

## Article

# Aḥmad Amīn’s Rationalist Approach to the Qur’ān and Sunnah

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**Abstract:** The emergence of Islamic reformist thinking in the period of the so-called Nahḍah (Renaissance), in particular in the latter part of the XIX century, entailed a revival of interest in Mu‘tazilite rationalism. Among the Sunni intellectuals who reevaluated the ancient theological school, a prominent place belongs to Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954). Mu‘tazilism takes up much space in his famous trilogy *Fajr al-Islām* (*The Dawn of Islam*), *Duhā al-Islām* (*The Morning of Islam*) and *Zuhr al-Islām* (*The Noon of Islam*). Although the trilogy has been defined as the first critical research work carried out by a Muslim writer on Islamic civilisation, it has not been the subject of any specific or in-depth studies. The present article aims to partially fill this gap through a detailed linguistic and content analysis of selected passages from the trilogy. This analysis shows how Aḥmad Amīn’s interpretation of the Mu‘tazilism fits into the wider project that he pursued to reform Islam: on the one hand, he fought against the traditional dependence on transmitted data (*naql*), which he considered to be the main cause of the intellectual stasis of the Muslims; on the other hand, he promoted a critical reading of the sacred texts, the Qur’ān and Sunnah, based on reason and on modern Western scientific methodology.

**Keywords:** Aḥmad Amīn; Mu‘tazilism; Neo-Mu‘tazilism; Islamic Reformism; Qur’ānic exegesis; *ḥadīth* criticism



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## 1. Introduction

As is well known, in the period of the so-called Nahḍah (Renaissance), in particular from the end of the XIX century, various Sunni Muslim intellectuals began to show an increasing interest in the Mu‘tazilite rationalist approach to the faith. This renewed interest was fuelled by the discoveries of numerous Mu‘tazilite manuscripts in a number of Middle Eastern libraries, which threw new light on the doctrines of the school, until then known especially through the refutations of their detractors. The gradual and subsequent reevaluation of Mu‘tazilism was functional to the wider drive for the reform (*islāḥ*) of Islam pursued in particular by intellectuals who lived between the two world wars who perceived the urgency to adapt their own religious heritage to the modern world and saw precisely in Mu‘tazilism the ideal means to achieve this goal. In this contribution, we aim to briefly retrace the main stages of this process and then to linger on the rereading of Mu‘tazilism proposed by Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954) in his famous trilogy, *Fajr al-Islām* (*The Dawn of Islam*), *Duhā al-Islām* (*The Morning of Islam*) and *Zuhr al-Islām* (*The Noon of Islam*). This work has been defined by various scholars as the first work of critical research on Islamic civilisation written by a Muslim scholar<sup>1</sup>. Despite this fact, it has not been translated into any Western language nor has it been the subject of any specific or in-depth studies<sup>2</sup>. Our intention with this article is to partly fill this gap, analysing how the vision of the Mu‘tazilism of Aḥmad Amīn<sup>3</sup> is placed in the framework of the wider project that he pursued to reform Islam, promoting, among other aspects, a critical and historically contextualised reading of the sacred texts, the Qur’ān and Sunnah, based on reason and on Western modern scientific methodology.

## 2. The Revaluation of Mu'tazilism and the Role of Ahmad Amīn

According to Robert Caspar, the revaluation of Mu'tazilism began with Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) ([Caspar 1957](#), p. 157), at least in the Arabic-speaking Islamic world, particularly in Egypt<sup>4</sup>. Caspar underlines that, despite the fact that 'Abduh only knew Mu'tazilism from the texts that disproved it<sup>5</sup>, he took on board a number of principles from it: besides extolling the role of reason, he stated that good and evil were inherent in things and he promoted a theory of the *kasb* or "acquisition" that was much more similar to the defence of Mu'tazilite free will than to Ash'arite fatalism ([Caspar 1957](#), pp. 165–68). Furthermore, in the first edition of the *Risālat al-tawhīd* (Treatise on [divine] unity)<sup>6</sup>, 'Abduh defended the controversial Mu'tazilite doctrine of the *khalq al-Qur'ān* or "created Qur'ān", stating that in no way does it diminish the veneration of the Book of God and fervently, condemning those who considered that "the Qur'ān that is read" was eternal ([Caspar 1957](#), p. 170; [Martin et al. \[1997\] 2016](#), p. 169).

It was, however, with Ahmad Amīn that the revaluation of Mu'tazilism assumed its organic form and the ancient school of Islam was able to enjoy new recognition. This was possible thanks to various factors, one of which, in fact, was the influence of Muhammad 'Abduh; an influence that, in reality, was primarily indirect, but not for this reason any less decisive. In his autobiography, *Hayātī* (My Life), Ahmad Amīn narrates that when he was a student at al-Azhar, his best friend was a disciple of 'Abduh, thanks to whom he was able to attend the last two lessons of the *shaykh*, coming away deeply impressed by them and regretting "not having been a pupil of his from the outset" ([Amīn 2011a](#), p. 55). Later, when he worked in Alessandria as a teacher of Arabic, he met another disciple of 'Abduh, 'Abd al-Hakīm b. Muḥammad. Amīn describes this disciple as the "second teacher" after his father. His influence awoke him from his inertia, widened his horizons and freed him from the slavery to traditions ([Amīn 2011a](#), p. 63). For Amīn, he was also a guide in politics, a field in which he promoted, in line with the philosophy of 'Abduh, the need—considered preliminary to the battle for independence from England—to implement internal reforms, disseminating education and raising the living standards of the people ([Amīn 2011a](#), p. 65). When he later entered the School of Judges, *Madrasat al-qadā' al-shar'i*, established in 1907 in accordance with the project initiated by Muhammad 'Abduh, he formed a friendship with the director, an old friend of 'Abduh, 'Ātif Bey Barakāt, to whom he later became an assistant. Amīn stated that he benefitted significantly from his wide-ranging views and above all that "he influenced me greatly in ensuring that reason should act as a judge in the religious domain" ([Amīn 2011a](#), p. 91). More generally, throughout his life he had many contacts with important intellectuals who were closely linked to 'Abduh. For example, taking part in the conferences and debates of Ahmad Lutfī al-Sayyid (1872–1963) ([Gershoni 2019](#))<sup>7</sup>, spending time with the group that followed Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Rāziq (ca. 1885–1947) ([Von Kügelgen 2008](#)) and collaborating on the feminist magazine established under the influence of Qāsim Amīn (1863–1908) ([Elsadda 2007](#)), *al-Sufūr* ([Amīn 2011a](#), pp. 93–94, 121–22).

The new discoveries of the European orientalists would also be fundamental. These, in fact, had been interested in Mu'tazilism for some time, but their studies, published in Western languages, had not yet been able to influence Arabic intellectuals ([Caspar 1957](#), p. 176). In 1925, however, the Swedish scholar Henrik Samuel Nyberg, following the discovery of a manuscript of the *Kitāb al-intisār* of al-Khayyāt (d. ca. 913) ([van Ess 2012a](#)), drafted a critical edition of it that was published in Cairo ([\(al-\)Khayyāt \(1925\)](#)). He preceded it with a long introduction in Arabic and, in fact, asked Ahmad Amīn himself to collaborate in its preparation. In this introduction, Nyberg not only explained the history of the manuscript, of its author and of his adversary Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. midway through or at the end of the X century) ([Kraus and Vajda 2012](#)) to refute those precise accusations for which the *Kitāb al-intisār* had in fact been written, but he also covered the history of Mu'tazilism and the important role played by the movement for the defence of Islam and the birth of the theology ([Caspar 1957](#), pp. 177, 181). Furthermore, in the years 1929–1930, the German orientalist Hellmut Ritter published the text of al-Ash'arī (d. 936) ([Watt 2012a](#)) *Maqālāt*

*alislāmiyyīn* ((al)-Ash‘arī (1929–1930)) in Istanbul in two volumes, in which the famous theologian assigned himself the role of Historian of Doctrines, reporting the various theses of Muslims on the main points of the theology with great intellectual honesty (Caspar 1957, p. 177); even today, this continues to be a valuable source of information on the history of the *kalām* in general and of Mu‘tazilism in particular. The texts of Nyberg and Ritter were undoubtedly decisive for Ahmad Amīn, who often makes references to them in the trilogy.

The various volumes which, beyond a doubt, can be considered as his “life work” were produced over the span of two decades. More precisely, *Fajr al-Islām* was published in 1929, the three volumes of *Duhā al-Islām* were published between 1933 and 1936, and the first three volumes of *Zuhr al-Islām* were published between 1945 and 1952. A fourth volume was published after Amīn’s death in 1955, based on the notes of the author collected by his student, Ahmād Fu‘ād al-Ahwānī (Caspar 1957, pp. 180–81). In *Fajr al-Islām*, Ahmād Amīn addressed the historic period that spanned the pre-Islamic era to the end of the Umayyad era; in *Duhā al-Islām*, the first part of the Abbasid era until the Caliphate of al-Mutawakkil (847–861); in *Zuhr al-Islām*, the era that spanned from the Caliphate of al-Mutawakkil to the end of the IV century of the Hegira (X century of the Christian era). Mu‘tazilism takes up much space in the trilogy, in particular in *Duhā al-Islām*, for obvious reasons: the movement was in vogue especially in the first century of the Abbasid era. In total, 20 pages out of 330 were dedicated to the school in *Fajr al-Islām*, 143 out of 966 in *Duhā al-Islām* (corresponding to most of the third volume, entitled *Fi-l-aqā‘id wa-l-madhā‘ib al-dīniyyah fi-l-‘aṣr al-abbāsi al-awwal*, “Religious schools and traditions in the first part of the Abbasid era”) and 44 out of 915 in *Zuhr al-Islām*<sup>8</sup>. We will focus here on the first two of the texts of the trilogy, dedicated to the origins and to the subsequent development of Mu‘tazilism until its decline.

### 3. A Description of the Main Principles of Mu‘tazilism

In *Fajr al-Islām*, Ahmad Amīn suitably introduces the Mu‘tazilite school on the matter of free will, placing it in the framework of differences of opinion on the subject, in particular, the opposing ones of Jabrites and Qadarites. He then dwells at length on the various theories linked to the origin of the name *mu‘tazilah*<sup>9</sup>, and finally summarizes the main principles, as follows:

The Mu‘tazilite precepts can be summarised in the main principles:

1. The doctrine of the state between the two states (*al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*), in other words anyone who commits a serious offence is neither an unbeliever (*kāfir*) nor a believer (*mu‘min*), but a transgressor [of divine Law] (*fāsiq*), and the transgressor deserves Hell for his transgression. This doctrine was evoked by the fact that political clashes, from the killing of ‘Uthmān (656) to the battle of the camel (657) and to that of Siffīn (658)<sup>10</sup>, would lead people to wonder who was right and who was wrong, then from here to wonder if the person that was wrong was an unbeliever or a believer. The Khārijites (Levi Della Vida 2012) affirmed the unbelief of those who committed serious offences, the Murji‘ites (Madelung 2012) considered them believers, al-Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728) (Ritter 2012) hypocrites (*munāfiq*) and Wāṣil b. ‘Aṭā’ (d. 748–749) (van Ess 2012b) declared them transgressors, a state between unbelief and faith, considering that they would forever remain in Hell.
2. The doctrine of free will (*qadar*), [in other words] that God is not behind the actions of people, who instead are themselves solely responsible and for this reason will be rewarded or punished: it is only in this way that God deserves to be called “righteous”. It was probably the excesses of Jahm b. Ṣafwān<sup>11</sup> and of his companions in stripping man of his power and making him into an inert body between whose hands actions slide as if over a rock that led them to this idea. It is in fact narrated that Wāṣil b. ‘Aṭā’ sent some of his companions to Khurāsān to discuss and dispute with Jahm.
3. The doctrine of unicity [of God] (*tawḥīd*), so they deny that God has eternal attributes, such as science (*ilm*), power (*qudrat*), life (*hayāh*), hearing (*sam‘*), sight (*bāṣar*) etc., different from His essence. God [that is] would be knowing, powerful, seeing and hearing by His essence not by attributes that add to it. Asserting the existence of

external attributes would in fact mean affirming the multiplicity (*ta' addud*), while God is One, does not have associates of any type and has absolutely no kind of plurality (*kathrah*) in His essence. Therefore these interpret allegorically the verses of the Qur'an that establish these attributes and from which it is possible to infer that He has attributes that are similar to those of the created beings. Most probably, these were pushed to profess this doctrine because of a wide-spread conviction of their time, in which many, such as Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767) (Plessner and Rippin 2012), who was a contemporary of Wāsil, affirmed the corporeality (*tajsid*) of God Almighty and they claimed that He had attributes like those of the created beings<sup>12</sup>.

4. The statement of the authority of reason and of its capacity to recognise good and evil, even if no revealed text (*shar'*) has been received on the matter and [that for which] each thing has an attribute that makes it something good or evil; [ . . . ] religious law does not make a thing good by commanding it and an evil one by prohibiting it, quite the opposite. It commands a thing because it is good and prohibits another because it is evil and could not do the opposite because the command and the prohibition are the consequence of the good and of the evil of the thing in itself. [The Mu'tazilites] were probably moved to assume this principle because they realised that some people attributed excessive value to the transmitted *hadīth* and fixated on them (*mā ra'ū min mugħalat qawm wa-jumūdi-him 'alā mā warada min hadīth*), even if they were false, and relied on the text (*wa-wuqūfi-him 'inda al-naṣṣ*) and, as such, if they didn't find a text, they didn't express an opinion. We saw this tendency when we spoke about the school of the *hadīth*. The Mu'tazilites perceived the danger stemming from an intellectual stalemate of this type and established this principle. For this reason, *hadīth*<sup>13</sup> scholars were, among the creatures of God, those who most hated the Mu'tazilites and vice-versa: when the State, at the time of al-Ma'mūn (813–833) and al-Mu'tasim (833–842), was in favour of the Mu'tazilites, they imparted a hard lesson to the people of *hadīth* on the occasion of the rift (*fitnah*) on the [matter of the] creation of the Qur'an and, when the State withdrew its support, it was the traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*) who taught them a lesson (Patton 1897; Caspar 1957, pp. 144–56; Martin et al. [1997] 2016, pp. 47–48; Demichelis 2012; Amīn 2011b, pp. 320–21).

During this short doctrinal overview, Ahmad Amīn, therefore, reports those that he considers to be the fundamental principles of Mu'tazilism, reconnecting them to the probable circumstances that led to their development. In particular, he reconnects the doctrine of the state between the two states (or the "intermediate position") to the clashes that divided the Muslims and that led to reflecting on the relationship between faith and works, and considers free will, the unicity of God and faith in reason and in its capacity to recognise good and evil as they are born from a reaction respectively to fatalism, anthropomorphism and to the excessive attachment of many Muslims to the *hadīth*. All these points will then be revisited and explored further in *Duhā al-Islām* through a detailed and organised presentation of the five famous precepts of the Mu'tazilites: the unicity of God (*tawhīd*); divine justice ('adl); the promise and the threat (*al-wa'd wa-l-wa'īd*); the state between the two states (*al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*); commanding the good and prohibiting evil (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahi 'an al-munkar*) (Amīn 2011c, p. 703). Before analysing this part, it is, however, important to pause briefly on two terms present in the passage quoted above: *jumūd* and *wuqūf*. The word, *jumūd* is the *maṣdar* of the verb, *jamada*, which literally means "to congeal", "to freeze", "to become solid" or "to become dry" and is used to indicate any form of "blocking", "inertia" or "stasis", both in the actual and metaphorical sense<sup>14</sup>. The *jumūd 'alā mā warada min hadīth*, therefore, indicates the behaviour of someone who remains immobile, fixated on texts and unable to move forward. It is not by chance that the expression, *wuqūf 'inda al-naṣṣ*, which literally means "stopping at the text", accompanies it. Therefore, for Amīn, it means denouncing something that, in his eyes, is an actual "dependence" on the datum transmitted, which translates into the erroneous conviction in relation to which, in the absence of a text, it is impossible to pronounce any judgement. On the subject, he refers to the chapter dedicated to the

*hadīth*, which in fact addresses this matter linked, in his opinion, to the process of falsifying prophetic sayings.

#### 4. Criticism of the *hadīth*

In this chapter, Ahmād Amīn appears very critical of the way in which the *hadīth* were collected and selected, and traces the history of their falsification from the time of the Prophet to that following the Islamic conquests. After having underlined the fact that the *hadīth* were written up much later, he goes on to write:

The absence of transcription of the *hadīth* in the early days in a specific book, the entrusting to memory and the difficulty in distinguishing what God's Messenger had said or done over a period of twenty-three years from the start of the Revelation to his death, [all these aspects] resulted in some fabricating the *hadīth* and falsely attributing them to God's Messenger. This must have already occurred at the time of the Prophet, as it is a *hadīth* that proclaims "Who attributes falsehood to me, may he have his place in Hell!" which leads to the notion that it had been uttered on the occasion of an event in which falsehood was attributed to the Prophet. After the death of God's Messenger, it became easier to lie and more difficult to verify facts [ . . . ]. Then when the conquests took place and numerous people of the conquered nations entered Islam, such as the Persians, Byzantines, Berbers, Egyptians and Syrians, including those whose faith was not particular deep-seated, falsification increased prodigiously and the river flowed until the villages were submerged. [ . . . ] To give an idea of the level of falsification that was reached, just think that the *hadīth* relating to the Qur'ānic exegesis—of which Ahmād b. Ḥanbal (d. 855) ([Holtzman 2009](#)) stated that none was genuine—numbered thousands and that the work of al-Bukhārī (d. 870) ([Melchert 2012](#)), that includes approximately seven thousand *hadīth*, of which around three thousand are repetitions, is the result of a choice that he made starting from six hundred thousand *hadīth* who were travelling around in his time ([Amīn 2011b](#), pp. 231–32).

Having said this, Amīn clearly identifies the various causes that led to the falsification of the *hadīth*:

[ . . . ] The falsifiers were led to do so for various reasons:

1. Political conflicts: the conflicts between 'Alī (d. 661) and Abū Bakr (d. 634), between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah (d. 680), between 'Abd Allāh b. Zubayr (d. 692) and 'Abd al-Malik (d. 705), then between Umayyads and Abbasids ([Laoust 1977](#), pp. 1–83), all these were the cause of the fabrication of many *hadīth* [ . . . ]. It can then be noted, reading them, that many *hadīth* were clearly falsified to support or belittle Umayyads, Abbasids or Alids [ . . . ]. Related to these are the *hadīth* that were falsified to celebrate the Arab tribes because these tribes competed for power, glory and honour and, as such, found in the creation of the *hadīth* a gateway to pride where [previously] they had found it in poetry [ . . . ]. And how many *hadīth* were falsified to emphasise the superiority of the Arabs over the Persians and Byzantines and to which they opposed falsified *hadīth* to show the superiority of the Persians, the Byzantines, the Abyssinians and the Turks [ . . . ]!
2. The theological and legal controversies: the theologians for example had different ideas on free will (*qadar*) or predestination (*jabr*), and some took the liberty of supporting their doctrine by means of falsified *hadīth*, in which they also reported tiny details that the Messenger would not normally address, even going so far as to mention the name of the adverse faction or even the name of its head and cursing both. Similarly, in the law (*fiqh*) there is no branch in which there is no *hadīth* to support this and one to support that. Even the books of the school of Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767) ([Yanagihashi 2007](#))—of which the '*ulamā'* state that he considered [only] very few *hadīth* to be genuine, seventeen according to

Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) ([Cheddadi 2018](#))—are filled with countless *hadīth*, and at times with reports that more resemble legal texts, but it would take up too much page space to present some examples of these, for which the fact is simply alluded to.

3. The propensity of some, who called themselves “scholars”, to comply with the wishes of rulers and caliphs, for whom they fabricated *hadīth* in order to please them, in the hope of obtaining something from them in return [ ... ].

4. The adaptations that some made, in the field of virtue, encouragement, intimidation, etc., in cases where what was unlawful could not be lawful or what was lawful was unlawful. In this way they falsified *hadīth* in this sphere and filled the books of *hadīth* with the virtues of people, even of those that the Prophet had never seen, such as Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 728 or 732) ([Khoury 2012](#)), or with the merits of the Qur’ānic verses and suras [ ... ].

5. But one of the most important causes of the falsification seems to me to be the fact that people were excessively driven not to accept knowledge unless it was firmly linked to the Book and to the Sunnah, instead disregarding any other. The rules of what constituted lawful and unlawful based solely on individual reasoning (*ijtihād*) did not have [for them] the same value as those based on *hadīth* or on other similar sources. Many ‘ulamā’ of the time even ended up rejecting and considering them [=the rules based solely on *ijtihād*] worthless and some even insulted those who advocated them ([Amīn 2011b](#), pp. 233–35).

As can be seen, Ahmad Amīn states here quite clearly that, in his opinion, the most significant cause that led to the creation of false *hadīth* was the excessive attachment of many Muslims to the sacred texts—*Qur’ān* and *Sunnah*—an attachment that led them to overestimate their value with respect to that of individual reasoning or *ijtihād* to the point where they assigned to the latter a minimum or zero value, and in many cases even ended up fervently condemning it. This said, he went on to explain that the proliferation of *hadīth* concerned many scholars who sought to distinguish the true ones from the false ones. However, while recognising the commendable effort of making this distinction, he does not spare them criticism. He in fact states that they focused on the chain of transmitters and on the reputation of each of these, therefore ending up confirming all the Companions and equalising them on the same level, despite the fact that in their days, these themselves voluntarily welcomed criticism and levelled some of their own at a level higher than the others. He also emphasises that the theological and legal controversies strongly conditioned the denial or acceptance of certain *hadīth*, for which, for example, the Sunnis were led to reject those supported by the Shiites, and vice versa ([Amīn 2011b](#), pp. 236–37). Finally, he states:

The ‘ulamā’ had established rules for [the discipline of the] impugning and accrediting (*al-jarḥ wa-l-ta‘dil*) that it is not possible to recall here but—quite honestly—they gave more importance to the criticism of the chain of transmitters (*isnād*) than to the criticism of the text (*matn*). It is very rare to find a criticism that states that a sentence attributed to the Prophet does not agree with the circumstances in which it would have been said or that the established historical circumstances contradict it, or that the *hadīth* contains a sort of philosophical expression that contradicts the usual manner of expression of the Prophet, or that the *hadīth* more resembles, in the conditions and in the obligations [that it poses], the legal texts and so on. In this context, we have not found in them even a tenth of the attention that they dedicated to the impugning and accrediting of people, to the point that we see the same al-Bukhārī, despite his value and his precision in research, confirming *hadīth* that the passing of time and the experimental observation have proved not to be genuine, for example the *hadīth* “In a hundred years, no living being will remain on the earth” [ ... ] ([Amīn 2011b](#), p. 238).

Here, Amīn emphasises the inefficiency of the traditional methods of critical analysis and the need to resort to modern textual analysis to truly bring order to the immense mass of the *ḥadīth*; thus, raising a sensitive issue that still today is debated, opening the way to subsequent criticisms that will be put forward by many intellectuals after him, first and foremost his son, Husayn (1932–2014), who, in the work *Dalīl al-muslim al-ḥazīn ilā muqtadā al-sulūk fī-l-qarn al-‘ishrīn* (*A Guide for the Sad and Perplexed Muslim Concerning the Sort of Behaviour Required by and in the Twentieth Century*), recently translated into English as *The Sorrowful Muslim’s Guide*, will resume and explore the observations of his father on the subject (Hussein, [Amin 2018](#), pp. 73–98).

### 5. The Dependence on the Textual Datum as an Obstacle to the Reform of Islam

For Amīn, the introduction of a modern critical methodology is fundamental to the renewal of Islam and to remedy the detachment from reality from which he suffered for some time, of which the traditional formation offered by al-Azhar was, for him, the symbol par excellence<sup>15</sup>. However, one of the fundamental obstacles to the realisation of such an objective was, in his opinion, represented by the dependence on the sacred texts referred to above and that, from his perspective, hindered any form of critical reasoning and capacity for analysis. The expression encountered above, *al-wuqūf ‘inda al-naṣṣ*, often returns in the trilogy and the contexts in which it is found help to ascertain the meaning with greater precision. Its use in indicating the tendency of those who refuse to accept another authority other than the textual one has already been seen in *Fajr al-Islām* in opposition to which the Mu‘tazilites had developed their theory that, with good and evil inherent in things, reasoning was quite able to recognise them even without the indications of the sacred texts. The same expression returns in *Duhā al-Islām* on the same subject, once again accompanied by the term, *jumūd*:

The Mu‘tazilites affirmed the authority of reason in the knowledge of good and evil, [saying that] good is not an imposition of things by God and neither is this the case with evil. In other words, it is not the fact that God commands a thing to make it good, nor is it the case that He prohibits it to make it evil. Quite the opposite. God commands a thing because it is good in itself and prohibits another thing because it is evil in itself. In the nature of things, there are in fact attributes that make them good and attributes that make them evil, and the mind is able to recognise these natural characteristics to distinguish good and evil—and in this principle, there is undoubtedly a liberation of reason from immobility (*al-jumūd*) and from the reliance on texts (*al-wuqūf ‘inda al-nuṣūṣ*). The legislator can in fact exercise reason on anything that is not mentioned in a text in order to be able to distinguish good from evil, to establish what is lawful and what is prohibited. The procedure is not limited to analogy (*qiyās*), but research is possible: if there is no foundation that is comparable to the thing, good and evil can be weighed and thus allow recognition of the nature of that thing. It could be said that it is measured by the yardstick of justice and then judged as something that must be done or not. In this way, when the Mu‘tazilite was a jurist, this principle made him freer; indeed, it was probably the flowing of Mu‘tazilism into Hanafism that was one of the reasons that led the Hanafites to put their faith in the use of the personal opinion (*ra'y*) in their school, given that to consider that good and evil are rationally qualifiable involves freedom of opinion and the use of reason in making judgements. [...] Similarly, when the Mu‘tazilites were engaged in ethics, they didn’t confine themselves to the limits of commands and prohibitions, instead weighing the virtues and vices with the balance of time, of the setting and so on, striving (*yajtahidu*) to define ethics themselves as their colleagues strove in the field of law ([Amīn 2011c](#), pp. 739–40).

In this passage, immobility (*al-jumūd*) and the reliance on texts (*al-wuqūf ‘inda al-nuṣūṣ*) are clearly contrasted with *ijtihād*, the personal effort of distinguishing good from evil in order to draw legal and ethical rules from it that are intended to establish what is lawful

and what is prohibited, what is virtuous and what is not. It is interesting to note that Ahmad Amīn is keen to emphasize that this effort and the reasoning it involves goes way beyond the simple *qiyās* or “reasoning by analogy” typical of Islamic jurisprudence and that it is properly a rational effort to be understood in a broad and complete sense; an effort that is based on the total trust in the analytical capacity of human reason.

However, the expression is also found again in *Duhā al-Islām* in another context: at the start of the paragraph, entitled “Criticism and analysis of the principles of the Mu‘tazilites” (*Naqd wa-taḥlīl li-uṣūl al-mu‘tazilah*), in resuming the fundamental points of the Mu‘tazilite doctrine, especially the two principles of unicity and justice, in order to express his own opinion on the matter, Amīn writes:

Probably, before the Mu‘tazilites, Islamic history had never been witness to such a complete philosophical doctrine on God, on His attributes and on His acts, based on rational proof and revealed arguments, as was the case with the Mu‘tazilites. They gave to reason the freedom to move through the research into all these matters without being hindered by anyone, therefore they allowed research to be conducted on the heavens and on the Earth, on God and on man, on what is modest and what is majestic. It does not have a defined space in which it has the right to move and one in which it is prohibited from doing so, rather reason was created for the purposes of knowing and with the capability of knowing every thing, even that which is beyond nature and matter. Indeed, their research into metaphysics was broader and more in-depth than into nature, given that they were religious reformers and defenders of the faith.

Their vision of the unicity of God was a vision of the highest level and transcendence. They applied to the phrase of the Most High «Nothing is similar to Him» (Q. 42:11) the most innovative application, they expounded it in the tiniest of details in the best ways possible, they countered the mediocre points of view such as those of the corporalists (*mujassimah*) who presented God as a body with a face, hands, eyes, flesh and blood. [ . . . ] So the Mu‘tazilites came and raised themselves above these opinions, they understood from the spirit of the Qur’ān that God was devoid of matter, therefore they proceeded to a thorough and wide exegesis, allegorically interpreted what contradicted this principle and logically linked their doctrines. [ . . . ] From the rational point of view, they dared, decided with courage and audacity the road to be followed, in relation to the transmitted data (*naql*) they accepted what agreed with the rational proof and allegorically interpreted what contradicted it. It was reason that ruled over the ambiguous verses (*āyāt mutashābihah*) and among the *ḥadīth* to determine their interpretability or inauthenticity if they disagreed with reason.

Their vision of the justice of God was in a similar vein. They found themselves addressing the problem of reward and punishment and they realised that they had no meaning unless the free will of man was established, [affirming] that he is the creator of his actions, that he can do or not do something; that, whether he does or does not do something is his choice, therefore his reward or his punishment are reasonable and just. But if God creates man and compels him to act in a certain way, then He compels the obedient to obey and the disobedient to disobey, then He punishes the latter and rewards the other, and therefore there is no justice in anything. Perhaps their weak point is that they pushed themselves excessively in comparing the invisible and the visible, I mean in comparing God to man, and in subjecting God Almighty to the laws of this world. They imposed on God, for example, justice as it is perceived by man and as a worldly system, and they overlooked the fact that the meaning of “justice”—even in this world—is a relative meaning whose perception changes with the passage of time, and that what was understood as justice in the Middle Ages, today is considered an injustice, without even considering what it would be like moving from this world

to that of God! [ . . . ] The same can be said of their doctrine of the attributes of God if these are identical or not to God. All their evidence is based on comparing the invisible and the visible, but the similarity is non-existent; they presumed that identity and otherness, temporality and spatiality, cause and effect, etc., were necessary laws for each existing thing and this, in my opinion, is absolutely wrong. These in fact are human laws and, if we want to be a little indulgent, we could say that they are laws of this, our world, and that we cannot know if they apply or not to another world. Passing judgement on God in the conviction that it is universal law, for man and for God, is an audacity that doesn't sit well with reason. [The reason indeed] knows his power and does not go beyond his limits. This was not only an error of the Mu'tazilites but also of the theologians who would come after them.

But, in any case, the path of the Mu'tazilites was inevitable, because it was a reaction to the state of certain beliefs of their time. They established the authority of reason, pushing it to the extreme before those who did not recognise them authority and even said: let's stop at the text (*naqifū 'inda al-nass*), therefore what is established (*muhkam*) and clear (*wādīh*) we learn, that which is ambiguous (*mutashābih*) and obscure (*ghāmīd*) we leave to the knowledge of God. The Mu'tazilites argued in favour of free will, pushing it to the far limit before those people who had robbed man of his free will, until making it like a feather in the wind or like a piece of wood in the open sea. In my opinion, the error in affirming the authority of reason and the free will and the extremism in both [the doctrines] is better than the extremism in opposing doctrines. For me, if the teachings of Mu'tazilism prevailed among the Muslims in these two matters—I mean the authority of reason and free will—from the Mu'tazilite era to today, Muslims would have had another position in history, different from the current one, in which they have been made powerless by submission (*taslīm*), inactive by dependence (*tawākul*) and paralysed by predestination (*jabr*) (Amīn 2011c, pp. 737–39).

This passage is extremely meaningful from many perspectives. Firstly, it shows the strength of Amīn in producing a balanced and objective judgement of Mu'tazilism, recognising both its strengths and weaknesses. In reevaluating the ancient theological school, in fact, he must recognise his limits which essentially consist of subjecting God to purely human logics. However, Amīn considers that these limits stem from a reaction to the opposing extremisms that were circulating at the time and above all considers them preferable to the latter, especially in matters of free will and the authority of reason. Focusing on this latter point, which is the subject of our analysis, we can see how in the above-mentioned passage, the emphasis is once again placed on the importance of interpreting the texts in the light of reason, of exercising logically and coherently the *ta'wil*, in opposition to those who assigned no role to reason and said "let's stop at the text", that means here "let's not dare to interpret". In this context, in other words, the *wuqūf 'inda al-nass*, the "stopping at the text" should not be understood as the "dependence" on the text that consisted of recognising authority only and exclusively to it, as in the previous passages, but indicates an actual "surrendering to understand it". This "surrendering" approach is frowned upon by Amīn and is particularly evident from the last sentence, in which he establishes the opposition *sultān al-'aql* (authority of reason)—*ḥurriyyat al-irādah* (free will) on the one hand and *taslīm* (submission)—*jabr* (predestination)—*tawākul* (dependence), qualified as a source of powerlessness and of stasis of Muslims, on the other.

Here, as elsewhere in the trilogy, he praises the intellectual courage of the Mu'tazilites, who "liberated reason and will from the power of destiny" (Amīn 2011c, p. 740), in opposition of the passive approach of traditionists. The logic and coherence with which they took forward their interpretations, based "on what is reasonable (*ma' qūl*) rather than on the dependence of what is transmitted (*manqūl*)" are repeatedly emphasised by Amīn, who does not hide his appreciation for their choice to submit to the scrutiny of reason

"the verses that apparently contradicted each other" and to make "reason act as an arbiter between the ambiguous verses, while before them, it sufficed merely to report what was transmitted by the Companions and by the Successors and, once ambiguous verses were encountered, silence ensued and the knowledge was delegated to God" ([Amīn 2011c](#), p. 740).

He also shows appreciation for their doctrine of the created *Qur'ān* ([Martin 2015](#)). In *Duhā al-Islām*, he addresses the matter both from a doctrinal and from a political standpoint. In the paragraph entitled "Their precepts" (*ta'ālīmu-hum*), he rightly speaks of it in connection with the doctrine of *tawḥīd* ([Amīn 2011c](#), pp. 704–20), explaining how the principle of the created *Qur'ān* necessarily follows from their interpretation of divine unicity: if in fact for the Mu'tazilites, "God and His attributes are One and the same (*wahdah*) not liable to change, then the *Qur'ān* cannot be the Word of God in the sense of being one of His eternal attributes", because it is multiple and temporal ([Amīn 2011c](#), p. 713)<sup>16</sup>. In this section, Ahmad Amīn does not take a stance. Instead, he limits himself to listing objectively and with rigorous scientific grounding all the scripural and rational proofs presented by the Mu'tazilites in support of their doctrine. He specifies that both their position and that of those who refrain from pronouncing on the matter are worthy of respect. However, Ahmad Amīn severely condemns the extreme opinion of those who defined "eternal" as everything that was part of the book and contained in it, including the cover, the ink and paper<sup>17</sup>. Further on, in the paragraph entitled "The issue of the created *Qur'ān*" (*Mas'ālat khalq al-Qur'ān*), in which he resumes the history of that doctrine from the point of view of its political repercussions, he instead assumes a daring position, affirming that

It is right to say that in each of the two fields [= of the Mu'tazilites and of the traditionists] there were those who were faithful to their belief. I believe that persons, such as al-Ma'mūn (d. 833) ([Rekaya 2012](#)), al-Wāthiq (d. 847) ([Zetterstéen et al. 2012](#)) and Ahmad b. Abī Du'ād (d. 854) ([Zetterstéen and Pellat 2012](#)), were sincere in their opinions: they believed that what they said was the truth and I agree with them, that it was the truth, even if I do not agree with them [in believing] that each truth should be told to each human being, in the same way that I do not agree with them in [choosing to] force people to say what I believe to be the truth ([Amīn 2011c](#), p. 837).

Here, therefore, it appears clear that for Ahmad Amīn, the Mu'tazilites professed a speculatively just thesis but made the mistake of also wanting to disseminate it among the people who were not able to understand it and for whom "the only thing that remains impressed, if they are told that the *Qur'ān* is created, is the loss of sanctification and veneration" ([Amīn 2011c](#), p. 832). Above all, the Mu'tazilites were seriously guilty of imposing it with force through the *mīhnah*, of which Amīn reports stories and events, firmly condemning the way in which the partisans of freedom became oppressors. If they had not been compromised with power, according to Amīn, they could have been able to continue their path, as the traditionists would have continued theirs, and this would have been the best thing for society:

It would have been better for the Muslims not to let Mu'tazilites into the web of power and made them live as they had done at the time of al-Manṣūr (754–775) and in the initial phase of that of al-Ma'mūn; if they had followed this road and if the traditionists had followed theirs, the Muslims would have benefitted greatly from it and the history of Islam would have been wholly different. The faction of the Mu'tazilites represents the liberal party and that of the traditionists the conservative party. The fact of there being two parties is in the interest of the nation: the Mu'tazilites push people to use reason and free thought, they guide them with their torches and lights that light up the street before them; the traditionists guard customs and inherited traditions, they cling on to the tails of the Mu'tazilites, preventing them from being careless on the way and thus risking becoming lost. In this way the nation will proceed along the path without

obstacles but always advancing. Paving the way for only one of the two sects and losing the other is extremely damaging ([Amīn 2011c](#), p. 842).

What instead happened was that the Mu'tazilites, after being persecutors, became persecuted and, from that time onwards, it was the traditionists that dominated society. This for Amīn represented a serious drawbar for society, the consequences of which he continues to see in his time:

When the light of the Mu'tazilites went out, the people fell under the rule of the traditionists and of their peers, the jurists, and remained under this domination from the time of al-Mutawakkil (847–861) until almost the present day. The result was a total immobilism (*jumūd*). The science of the scholar (*'ālim*) consisted of memorising the *hadīth* and thus transmitting them as he had heard them, explaining them from a linguistic point of view and commenting on the transmitters as those of ancient times once did: this is worthy of faith, this is weak, without any rational criticism; the right of the jurist (*faqīh*) consisted of narrating the pronouncements of the previous *imām* and, if a new question was posed, the greatest effort of the *mujtahid* was invested in deriving it from the principles of his *imām*. [ . . . ] All were subject to the command of al-Mutawakkil to «submit and imitate» (*al-taslīm wa-l-taqlīd*), all were without personality, because personality is the enemy of submission and of imitation. If Mu'tazilism had remained, Muslims would have been bearers of better tendencies than they actually were ([Amīn 2011c](#), pp. 842–43).

Once more, therefore, the Mu'tazilites/traditionists confrontation is resolved to the detriment of the latter, that is of the traditionists. If it is true that, for the just balance of society, Ahmad Amīn considers that the two factions should subsist without one domineering over the other, it is equally true that he clearly prefers the mentality and the critical spirit of the Mu'tazilites, despite the defects and shortcomings of their speculation or the faults they committed. It is no coincidence that here also, as in the passages examined above, the traditionists are associated with terms known with an extremely negative connotation: besides the already encountered *jumūd* and *taslīm*, we find here *taqlīd*, which indicates the “servile imitation”, the “uncritical acceptance of a given teaching” ([Esposito 2003](#)) and, as such, it is opposed to the interpretative effort and, more generally, to the research method based on the reason proper of the Mu'tazilites, a method that Amīn considers fundamental for the progress of society. It is no coincidence that he sees a hope for the renewal of Islam in the movement of the *Nahḍah* that, in his opinion, has much in common with Mu'tazilism, first and foremost a method based on doubt and on experimentation:

When the position of the Mu'tazilites weakened after the *mīhnah*, the Muslims remained under the influence of the party of conservatives for around a thousand years, until the modern Renaissance (*nahḍah*). In fact, there is a tendency in it that is typical of Mu'tazilism, there is doubt and experience, which are two methods of Mu'tazilism, as had been seen in al-Nazzām (d. between 835 and 845) ([van Ess 2012c](#)) and al-Jāḥiz (d. 869) ([Pellat 2012](#)); there is the faith in authority of reason and in free will; in other words, man creates his own actions and as a result is responsible for them; there is freedom to debate, research and dispute; there is the awareness of man of his own personality, the not entrusting to destiny of each consequence and responsibility, and much more besides. They are all principles—as we have seen—that are professed and practised by the Mu'tazilites. Perhaps the only difference between the teachings of the Mu'tazilites and that of the modern Renaissance is that the Mu'tazilite teachings of these principles were based on religion, while those of the modern Renaissance are based on pure reason; in other words, the Mu'tazilites considered these principles religious while the modern Renaissance considers them rational ([Amīn 2011c](#), p. 845).

The conclusion is cutting:

In my opinion, one of the greatest disasters for the Muslims was the death of the Mu'tazilites, who committed a crime against themselves ([Amīn 2011c](#), p. 845).

## 6. Conclusions

From what has been said, it appears evident that for Ahmād Amīn, the dependence on texts has been seen both as renouncing the use of reason in the absence of a textual support and as a surrendering to interpreting its meaning, constituting one of the greatest hurdles to the renewal of Islam. He considers it a sign of the intellectual stasis that, on the one hand, impedes the creation of a way of interpreting the sacred texts that is logical, coherent and in step with the times and, on the other, that prevents the exercising of the critical spirit necessary to reformulate and rationalise Islamic tradition. This operation would require, among other measures, the introduction of the modern Western methodology. For example, the use of critical philology to bring order to the enormous mass of *ḥadīth* or even, more simply, an analytical approach to the sources based on an analysis that is objective and free from prejudice, such as that implemented by the same Ahmād Amīn to present the history of the various Islamic doctrines in the trilogy. This approach has allowed him, on the one hand, to reevaluate the much officially denigrated Mu'tazilism, understood and analysed in light of its historical context and, on the other, to see in it an autochthonous example of critical spirit, intellectual courage and mental openness. As such, it is considered useful for the development of an Islamic modernity that is able to compete with the Western one. Modern Islam, the result of the Nahḍah, should, therefore for Amīn, follow in the footsteps of Mu'tazilism, of course ridding itself of its excesses. In this sense, he fully deserves the label of "neo-Mu'tazilite" that is often given to those intellectuals—including, in more recent times Muḥammad Arkūn (1928–2010) and Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd (1943–2010)—who have made themselves continuers in varying degrees of that "Mu'tazilite mentality", so well described by Amīn, considered necessary to reform Islam and combat the more obscurantist tendencies and interpretations commonly known today as "fundamentalist"<sup>18</sup>.

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## Notes

- 1 To use just a few examples, Robert Caspar defines the trilogy as a work that successfully achieved the goal determined by the author, namely that of "offrir à l'ensemble du monde arabe un tableau de son histoire intellectuelle conforme aux exigences de la méthode moderne" ([Caspar 1957](#), p. 181); Emmanuelle Perrin describes it as "le premier travail de recherche critique sur la formation de la culture islamique" ([Perrin 2002](#)) and Efraim Barak refers to it as "the first attempt by a Muslim writer to research Islamic history using scientific tools" ([Barak 2007](#), p. 295).
- 2 As far as we can ascertain, no Western scholar has ever translated either the trilogy or even part of it. The only translation that we are aware of is that of the first book, *Fajr al-Islām*, published in French under the title, *L'aube de l'Islam* by a small Algerian publishing house ([Amin 2013](#)). We are currently preparing an anthological translation in Italian of passages selected from the trilogy for the series, *Traduzioni, studi e ricerche sulla nahḍah* of the Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino.
- 3 A short but useful overview of the vision of Mu'tazilism of the author can be found in ([Caspar 1957](#), pp. 180–84) and is resumed and in part reworked by ([Khālid 1969](#)).
- 4 Detlev Khālid highlights that this revaluation already had its roots in the XVIII century in India with Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (1703–1762), to then become more organic and explicit during the following century thanks to a younger contemporary of 'Abduh, Sayyid Ahmād Khān (1817–1898) ([Khālid 1969](#), p. 321 and p. 323). On the role of Sayyid Ahmād Khān, see also ([Malik 1980](#)). In general, as summarized by ([Demichelis 2010](#), p. 411), the rediscovery of rationalism before 'Abduh can be found in many other authors such as Khayr al-Dīn (1820–1889) and al-Afghānī (1838–1897). It is true, however, that the role of 'Abduh in this matter was central, especially for Ahmād Amīn.

- 5 The discovery of Mu‘tazilite manuscripts only began after his death.
- 6 In subsequent editions, the page in question would be removed following the controversy it aroused ([Abū Zayd 1995](#), p. 202).
- 7 All online sources were consulted on 18 January 2022.
- 8 The reference is to the following editions: ([Amīn 2011b, 2011c](#)) for *Fajr al-Islām* and *Dūhā al-Islām* and ([Amīn 2013](#)) for *Zuhr al-Islām*. In the latter, the part dedicated to Mu‘tazilism is found in the fourth volume, the one that was published for the first time posthumously in 1955.
- 9 Following his research and independently from the results reached by the Italian orientalist Nallino, Ahmad Amīn arrived at his same conclusions, considering that the name, *mu‘tazilah* did not originate from the idea of a “secession” from orthodoxy, but from the idea of “abstention” from taking a stance regarding the legal qualification of the sinner. The name, in fact, had been chosen or attributed originally to the group of people who adopted a “neutral” approach with respect to the clash between the partisans of ‘Alī and those of ‘Uthmān ([Amīn 2011b](#), pp. 311–20; [Nallino 1916](#), pp. 442–54).
- 10 On these events and more generally on political events in the period from the death of the prophet Muḥammad (632) to that of ‘Alī (661), see the useful summary contained in ([Crone 2004](#), pp. 17–20).
- 11 This was an ancient theologian, presumed founder of the sect of the so-called “jahmites”, who adhered to an extreme form of the doctrine of *jabr* (predestination), considering that man acts only metaphorically, as the sun “acts” when it sets ([Watt 2012b](#)). There is no definite information on Jahm, only that it was the secretary of al-Hārith b. Surayj who rebelled against the Umayyads and, between 734 and 746, controlled a number of areas of eastern Khurāsān. Jahm was killed in 746, shortly before the same al-Hārith ([Watt 2012c](#)).
- 12 The reference here is to the “popular view of God among traditionalist Muslims, who took Quranic statements about God literally”. For example, the *Qur’ān* “describes God seated on a throne, having a face, seeing with His eyes; therefore God must have a body. [...] Those who held such a view of God—and many of the *ahl al-hadīth* and other traditionalists did—were labelled by the mutakallimun as the *Mushabbīha*, the purveyors of anthropomorphism (*tashbih*) and as the *Mujassīma*, those who embodied God (*tajsīm*)” ([Martin et al. \[1997\] 2016](#), p. 96). See also ([Strothmann 2012](#)).
- 13 We will use the more common singular form *ḥadīth* for both singular and plural senses of the term.
- 14 In this regard, see the definitions of *jamāda* and *jumūd* in the main classical and modern lexicons and dictionaries, available on the website <http://arabiclexicon.hawramani.com> accessed on 18 January 2022, in particular those contained in ([Lane 1863](#); [Ibn Manzūr 1955–1956](#)).
- 15 In his autobiography, Ahmād Amīn dedicates much space to the criticism of the teaching methods of al-Azhar, especially in chapter IX ([Amīn 2011a](#), pp. 49–54; [Borruso 1980](#)). In an article in 1951, entitled “If I were the shaykh of al-Azhar”, he also explains how he would reform this historic institution ([Perrin 2002](#)).
- 16 On the Mu‘tazilite principle of the *tawhīd* and the consequent interpretation of the created *Qur’ān*, see also the presentation of Gardet and Anawati in their *Introduction à la théologie musulmane*, as it is very much based on the trilogy of Ahmād Amīn ([Gardet and Anawati 1970](#), pp. 47–49).
- 17 He writes on the matter, “This is clearly an invalid affirmation produced from a limited mind and from an unhealthy vision” ([Amīn 2011c](#), p. 717).
- 18 On the different definitions, interpretations and problems related to the label of “neo-Mu‘tazilism” and its application to some intellectuals, including Muḥammad Arkūn and Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd, see: ([Caspar 1957](#), pp. 199–201; [Khālid 1969](#); [Gardet 1972](#); [Schoen 1976](#), pp. 132–38; [Martin et al. \[1997\] 2016](#), pp. 256–59; [Hildebrandt 2007](#); [Demichelis 2010](#); [Campanini 2012](#), pp. 48–49).

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