws. We have just seen that *Mu'tazila* theologians accepted the concept of *ṭaba'*, and that *Allah's* purpose in creation was that natural things should act consistently by virtue of their natures; it is no wonder, then, that some *Mu'tazilites* accepted causality.
- 4) Accidents persist in their action, they do not act just once. *Mu'tazila* theologians held that there is a solid link between accident

and substance, that these accidents are not a result of *Allah's* direct action. *Allah* did not create accidents, they result from the action of bodies by their natures. Their adversaries concluded from this that they believed in the action of these natures, not that of *Allah*.

- 5) *Mu'tazila* theologians did not approve 'renewed' creation of bodies, which means that *Allah* creates bodies and destroys them in every moment. They maintained that bodies endure as long as *Allah* wants them to, but they disagreed among themselves on the qualities of endurance and destruction.

According to this theory of creation *Allah* created bodies and provided them with natural powers that act in accordance with specific laws and with both of which *Allah* orders the world. With their existence, the need for *Allah* becomes attenuated: I believe this theory suits the concept of divinity from which *Mu'tazila* started out, a theory which keeps a distance between *Allah* and the universe.

***Allah's* purpose in creation was that natural things should act consistently by virtue of their natures**

Notes

- * **Naman Salman** is a researcher in Islamic philosophy. He worked at some Arab universities teaching Islamic philosophy. Salman wrote in the theory of knowledge of *al-Asha'irah*. His current affiliation is the Trinity College where he work on his doctoral dissertation.
- 1 Al-khaiat, Kitab *Al-intisar*, (Cairo: Al-Dar Al-
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 - 2 *Al-Eiji* *Azid Al-Deen Al-Mawakif fi ilm alkalam*
(Beirut : *Aalem Al-Kotob Vol. 1,*) p. 42. (Translation
by the author)
 - 3 *Qur'an*, Ch. 42, V. 11.
 - 4 *Amarah*, Muhammad, ed. *Rasā'il al-Adl wa al-*
Tawhīd (Cairo: Dar al-Shurūq, 1988), p.78. (My
translation)
 - 5 Al-Qāzī, *Abd al-Gabbār*, *Al-Muhīt bi al-Taklīf*, (Beirut
: Al- Mutbāaa Al- catholikiya vol.1), (My translation).
[The Compendium of Obligation], p. 200.
 - 6 Al-Qāzī, *Abd al-Gabbār*, *Al-Mughnī fī Abwāb al-*
Tawhīd wa al-Adl, Vol. VI, p. 312. . (My translation),
 - 7 Sayyid Fu'ād, ed. *Faẓl al-'Itizāl wa Tabaqāt al-*
Mu'tazila (Tunis: Al-Dar al-Tunisiyya li al-Nashr,
1974) p.234.
 - 8 Al-Shahristānī, *Al-Milal wa Al-Niāl* (Beirut: Dar al-
Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1992), p. 40
 - 9 Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in*
the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism, Grand Rapids,
MI: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1997,
p. 38.
 - 10 Al-Ashārī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* (Beirut : Al-Mektba
Al-Asrīya , 1990),Vol. 1, p.279.
 - 11 Ibn al-Murtāzā, Ahmad Ibn Yāsiā, *Al-Munya wa al-*
Amal Ed. Tom Arnold (Haider Abbad : Al-Māarif Al-
Nizamīya, 1316 Hijra), p.4.
 - 12 Ibn Hazm, *Al-Fīal fi al-Ahwā' wa al-Milal wa al-Niāl*
(Beirut : Dar Al- Jil , 1996), vol. IV, p.146.

