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A EURO-AMERICAN ‘ULAMA?

MUʿTAZILISM, (POST)MODERNITY, AND MINORITY ISLAM

by

ANTHONY R. BYRD

Under the Direction of John L. Iskander

ABSTRACT

Muslim heresiographers present the medieval rationalist school of theology known as the Muʿtazila as heretics, while modern Western and modernist Muslim scholarship almost invariably present the Muʿtazila as the original free-thinkers of Islam. The result is a polarized view of the Muʿtazili tradition; Islamists view the Muʿtazila as a heresy best forgotten while modernists, Muslim and Western, as historical proof of Islam’s essentially rational character. The present study is an attempt to problematize both perspectives by reexamining the concepts of reason (or rationalism) and tradition (or traditionalism) in light of Muʿtazilite theology and ethics. This analysis shows that the modern heirs of Muʿtazili thought are not be sought in Muslim scholastic theology or Enlightenment liberalism, but in the postmodern critiques of Western Muslim scholars such as Tariq Ramadan and Khaled Abou El Fadl.

INDEX WORDS: Muʿtazilism, Tariq Ramadan, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Western Muslims, Islamic ethics, Islamic rationalism

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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I. Preliminary Remarks: Euthyphro in Baghdad

Socrates: Consider this: Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious,
or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?
-Plato, *Euthyphro*

This is the question of the Euthyphro, posed by Socrates to the dialogue's namesake on the road to a preliminary hearing at which Socrates will hear the formal charges brought against him by Meletus, charges of impiety and corrupting the Athenian youth- no light charges by any means. Euthyphro too was on the way to court, but rather as a prosecutor. He had charged a man, no less than his father in fact, with the murder of a servant who had apparently killed another servant in a drunken brawl. Euthyphro's father had bound the offending servant hand and foot and left him in a ditch, awaiting word from the seers as to whether, and to what extent, the murderer should receive punishment. Word, however, came too swiftly and from another quarter as the servant died from exposure, a death which had prompted Euthyphro to charge his father with murder for this unjust killing. Socrates, surprised by Euthyphro's lack of "fear of having acted impiously"[1] in bringing his father to trial, begins a line of questioning on the nature of piety, attempting to flesh out whether that which is pious is so because the gods have decreed it such, or whether all acts and men we can call pious are so because they share some inherent characteristic which both gods and men recognize and thus can justifiably apply the classification 'pious'. To rephrase the question might be to ask whether that which is ethically praiseworthy is so from the simple fact that it has be decreed so by God, or

[1] Plato, "Euthyphro," in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. Marc S. Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 100.

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whether moral value can be ascertained objectively, by any who possesses the powers of reason.

We all agree, presumably, that torturing the innocent is ethically objectionable. It might be that this act is to be avoided because God has decreed that torturing innocents is forbidden and were God to decree that torturing innocents is an obligatory act, then the act would cease to be bad and become good, something all should do. It also seems to be true that to view torturing innocents as ethically praiseworthy will strike most people as exceedingly odd. That the very act of torturing innocents, and the very moral psychology involved which underlies such an act, including cruelty and a lack of empathy and justice, seems abhorrent to most us may lead one justifiably to the position that God would never decree such a thing. Of course, however, in holding this position one would implicitly be positing a standard for that which is good or ethically praiseworthy beyond, or even prior too, God's self, thus limiting God's transcendence and omnipotence by making it conform to human standards of justice. What I am attempting to get at here, and what I see being approached in Socrates' dialogue with Euthyphro, is: how are we to provide a foundation for ethics? More specifically, I want to explore this question in the context of the history of a religious community, one in which members of the community agree on a wide range of metaphysical positions, such as the very existence of God and his role in regulating the community's moral performance through reward and punishment, even if those positions change through time. Moreover, I want to explore what is at stake for a religious community in a context of religious and moral diversity in the choices made concerning foundational presuppositions in religious ethics.

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If we can reformulate the topic of the Euthyphro a bit and present it as it appears in the monotheistic traditions, to move Euthyphro to Baghdad as it were, the question becomes one of the relationship between reason and revelation. In Islamic intellectual history, the tradition which concerns us here, the issue of whether reason or revelation takes prime place in disclosing moral knowledge came to the theological fore in the second century AH (8-9th century CE) by a loose community of theologians known as the Mu'tazila, who came to their ascendancy in Basra and Baghdad in modern day southern Iraq. The Mu'tazila and their opponents, those who were to become emblematic of the orthodox theological positions of Sunni Islam, differed radically in their answer to the question Socrates posed to Euthyphro[2], among other things, and the debate the Mu'tazila brought to the fore formulated a crisis in the theology of early Islam, one which, I will argue, continues to influence the scope and content of Islamic theological ethics.

II. Introduction: Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics, Revisited[3]

Though the heyday of Mu'tazili thought and their influence as a dominant school of theology had certainly passed by the turn of the eleventh century CE, variations of Mu'tazilism continued to survive, predominantly among Shi'ah theologians of the Zaydiyah and Rawafid schools. Still, among the mainstream theologians of Sunni orthodoxy, Mu'tazilism all but disappeared. This is partly due to the fact that Mu'tazili doctrines on the status of the Qur'an, reason and God's justice were increasingly seen as

[2] The relation of the Euthyphro to the reason/revelation complex in Islamic kalam is originally presented in Richard Martin and Mark Woodward with Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 27-28.
[3] I am here referencing George Hourani's seminal work on the Mu'tazilite, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

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radical and eventually as heretical, and certainly also due to the fact that much of the long term doctrinal progress in Islamic thought occurred in the field of jurisprudence and not in theology. After a certain point in Islamic history[4], most theological questions were assumed to be settled or at least not worth considering; the brightest minds were naturally attracted to fields such as law which were more 'concrete' and less subject to the criticism of the piety minded who, it would be fair to say, harbored a pervasive anti-intellectual sentiment. Like the proverbial bad penny, however, Mu'tazilism continues turn up at unlikely times and in unlikely places in the Islamic intellectual milieu. Traces of Mu'tazilism persist in the Maghreb among those who call themselves the Wasiliyah, referencing Wasil ibn 'Ata the reputed founder of Mu'tazila, though evidencing little theological activity and using the mantle of the Mu'tazila primarily as an identity marker.[5] It has been widely observed that Mu'tazilism came to be appropriated by Muslim modernists such as Muhammad 'Abduh in the early decades of the last century; in the face of modernity and Western colonialist critiques of Islam, the Mu'tazila were seen by many Muslim modernists as witness to the essentially rational character of Islam, and thus also witnessing Islam's compatibility with modernity generally and modern science and technology specifically. This movement led many scholars to prophecy the eventual end of more strident forms of traditionalism in Islam, a prediction dramatically discredited by events such as Iranian Revolution of 1979. Still, Mu'tazilism continues to persist as an active element among Muslim intellectuals, and more recently Mu'tazilism has been characterized as a symbol of rationalism and free-thinking for postmodern

[4] Joseph Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), 4.
[5] Joseph Van Ess, "Muʿtazilah" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones. Vol. 9. 2nd. Ed. (Detroit: Macmillian Reference USA, 2005), 6322.

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Muslim intellectuals and as a way for Muslims to "encounter change and external challenges in ways that can be construed as Islamic."[6] Martin and Woodward pursued this line of thought in *Defenders of Reason in Islam*, highlighting the work of Muslim intellectuals of the past generation, including Falzur Rahman and Hassan Hanafi, among others. Included in this work is a translation and commentary of Harun Nasution's defense of Mu'tazilism, a modern work by an Indonesian Muslim scholar and self-identified modern Mu'tazilite. Most modern Muslim intellectuals and theologians whose work can be identified with aspects of Mu'tazili thought do not identify themselves so clearly with the medieval school; this is the case with the other intellectuals Martin and Woodward engage in their text, and it is certainly the case with the current generation of Muslim intellectuals who can also be identified with strains of Mu'tazili thought. It is my contention that many prominent Muslim intellectuals living and working in Europe and America also share intellectual filiations with certain strains of classical Mu'tazili theology and ethics, even if they do not strictly identify themselves as Mu'tazilites as Nasution does. Specifically, I intend here to carry forward the work begun by Martin and Woodward in *Defenders of Reason* by placing the medieval Mu'tazila in conversation with the work of two very prominent Muslim intellectuals and ethicists, Tariq Ramadan and Khaled Abou El Fadl.

Undoubtedly, one could trace the intellectual filiations between the Mu'tazila and numerous other moderate or liberal Muslim intellectuals in the Western and the Muslim worlds. However, I have chosen to focus on Ramadan and Abou El Fadl for several, I believe, important reasons. First, both Ramadan and Abou El Fadl are well known among not only scholars but also among the non-specialized reader in both the Western and

[6] Martin, *Defenders of Reason*, 200.

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Muslim worlds. Because of the wide distribution of their works and their accessibility to the average reader, Ramadan and Abou El Fadl enjoy a wide readership and an influence consistent with being public intellectuals on the topics of Islam, modernity, and religious ethics. Importantly, both Ramadan and Abou El Fadl are Muslim intellectuals and ethicists living and working in a minority religious context. I am working from the fundamental premise that any theological work is inextricably linked to the cultural and historical context in which it emerges, and thus the work of Ramadan and Abou El Fadl should be seen as reflections of that minority context. Theology is not universal language about God, no matter how forcefully or often a particular religious community may make a claim of transcendence for its theology. Theology is always human speech about God, and as such is always informed by particular theological and historical traditions, written for particular times, places and interpretative communities. Thus it is always important to analyze theology with a concern for the situation in which it emerges. Interestingly, Mu‘tazili theology in its classical form was originally a product of a religiously and culturally diverse historical situation, and emerged in opposition to Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrain theologies, and it was in this cultural milieu, indeed in response to it, that Mu‘tazili theologians developed the first systematic creed for their emergent religion. If we formulate this as a dialogue between past and present, between medieval Mu‘tazilism and postmodern critics like El Fadl and Ramadan, with sensitivity to their shared historical situations, it will hopefully become clearer just where and how their particular theologies and world views overlap.

It has been argued that secular students of religious ethics have failed to provide adequate justification for interest in their subject matter which is “neither theological nor

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antiquarian."[7] While this may or may not be the case elsewhere, it poses a particularly important question and points to the significance of the study intended here. Just how and why, exactly, are the theological discourses on the ontological structure of acts, written by eighth and ninth century Muslims, important for someone who is neither a theologian nor a collector, interested only in gathering up old theories simply to place on a shelf and gather dust? It is my contention that in order to understand and explain the issues at play in debates concerning ethics in the modern age, it becomes of the first importance to understand how these debates were formulated and articulated in the pre-modern age, inasmuch as the classical tradition of Islamic ethics has determined the substance of the received morality of the modern Muslim world.[8] Because we cannot understand current debates in Islamic ethics without reference to similar debates in the past, religious ethics of an earlier period becomes philosophically interesting and worthy of study, even if none of these past positions are justified or justifiable in the present.

The point here is not to draw up a list of core Islamic values or beliefs in ethics and theology and establish their consistency through the centuries- such lists are always normative in character and thus analytically unhelpful. What different communities of Muslims both past and present do share however, is a tradition. It will be useful here to employ a clearly defined concept of what constitutes a tradition as articulated by two

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[7] Jeffery Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988), 124.

[8] And, I would add, the modern Western world. It is one of the great fallacies of the scholarly study of Islam and the West that the question has been posed in just this way- Islam and the West- rather than Islam in the West, or even better, Islam is the West. It is both historically and geographically true that Islam is indeed a part of the Western tradition, at least to the extent that the Greeks are. We would do well to remember here that Islam retained a firm presence in Europe, on the Iberian peninsula, from roughly 750 CE until 1492, and even after as crypto-Islam for perhaps two more centuries. Muslims are also an integral part of Western society today, as I hope to show by highlighting the work of such Western Muslims as Tariq Ramadan and Khaled Abou El Fadl. Greece, geographically anyway, (and I would argue culturally as well) is much more a part of the Near East and Asia than Europe, as that term has come to be defined. Any ideas we may retain about Greece and Greek culture being the birth of Western (Euro-American) culture owes more to Hegel's universal history than to historical reality.

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scholars who have thought deeply about just this issue: Alasdair MacIntyre and Talal Asad. In his epoch-making work of moral philosophy, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre begins his discussion of tradition by warning us against the "ideological uses to which the concept of tradition had been put by conservative political theorists" which often "follow Burke in contrasting tradition with reason."[9] This point becomes particularly important in understanding the history of Islamic religious discourse as the debates over such issues as the role of reason in attaining moral knowledge and the createdness of the Qur'an are often painted in the secondary literature as between 'rationalists' and traditionalists', as if the two sides are so clearly and neatly defined, and employing the categories without reference to their specifically Islamic context. In fact, both the rationalist Mu'tazila and the traditionalist Hanbaliya are traditional in the sense that their discourse is embedded in a context defined by the tradition which precedes their individual emergence (however rapidly those traditions may evolve in the modern age), and both are rational in the sense that their respective positions must be pragmatically functional, they must "make sense", in order for their theories to survive. (Thus there is an important sense here in which the more 'traditional' theories of the Hanbaliys and their intellectual heirs the Ash'ariya are the more 'rational' simply because they survived!) Avoiding the simplistic understanding of tradition as that which is opposed to reason allows for MacIntyre to proceed with a more nuanced and dynamic definition:

> A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those

[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 221.

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> traditions of which the individual's life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and the goods of a single life.[10]

MacIntyre further argues that when a tradition "is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument"[11] about the very nature of the tradition itself- where it is heading, what ends it pursues, and how it goes about pursuing those ends. Those discursive traditions we refer to as Islamic then at times are more successful and at times less successful at posing new questions or at responding to historical ruptures (such as that brought about by modernity). The important point however, and what allows for our understanding of Islam as a tradition, is a history of argument and debate over a group of sometimes shared fundamental doctrines and practices in a shared style of discourse.

Following MacIntyre, Talal Asad has further developed the concept of a tradition, and related it specifically to the study of Islam, as a 'discursive tradition'. For Asad, "an Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present."[12] If we follow Asad, a tradition primarily consists as a set of discourses usually mediated through institutions which attempt to instruct the community in the correct model of practice and elucidate its purpose with reference to that practice's history and future. Furthermore, the discursive tradition is always also linked to the present because it is in the particular present context that we are grounded and it is only through that present that we can approach the past and future of a practice or doctrine, even as the history of that practice or doctrine has in some way helped to shape the

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[10] Ibid, 222.
[11] Ibid
[12] Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown Univ. Press, 1986), 14.

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present. In addition, the discourse will always in part be determined by the network of power relations, of conflict and contestation, which functions to set the boundaries of that tradition- who can participate and who cannot. Following MacIntyre and Asad then, we can usefully employ the concept of tradition, not as that which is opposed to reason or as a monolithic set of beliefs all Muslim must share, but rather as discourse. A tradition is an ongoing, evolving and sometimes aggressive conversation through time that rests upon a shared set of assumptions, style and vocabulary, however much those assumptions may be the source of argument or how often they may change. This discourse will be often, albeit not exclusively, mediated through texts and institutions that communities will find authoritative, whatever they decide the criteria for that term may be.

First and foremost, such a view of tradition should be useful when applied to Islam in general as it provides a space between reducing Islam to a monolith on the one hand, and polymorphing it into a variety of local religious and cultural manifestations, or 'islams', which have little or nothing in common on the other. If Islam itself is best approached as a discursive tradition, then it might also be true that particular 'sub-traditions' within the general might also be analyzed in similar terms, as discursive traditions. Muhammad Zaman has proposed the shariʿa, classical Islamic historiography, and Islamic higher learning (the ʿulama) as varying facets of Islam in general which may be fruitfully analyzed as discursive traditions.[13] It will be one of my main contentions here that the history of Islamic theological ethics can just as fruitfully be analyzed as a discursive tradition, in as much as Islamic theology is marked by a series of debates which have remained relatively consistent over time and have been mediated through

[13] Muhammad Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), 6-7. The discussion of MacIntyre and Asad's concept of a tradition as presented here, particularly as it relates to Islamic studies, is particularly indebted to Zaman's work, especially 3-16.

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institutions and authoritative texts and expressed in a shared style and vocabulary. These debates have revolved, using MacIntyre's terminology, around the goods internal to that tradition (piety and knowledge of God, including its limits), and also the best means of achieving those ends (specifically here, the role of reason in accessing religious knowledge, including moral knowledge). As Zaman has pointed out, "the concept of tradition is helpful not only in studying the history of discursive practices but also in tracking and understanding the significance of the *ruptures* in that history."[14] This is to ask, if Islamic theology can be usefully viewed as a discursive tradition, and we see a persistent debate in that tradition over the role of reason in attaining moral knowledge, then how has a rupture such as modernity (or postmodernity) influenced the nature of the discourse?

The main line majoritarian position in Islamic ethics seems, on the surface, to have changed little since the triumph of the theological scene by the Ash'ariya in the eleventh century. By and large, the scope of Islamic religious ethics tends to be strictly determined by reference to canonical texts, the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. What these texts authorize are to be considered obligatory (*wājib*) or permissible (*ma'rūf*), and what these texts proscribe is to be considered prohibited (*mahzūr*). To place this in relation to the above discussion of the Euthryphro, the answer given by Islamic orthodoxy is: that which is good is so because God has decreed it as such. This amounts to a divine command theory of morality, or what George Hourani has termed "divine" or "theistic subjectivism".[15] It is this position which still represents the orthodox line of

[14] Ibid, 7. Italics in original.
[15] George Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbar* (Oxford: Claredon, 1971), 147 and elsewhere. This theistic subjectivism, sometimes also term ethical volunteerism, might be better termed theistic emotivism, insofar as orthodox Sunnitie theology posits a radical contingency for the universe

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Sunni Islam in the contemporary Muslim world. Historically, however, theistic subjectivism has been only one, albeit the most influential, ethical theory in Islamic theology.[16] The Mu‘tazila, in an attempt to preserve the Qur‘anic notions of God’s justice and unity, posited an objective theory of the good and upheld the intellect (*‘aql*) as a legitimate source of moral knowledge alongside, sometimes even prior to, the Muslim Revelational event. In the midst of a complex assortment of theological positions including the createdness of the Qur‘an (certainly the most well known Mu‘tazilite position), the Mu‘tazila held that all men are bound by a common rationality which allows for a kind of intuitive moral knowledge of what is right (or useful) and what is wrong (or forbidden). This common sense moral knowledge, because of its universal nature, is both prior to the Muslim Revelation and exists outside of it. Importantly, this allows for the possibility that those born before or outside of the Muslim Revelation to live their lives well in God’s eyes, if not yet Islamically. The purpose of Revelation (‘*sam*) then, according to Mu‘tazilite theology, is to confirm man’s moral common sense and to supplement it by teaching additional moral imperatives not available to the ‘aql such as ritual obligations and food restrictions. It is these additional moral rules, specific to the Muslim Revelation and impossible to know through the ʿaql alone (even though they must, by definition, be compatible with it) which provide for the unique character of Islamic ritual practice in a context of cultural and religious diversity.

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which is held together only by the seemingly arbitrary whim of the divine. Thus any moral statement is best seen as an expression of desire on the part of God; an expression such as ‘don’t do X’ is best described as a statement directed at the agent and only nominally related to the thing.

[16] Other theories of Islamic ethics which may be seen to constitute a tradition on ethical inquiry in and of themselves include Sufi discourses on purity and illumination and the Neoplatonic ethical theories of medieval Muslim philosophers. For a synoptic treatment of these theories, see Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

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Two important issues are usually raised at this point in any discussion of Muʻtazilite theology. First, the Muʻtazila seem at surface to offer a kind of proto-modernist or liberal theology. We have said that the Muʻtazila, in general, elevate reason and the intellect as an important source of religious and moral knowledge, and this obviously resonates well with modern liberalism's idea of an Universal Reason which provides, if not the only source of moral knowledge, at least the only type of moral knowledge acceptable for debate in the public sphere. This has led to the Muʻtazila being consistently labeled as the "rationalists" or the "free-thinkers" of the Islamic tradition, usually by Western trained Orientalists who do so for the purpose of furthering their own intellectual agendas. Secondly, given the elevation of the ʻaql in Muʻtazali discourse, it might be concluded that the Muʻtazila simultaneously render the Muslim Revelation redundant, which has the effect of devaluing the tradition as a whole. If one can derive all important religious and moral knowledge from the intellect alone, including the very existence of God, his oneness and a set of moral obligations for behaving well, then what place has revelation at all in the life of the community? It might seem that, for a revealed religion like Islam, restricting the purpose of revelation to outlining regulations for ritual purity and food restriction might seem a bit problematic. This is precisely one of the attacks leveled at the Muʻtazili conception of the ʻaql by their more piety-minded and traditionalist contemporaries, the Ashʻariya and the Hanbaliya, as they sought to uphold their own set of theological doctrines which included the uniqueness of the Muslim Revelational event and its important corollary, the uncreatedness of the Qurʻan.

In the next section of this essay, I intent to address both of the above mentioned issues through first offering a brief historical analysis intended to situate the Muʻtazila in

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their particular historical context, and secondly through a critical reading of several important Mu‘tazila sources, specifically those of the eleventh century Basran Mu‘tazili, Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar. I will argue that it is a fundamental misreading of Mu‘tazilite theology to apply the label “rationalist” to their discourse without analyzing closely what we mean by the term rationalist. Too often in discussion of Mu‘tazilite theology, the term ‘rationalism’ is meant to evoke images of a type of eighteenth-century Enlightenment rationalism, a sober and steadfast adherence to objective truth in the face of ossified religious dogma.[17] Such discussion reveals more about the concerns of Western Orientalists and their appropriation of Islamic intellectual history in the service of a modern, and thus innocuous, Islam. In addition, if we make the mistake of tossing about the term rationalist without clearly defining what we mean in using it, the unintended consequence is to imply that the Mu‘tazila’s opponents, the Hanbaliya and the Ash‘ariya, are by default irrational in their theological approach. Though the term irrational is rarely used in reference to what emerged as the mainline Sunni theological complex, the term most often used is traditionalist. Just as rationalism is meant to evoke Enlightenment liberalism, so traditionalism, I will argue, is most often meant to invoke blind adherence to religious dogma in the face of objective, rational argumentation. On the contrary however, the Hanbali and the Ashʿari theological systems are just as “rational” as the Mu‘azila in terms of logical coherence; it is just that the traditionalists start from a different set of fundamental presuppositions which privilege different foundational positions, and so end up in a different place. In the same vein, those who in the modern age advance more strident forms of traditionalism and are variously referred to as either

[17] See A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1995), 182.

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fundamentalists (usuliyun) or Islamists (islamiyun) are quite rational in the strictly lexical sense of the term. Conversely, many Muslim modernists are often labeled rationalists even when they don't necessarily adhere to the Enlightenment platform as it is articulated by Western thinkers of the Enlightenment tradition. What the preceding discussion highlights is the danger of analyzing the discourses of a tradition using concepts which emerge out of, and generate meaning from, a foreign tradition. If we intend to retain the terms 'rationalist' and 'traditionalist' as useful models in analyzing the discursive tradition of Islamic theological ethics, which I believe we should for a variety of reasons, it becomes of the first importance to divorce them from their initial context and explain precisely what they mean and how they are useful in an Islamic one. I will further argue through a critical reading of selected Mu'tazila sources that interpreting their elevation of the 'aql as a valid source of moral knowledge as simultaneously devaluing the priority of revelation is a fundamental misreading of their theology. Following the work of A. Kevin Reinhart, I will argue that, for the Mu'tazila, the ʿaql was not a secular faculty but a religious one, and thus the point of being a rationalist is "to be open to all forms of God's guidance, not just the positivist data of written Revelation."[18] Relying on the 'aql as a valid source of religious, including moral, knowledge has the effect of extending revelation, in the same way that the Muslim juridical tradition sought to extend the Qur'anic Revelation through various methods, but not necessarily devaluing it. Viewed in this way, the Mu'tazila are potentially no longer anathema to mainline Sunni orthodoxy, but can be seen to be piety minded in a way similar to their Hanbali opponents. Indeed, both were involved in the same project of extending revelation to cover all aspects of a

[18] Ibid. Though it should be noted that though Reinhart seems to intimate that , for the Mu'tazila, the intellect was a religiously faculty, he does not then argue that this position doesn't devalue the uniqueness of the Muslim Revelational event.

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lived moral existence. However, while the traditionalists accomplished this by extending scriptural revelation through analogy (*qiyas*) and consensus (*'ijma*), essentially insuring only that all moral reasoning is done in scriptural terms even if it is not authentic to the moral imperatives of the Qur'an, while the Mu'tazila opted for a pluralistic view of revelation in ways that make religious knowledge accessible in a variety of ways by the individual believer.

In sections four and five I will move to a detailed analysis of the intellectual filiations between the work of Tariq Ramadan and Khaled Abou El Fadl and medieval Mu'tazilism. Again, the importance of these two thinkers cannot be overestimated due to the novelty of their approach to the tradition of Islamic discourse and their widespread influence among both scholars and non-specialists. It will be seen that Ramadan and Abou El Fadl both appropriate certain elements of Mu'tazili thought in unique and specific ways dependant on their own agenda's particular point and purpose. Tariq Ramadan is concerned with speaking to the individual believer, more specifically individual Muslims living in the West, and as such he develops a moral psychology and epistemology which leaves room for inner promptings and private revelation. I will argue that this very concern places Ramadan in dialogue with the medieval Mu'tazila who themselves, many of which were noted ascetics, were concerned with carving out a space for sources of religious knowledge other than authoritative texts. Also like the Mu'tazila, Ramadan holds what may be termed an optimistic view of world, where the moral value of actions revel themselves to the attentive believer, even if the action cannot be specifically referenced in authoritative texts such as the Qur'an. I will argue that both Ramadan and the Mu'tazila make room within their theologies for a kind of intuitive

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moral knowledge which allows for knowledge of moral value, even to those outside of the Revelational event. It will also be my contention that a theology which gives priority to this kind of intuitive moral knowledge is not unconnected with a concern for coexistence in a context of religious diversity and religious minority.

Khaled Abou El Fadl's relationship to Mu'tazilism follows a different trajectory than Ramadan's, but the two are not unconnected. In the works to be surveyed here, Abou El Fadl is primarily concerned with issues of the religious authority of the text and the reader within the context of an interpretative community. Objecting to variants of Islamic extremism, Abou El Fadl argues repeatedly against a strict interpretation of the religious sources by self-imposed religious elites who advocate the subjugation of women and an opposition to all who are not Muslim (under their most restricted definition of that term) effectively co-opt the authority of the texts in favor of the authoritativeness of the reader. Abou El Fadl advocates the return of reason to Muslim theology in an effort to generate a more subtle hermeneutic strategy for reading canonical texts, a strategy which Abou El Fadl sees as more authentic to the moral worldview of the Qur'an. Like the Mu'tazila, for Abou El Fadl the 'aql is not purely a secular faculty, but a religious one, endowed by God, and as such represents a valid source of religious knowledge and a useful hermeneutic tool. Also like Ramadan and the Mu'tazila, Abou El Fadl's approach is generated in part as a response to a context of religious and cultural diversity.

It is important to note that both Ramadan and Abou El Fadl are writing with an eye to rejecting the variety and interpretations of an Islam which has been variously described as fundamentalist or puritan, and so it is perhaps important to end these introductory remarks with a word on this phenomenon which is so important to the

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context of the ground to be covered here, and so prominent in the public mind. Though fundamentalism will always be in the background of this study, this should be said at the outset and kept in mind throughout, it will rarely be brought in the foreground of the discussion. The reason for this is simple, but perhaps more important in the broad view than the more technical and specific topics that will follow. Others have argued, and I am inclined to agree, that the predominance of scholarly interest on Islam in the last few decades has been focused on fundamentalism and the loud voice it enjoys in the public sphere.[19] Indeed, one gets the sense that the study of Islam is in danger of being high-jacked by the study of fundamentalism, and one is left to wonder if the vast scholarly interest in the subject and the influence fundamentalists enjoy are not somehow related. While I do not wish to de-legitimize the study of more stringent forms of traditionalism in the academy (as if I even had that power), in a broad sense I do want to highlight some of the more measured voices of contemporary Islam, and those which are struggling with being religious in the modern age but also with being Islamic in Western societies. It is often true that the value of a person's message is inversely proportional to the volume with which it is expressed, and this is no more true than in the current public discourse about Islam. What initially attracted me to thinkers such as Ramadan and Abou El Fadl, and what I imagine adds to their quiet popularity in both the Muslim and Western worlds, is the passion and humanity with which they seek to resuscitate their tradition. Furthermore, we in the West could stand to learn from their intellectual promiscuity, those who raid the archives of the length and breadth of Muslim intellectual history, Greek philosophy, and the best of the European intellectual tradition. Ebrahim Moosa, another Muslim intellectual who just as easily could have been a topic for this study, has

[19] See Martin, *Defenders of Reason in Islam*, 2-21.

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illustrated this type of intellectual promiscuity in a study of Ghazali, and illustrated the advantages of such an approach. Of Ghazali, Moosa writes "he realized that all the answers to life's complex realities do not reside in a single culture, intellectual tradition, or historical epoch. For that reason, he ventured outside the mainline currents, raiding archives of knowledge in order to see how he could reinforce the positive aspects of the traditions that he had inherited."[20] Much the same could be said of Moosa himself, Ramadan and El Abou Fadl, or indeed the medieval Mu'tazila who "raided the archives" of their emergent tradition alongside the cultural heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia and the methods of Hellenistic philosophy. It bears us well to pay attention to those who, perhaps at times even ambitiously, seek to reinterpret and re-imagine their tradition using the best of that to which they have been exposed in an effort to resuscitate that tradition. Moosa argues that, to Ghazali, "the concept of resuscitation of tradition meant to discern and understand the ethical imperatives and practices as they cohere in tradition,"[21] and indeed, it this precisely this type attentiveness to ethical imperatives, rather than a strict legalism, which underlies much of what Ramadan and Abou El Fadl have written. It is clear that a similar project is underway among a growing number of Muslim intellectuals and, interesting enough, the medium for this resuscitation might be Western Muslims, many of whom use theology rather than more traditional forms of jurisprudence. Though it might yet be too early to tell, this does provide interesting avenues for further study.

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[20] Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005), 267.
[21] Ibid, 278.

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III. Muʻtazilism in the Classical Age of Islamic Thought

1. Muʻtazilism and the Development of *Kalam*

The general theological movement we can retrospectively refer to as Muʻtazilism emerged from, and in reaction to, a context of doctrinal diversity among the first generations of Muslims and was tempered into the first systematic Islamic theology in a cauldron of religious and cultural diversity. Theological conflicts within the quickly growing Muslim community arose from the very practical problems of how the Muslim ʿ*umma* was to define itself- who was a member of the community and who was not. The topics which occupied the early theologians (*mutakallimun*), and the Muʻtazila in particular, were wholly indigenous to the tradition itself and originated in the political disputes of the early Muslim community. The primary issue here emerges from the assassination of ʿUthman, the third caliph of the Muslim ʿumma, and it has to do with the question of grave sinners (*fasik*) and their status in the Muslim community. ʿUthman b. ʻAffan (r. 644-656) came to power as the third caliph of the Muslim community after the death of ʻUmar, and carried forward the policies of his predecessor but with significantly less political skill. ʻUthman's reign has been famously divided into six good years and six bad with the latter plagued by a perceived tendency on ʻUthman's part to nepotism and an unpopular recension of the Qurʻan, engendering discontent among the leaders of certain garrison towns, particularly in the regions surrounding Fustat and Kufah. The discontent culminated in 656 when, after as series of negotiations and counterplotting between ʻUthman and his opponents, the latter resorted to murder. The death of ʻUthman at the hands of his coreligionists was a scandal for the Muslim community, both directly

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after the event and for centuries to come. These events were the cause of the first *fitna* or civil war within the Muslim community; ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, Muhammad’s young cousin and a powerful leader with a staunch following, assumed leadership of the caliphate but not without a large measure of dissention among those who had supported ‘Uthman and wished to see his murders brought to justice. ‘Ali refused to punish the mutineers (indeed, all were uncertain whom exactly was behind ‘Uthman’s killing), sparking the fitna between those who supported ‘Ali and those who were of the powerful house of ‘Umayya, family to ‘Uthman, centered in the Syrian town of Damascus. The two parties agreed to arbitration in 661 after several years of intermittent warfare, and as a result ‘Ali, like ‘Uthman, was assassinated by a group of mutineers, but this time by a small and fanatically puritan sect of Muslims known as the Khawarij (seceders or rebels) who saw ‘Ali as having betrayed his authority as leader of the Muslim community by agreeing to arbitration with his opponents who, because of their intransigence and support of the grave sinner ‘Uthman, were not in fact Muslims at all but apostates and unbelievers.[22]

The vast importance of these series of events for the development of Muslim theology centers on the Kharidjites and their position on the status of grave sinners in the Muslim community. In the simplest terms, the Kharidjites held that the faith of any Muslim was not expressed simply by belief in the heart and the enunciation of the *shahada* from the lips; the faith of a Muslim must also be expressed in works. Thus the committing of certain grave sins was enough to warrant someone’s exclusion from the Muslim community. From the position of the Kharidjites, ‘Uthman was not a Muslim because of his sins and thus his killing was just, as was the battling his supporters by ‘Ali.

[22] For a detailed historical account of the first fitna, see Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), 187-231.

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When ʿAli agreed to arbitration with, from the Khawariji point of view, the apostates, he had betrayed the true Muslim community and become an unbeliever himself.

Thus the Kharidjites, because of their intransigence and fanaticism, brought into sharp relief for the first time in Islamicate intellectual history the question of the boundaries of the Muslim community. This was both a political question and a theological one. On the political level, the problem at hand was about the leadership of the Muslim community. The position of the Kharidjites was that it was to be a religious leader- the best qualified Muslim and the most pious. Thus the Kharidjites opposed the line of caliphs descending from ‘Uthman and Mu‘awiya into the Ummayyad dynasty who were viewed to have exhibited precious few of the characteristics incumbent upon Muslims. The majority of the ‘umma tended toward the view that the leader of the community was to be a political leader only, and a pious Muslim had a duty to support the caliph even if the political leadership did not necessarily exhibit the virtues of the Qur‘an and Prophet. This was to be done for the sake of the community of Muslims as a whole- a feeling reinforced by the experience of the first and second fitnas in the early years of the Islamic caliphate. On the theological level, the question was one of who was a Muslim and who was an infidel- who was to be saved and who damned. The sharp and conservative position of the Kharidjites on this issue forced the Muslim community to define its own position, one eventually articulated by those who became known as Muridjites or “postponers”. The early Muridjites articulated a position in sharp opposition to the Kharidjites; they saw a sharp distinction between faith and works, envisioning each as a whole entity unto itself. Thus external expression of belief manifested in obligatory acts were certainly praiseworthy and incumbent on any believing Muslim, but failure to

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perform good works was essentially irrelevant to a Muslim's faith and status as a member of the community. Theologically, this means that even a Muslim who commits grave sins is still to be considered a Muslim and that the judgment of a sinner is to be postponed until the last day when God would judge all men (hence the name given to those who held this particular theological position as 'postponers').[23] These debates were to continue for several centuries in intellectual circles in the major cities of the expanding Islamic empire, and in turn engendered debates on other important theological issues such as predestination, moral responsibility and the definition of faith.

The Kharidjites and their influence on the formative period of Muslim theology are important for us here for their position contains the "germ of the leading idea of the Qadarites, and the latter were the heralds of the Mu'tazilites."[24] Questions about the relation between faith and works and the boundaries of the Muslim community naturally lead to theological speculation on man's responsibility for his acts, both good and evil. As we have seen, the position of the Kharidjites on the relation of faith to works implies rather strongly that man is responsible for his behavior in this world and suffers punishment accordingly, whether punishment is meted out in this world or in the next. Consequently, a debate emerged about man and the authorship of his acts, and thus his

[23] It is important to note that the sects discussed in this paper, Kharidjites, Murdjites, Qadarites, etc, were not unified movements but rather loose theological positions held by individual scholars at different times and places. We have very little source material on these early theological movements; most of the information we have comes to us in the form of latter hereisographies by such writers as al-Shahrastani and Ibn Khaldun. Thus these sect names were often applied in retrospect in polemical fashion; the Murdjites for instance were not a monolithic movement with a clearly articulated systematic theology- we do not really get anything of this sort until the Mu'tazila, and only among them in the late 9th century CE. Indeed, most of these early theological positions became identified as heretical sects but only after an 'orthodox' Sunnite Islam is developed in opposition to the Mu'tazila with Ash'ari and Mataturdi. Thus any early mutakallimun who was seen as errant by later orthodoxy ran the risk of being identified as a Murdjites, Qadarite, etc. in the heresiographical literature. For attempts as problematizing these theological categories see for example Steven C. Judd, "Ghaylan al-Dimashqi: The Isolation of a Heretic in Islamic Historiography," *IJMES*, 31 (1999): 161-185; J. Meric Pessagno, "The Murjia, Imam and Abu Ubayd," *JAOS*, 95.3. (1975): 382-393.
[24] A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1932), 37.

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responsibility for those acts. In the Islamicate context, this debate centered on the question of *qadar*, which we can loosely render as will or capacity; specifically, who possesses qadar, man or God alone? The Qur‘an is frustratingly ambiguous on this issue, and proponents on both sides of the debate were able to convincingly quote Qur‘anic *suras* in support of their particular view. Suras such as 10:100, “No one can have faith except by God’s leave”[25] and 6:125 “If God intends to guide a man, he opens his bosom to Islam… But if he pleases to confound him, He makes his bosom small and narrow as though he were climbing up to the sky” were often quoted in support of a deterministic view- God guides whom he will and leads astray whom he will. But a question arose in the minds of certain pious Muslims concerned to preserve the image of a just God: how could God make a man an unbeliever and then punish him for his unbelief? Those who advocated for man’s free will had ample support from the Qur’an as well, as evidenced by such suras as 18:29, “Say: This is the truth from your Lord… Let him who will, believe in it, and him who will, deny it.” Those who argued on behalf of God’s qadar alone and the predestination of man’s fate came to be known as the ‘compulsionists’ (the Mujbira); their opponents, who championed free will and thus man’s ultimate moral responsibility for his actions, a position ultimately taken up and systematized a century later by the Mu‘tazila, came to be known ironically as Qadariya or Qadarites.

It was precisely these issues which were debated in scholarly circles and among the citied intelligentsia in the decades which saw the emergence of a group of ideas and theologians referred to as the Mu‘tazila. Indeed, it was over the issue of the status of grave sinners and its important political corollary, how to judge the successors to the

[25] All references to the Qur’an are taken from the translation by N. J. Dawood, Penguin Publishing Group, 1st edition published in 1956.

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Prophet, debated in a group of scholars surrounding the figure of al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), that we can trace the Mu‘tazila’s beginnings. Al-Hasan al-Basri was a noted Qadarite who famously argued the free will position in a letter to the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705). According to Muslim tradition, a group of young scholars surrounding al-Basri asked the shaykh whether a fasik was to be considered a believer or an unbeliever. If al-Hasan al-Basri eventually managed a response it has not survived; rather, tradition records that as the shaykh hesitated another scholar in the group, Wasil ibn ‘Ata’, declared that a fasik was neither an unbeliever nor a believer but rather in an intermediate position, a doctrine which was to become one of the five *usul*, or fundamentals, of Mu‘tazili theology. At this point Wasil is said to have left the scholarly discussion and the circle of al-Basri with several other students, including his friend ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubayd. The origin of the term “Mu‘tazila” is sometimes said to have emerged from the term “i‘tazala,” or “to withdraw,” as Wasil and his comrades apparently did.[26]

If the topics debated among the first generations of Muslim theologians emerged out of the historical and political circumstances of the early community, the character and style of the *kalam*, as well the theological ethics of the Mu‘tazila, emerged from a context of Islam’s minority in the rapidly expanding Abbasid caliphate. The religious diversity of the emerging Islamic empire played a vast role in engendering theological reflection among Muslim intellectuals. The early mutakallimun found themselves in dialogue with

[26] This story is generally maintained by Muslim tradition and often repeated by scholars of Muslim theology. It has been argued however that the “withdraw” the early Mu‘tazila made was from the world of politics and wealth, and not from the circle of al-Hasan al-Basri. The traditional account is regarded as myth by most scholars, though most other explanations for the name have been rejected as well. Recent successes have been made however in advancing claims that the name does indeed have its roots in an ascetic withdrawal. For a thorough assessment of the traditional accounts see W. M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1973), 209-217, for a persuasive and more recent argument in favor of the asceticism thesis, see Sarah Stroumsa, “The Beginnings of the Mu‘tazila, Reconsidered,” *JSAI* 13 (1990):229-241.

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Jews, Christians, Manicheans, Zoroastrians and Greek philosophers, many of whom held important political positions in the Umayyad caliphate.[27] Many of the newly converted Muslims shared in a more Hellenistic world view, and undoubtedly incorporated techniques of Hellenistic rational argumentation into polemics with the intelligentsia of other faiths. When one is arguing with a Christian or a Manichean, citing proof texts from the Qurʿan makes little sense; naturally, a reliance on Hellenistic modes of argumentation in debates such as this becomes increasingly important.[28] As a result, Muslim theology never lost its disputational character, and important issues which defined the community in opposition to other religions naturally came to the fore, issues such as the unity of God (*tawhid*) and the role of Muhammad as a prophet in the line of the Abrahamic traditions. On the popular level, we see this reflected in the *shahada*, the profession of which defined a Muslim precisely in opposition to members of the variety of other religious communities. Richard Bulliet has argued through an analysis of early Muslim biographical dictionaries that Iran did not become majority Muslim until almost the end of the ninth century, Iraq the tenth, and Syria and Egypt much later.[29] In contrast, Muʿtazilism began to emerge in the mid-eighth century when Muslims ruled over a population which was majority non-Muslim. In this minoritarian context, the Muʿtazila should be seen as a missionary movement in addition to a theological movement; indeed,

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[27] See van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, esp. 14-29; also Watt, *Formative Period*, 180-186.
[28] For a discussion of the type and extent of Hellenic, Stoic and Neoplatonic influences on the kalam, see Josef van Ess, "The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology" in Logic in Classical Islamic Culture, ed. G.E. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Publishers, 1970), 21-50. Here van Ess is concerned primarily with the similarities between the logical methods of the early mutakallimun and the Stoic logicians, and argues that while the two are not identical, the kalam was built upon Stoic logic.
[29] Richard Bulliet, *Conversion of Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979). Though Bulliet's methodology of relying on biographical dictionaries of prominent religious scholars, assuming that one entry equates to several thousand Muslims, is problematic, his conclusions have been heavily relied upon by scholars and his study remains the best on conversion rates in the early Islamic Near East.

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it is this minoritarian and missionary character of the Mu‘tazila which is reflected in their assessment of the ‘aql as a legitimate source of moral knowledge. Expressing the majority of the Qur’anic ethical material as something which adherents of other religious communities share by virtue of their common humanity was imperative for the missionary movement struggling with its own formation in a religiously plural environment. If we draw out the correlation between theological models and Muslim population density and influence even further, we can see that the tendency of the Mu‘tazila to ground ethics in the ‘aql was abandoned as Islam came into its ascendancy. For the generation of scholars such as al-Ghazali, who lived in a period of a triumphalist Islam where the uniqueness of the Muslim Revelational event was self-evident, ethics without Revelation came to be seen as unimaginable and eventually heretical. As Reinhart lucidly points out, “If morality without Revelation came to be inconceivable, it was only because Islamic morality after Revelation was so successful.”[30] This is to say that in a historical period where the success of Islam as a complete *weltanschauung* is evident among a vast majority of the population and the singularity of the Muslim Revelation in history is a given, the particularities of Mu‘tazili religious ethics were rendered obsolete. It is not that the Mu‘tazili were less ‘right’ in their interpretation of the relationship between ethics and Revelation than their successors; as argued above, theology is not the universal language of God but rather a particular language about God grounded in a specific historical and cultural context. If the context changes then, so should we expect theological formulations to change. It remains to be seen how Islamic theology and ethics appears in a contemporary minoritarian context, and if it has any

[30] Reinhart, 184. I am particularly indebted to Kevin Reinhart’s work on the correlation between Muslim population density and theological positions in the history of Islamic thought.

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filiations with the Mu‘tazila. Before we approach this question however, we must look closer at the some specifics of Mu‘tazili theological ethics.

2. The *‘Aql* and Moral Knowing

In a religiously plural environment, one of the primary problem the Mu‘tazili mutakallimun were forced to confront was the seemingly widespread agreement by different religious communities on the assessment of particular acts. It was obviously widely held that acts such as murder and theft were wrong and thus prohibited, and this is true whether one is a Muslim, Christian or Brahmin. How is one to account for this consensus while at the same time finding a place for the uniqueness of the Muslim Revelational event and its role in moral knowledge? The Mu‘tazili *madhab* approached this problem with two primary but interconnected positions: the nature of the ‘aql and the locus of an act’s assessment. We will see that both the early Baghdadi and the later Basran Mu‘tazili in general agreed on the nature of the ‘aql; in contrast, the Basran Mu‘tazili position on the locus of an act’s assessment is at variance with their predecessors and serves as a corrective to the Baghdadi Mu‘tazili’s rigid moral ontology. Furthermore, both positions were at odds with the traditionalist Hanbali and Ash‘ari theologians whose positions were to become the substance of Sunni orthodoxy.

Among the earliest Mu‘tazili religious doctors in the middle of the ninth century, particularly in the Baghdad Mu‘tazili Abu l-Hudhayl (d. 840), we find discussions of the ‘aql which both set their epistemology apart from their theological opponents and defined the form of later Mu‘tazili discussions.[31] For Abu l-Hudhayl and his school, the ‘aql was both reason and knowledge; that is, the ‘aql is defined as both the capacity and process

[31] Ibid, 139.

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for knowing as well as the body of knowledge once acquired. Furthermore, the ‘aql as reason or rationality is lodged in man by God. Thus reason is not a purely human faculty; it exists as a capacity endowed by God and it works to build a body of knowledge in the knower by virtue of perception in the knower. The ‘aql for the classical Mu‘tazila then was “both the capacity for acquired knowledge, and the innate or acquired possession of certain obvious and indisputable facts.”[32] Some of these obvious and indisputable facts were of a moral nature, an argument which receives its most sophisticated systemization in the work of the late Basran Mu‘tazili doctor Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1024). ‘Abd al-Jabbar, building on the work of earlier theologians such as al-Hudhayl, held that knowledge was of two types, immediate and acquired. Immediate (*daruri*) knowledge is further divided into immediate knowledge gained through perception (*idrak*) and immediate knowledge gained through rational intuition which gives knowledge of general truths.[33] These general truths arise out of experience and are intuitive; though perception always precedes rational intuition, it is not constitutive of rational intuition. For ‘Abd al-Jabbar, rational immediate knowledge is indeed intuitive in the strictest sense and therefore does not require proofs. It is self-evident knowledge available to every rational person by virtue of God’s lodgment of the ‘aql as a poised and sensitive capacity in every human being. It is innate possession of ‘certain obvious and indisputable facts,’ and in the moral sphere these facts include the knowledge that wrongdoing is evil and that to will evil is evil. Al-Jabbar makes the immediate and rational nature of these assessments clear in his theological summa *al-Mughnī fī Abwāb al-Tawhīd wa’l-‘Adl*:

> And we only say about these two [lying and wrongdoing are evil] and similar pieces on knowledge that they are things that occur originally (*ibtidā’an*) in

[32] Ibid.
[33] Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 20-21.

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> rational persons; not that they exist originally before knowledge of perceptibles, but that preceding knowledge is not a way to them, as we have shown with respect to perception and other things… this knowledge is not dependent on perception, even though perception must precede it in a special sense.[34]

As many scholars of Mu'tazili theological ethics have noted, the central characteristic of this intuitive ethical knowledge is that it is self-validating and needs no external support, including that which comes from Revelation. As we have said, a position such as this is important in a context of religious diversity; for at least some of the Mu'tazila, religious diversity did not necessitate moral diversity. Indeed, it was the facts of moral agreement among different confessional communities which in part prompted the Mu'tazila along this line of ethical inquiry.

For the discursive tradition stretching from al-Hudhayl to al-Jabbar, it was this innate capacity for rational knowledge which brings man to a state of moral obligation. According to al-Hudhayl, one progresses from an innate moral knowledge lodged in all humans by virtue of their humanity to stages of self awareness and moral duty.[35] While some theologians sought to define these stages legally in terms of age and maturity, al-Hudhayl defined the progression to moral responsibility in terms of the 'aql, from innate moral knowledge to an affective self-knowledge through perception and experience. It seems that for al-Hudhayl, self-knowledge necessarily leads to knowledge of the oneness (*tawhid*) and justice (*'adl*) of God- the two major tenets of the Mu'tazili five fundamentals. Further, this knowledge of God's characteristics leads one to draw firm conclusions about what God wants from us, namely to live a moral life. In this scheme, moral knowledge, while interconnected with knowledge of God's characteristics,

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[34] Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *al-Mughnī* (XII. 66), quoted in Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 22. See also Idem, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 98-117.
[35] Reinhart, 140.

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ultimately does not derive from revelation but rather from the innate capacity for moral knowing which resides in all rational beings. It follows then that one can please God through one's moral performance even if one is outside the bounds of the Muslim Revelational event, be it in a temporal, geographic or merely cultural sense.

We see al-Hudhayl's reliance on the 'aql as the central pillar in man's relationship with God reflected almost two centuries later by 'Abd al-Jabbar. Al-Jabbar, like al-Hudhayl, held that all humans were bound by a common rationality and that this innate capacity was the essential means of accessing knowledge of God. In his *Kitab al-Usul al-khamsa*, or The Book of the Five Fundamentals, al-Jabbar set out in the traditional 'if asked, then say to him' style of classical kalam literature the primary principles of the Mu'tazili madhab. Kalam as a discursive tradition emerged from a culture of openness and debate among members of different confessional communities as well as among Muslim scholars of different *madhabs*. This was done both as a form of scholarship and as entertainment; many of these discussions were hosted by the city's cultural and financial elite, and the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833) was especially noted for his interest in theological subtleties. 'Abd al-Jabbar opens his discourse on the five fundamentals of his madhab with a short synopsis of first principles in the knowledge of God. I will quote a number of short passages in full because of the importance they bear on our subject matter and as they serve as a nice sample of the unique style of medieval Islamic kalam literature.

> If it is asked: What is the first duty that God imposes on you? Say to him: Speculative reasoning (*al-nazzar*) which leads to knowledge of God, because he is not known intuitively (*darurtan*) nor by the senses (*bi l-mushahada*). Thus, He must be known by reflection and speculation…

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> Then if it is asked: Why did speculative reasoning become the first of the duties? Say to him: Because the rest of the stipulates of revelation concerning what we should say and do are no good until after there is knowledge of God. Do you see that it is no good for us to pray without knowing to whom we are to pray?...
>
> Then if it is asked: If reasoning speculatively on the knowledge of God is incumbent then on what do you speculate? Say to him: On evidentiary proofs.
>
> Then if it is asked: What are the proofs? Say to him: There are four: rational argument (*hujjat al-'aql*), scripture (*al-kitab*), the example [of the Prophet] (Sunna), and the consensus [of the community] (*ijma'*). Knowledge of God can only be gained by speculating with rational argument, because if we do not [first] know that He is truthful we will not know the authenticity of the Book, the Sunna and the communal consensus.
>
> Then if it is asked: What is the proof by which speculative reason leads to the knowledge of God? Say to him: My own being (or "self" *nafsi*) and what I observe about physical bodies.[36]

The Qadi goes on to explain how self-knowledge can be evidence of God before preceding to an explication of the five fundamentals of Mu'tazili theology, but the point is hopefully clear. By and large, the Mu'tazila as a school of theology held that the 'aql was the primary factor in attaining both knowledge of God and the moral life. In their view God created humankind as both perceivers and knowers, but with these capacities comes the correlative responsibility to inquire rationally into the nature and characteristics of God, including drawing conclusions about the moral life.

In the above Mu'tazili theory of the 'aql, it is clear that moral knowledge is available without Revelation by virtue of a common rationality, and this as true of al-Hudhayl and it is for al-Jabbar. However, if we cannot locate the goodness or detestability of an act in the simple fact of God's explicit permissions and prohibitions as disclosed in scriptural Revelation, then where are we to identify the locus of an act's

[36] Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Kitab al-Usul al-khamsa*, quoted in Martin, *Defenders of Reason*, 90-91. All brackets and translations of key terms appear in Martin.

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assessment? On this question the later Basran Mu‘tazila disagreed with their Baghdadi predecessors with the former’s own position being in part a reaction to the latter. On the metaphysical level, almost all the speculative thinkers in medieval Islam, rationalists and traditionalists, Permitters, Proscribers and No-Assessors, Mu‘tazilites and Hanbalites, ascribed to atomistic theories of reality wherein all things (and for the ethical theorists approached here an act is a thing) are composed of atoms of matter which constitute that thing’s substrate as well as its accidents.[37] The early Baghdadi Mu‘tazila such as Abu l-Hudhayl sought to center the locus of an acts’ moral assessment in the act’s ontological structure; that is, he and others posited a theory in which an acts ‘goodness’ was an accident inextricably linked to the substrate of the thing.[38] Metaphysically, for these thinkers the substrate or essence of a thing, a horse for example, is inseparable from its assessment as ‘white’. The substrate and the accident are not the same thing, but the two are inseparable ontologically; there is no horse to which the term white applies, rather this horse and its whiteness cannot exist without one another. The moral assessment of an act is then an accident of the thing itself in the same way whiteness is of the horse- this particular act of lying and its wrongness are inseparable ontologically.[39] We know the assessment of this particular act of lying by virtue of our innate moral knowledge, and this assessment holds true for all similar acts we can define as lying- they are all wrong because to be theft is also to be wrong, definitionally and in essence. Here we see the beginnings of the Mu‘tazili answer to the question of the Euthyphro: God commands a thing because it is good in its ontological structure. If the locus of an act’s assessment

[37] T. Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology From Muhammad to the Present* trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 115-18.
[38] Reinhart, 141.
[39] Ibid

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resides in the ontological structure of the thing and not in God's command, and God were to make something inherently evil obligatory, then God would will us to do evil, which itself is evil. God, however, cannot be evil but rather is just and good, always willing good for his creatures. Therefore, God commands and prohibits certain things because they are good or evil, not the other way around.

However, the structure of the early Baghdad Mu'tazili moral ontology leaves little room for the complexities of lived moral experience. It is in fact true that our moral lives are sometimes faced with dilemmas in which an act considered to be wrong might be right dependant on the particularities of its situation. According to al-Hudhayl, the acts of theft and lying and their wrongness are ontologically linked, and so it follows that any act of lying must be wrong, whether or not it is lying to protect a Prophet or some other such situation. It is precisely this line of argumentation which was pursued by the Mu'tazila's traditionalist opponents. Simplifying to the extreme, they argued that lived moral experience is too complex to reduce to simple categorical syllogisms such as 'All lying is proscribed and this act is lying, therefore this act is proscribed.' Even more devastating was the Ash'arite critique that what we imagine as the 'aql is merely self-interest and emotion, desire and appetite, masquerading as intellect; thus the 'aql cannot be relied upon to make moral assessments- there is no objective morality. The only reliable guide we have to such issues is the positivist data of Revelation, and so scripture becomes the sole moral authority.[40] At the same time that these traditionalist Ash'arite critiques were dismantling the moral ontology of the Baghdadi Mu'tazila, a different school of

[40] For an insightful account of three theologians' critiques of Mu'tazilite ethics, see S. A. Jackson, "The Alchemy of Domination? Some Ashartie Responses to Mutazilite Ethics," *IJMES*, 31.2 (1999).

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Mu‘tazila located in Basra, and finding its greatest expression in Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar, was offering their own version of a rationalist ethics.

The Basran Mu‘tazila recognized the flaws of the Baghdadi’s moral ontology just as the Ash‘arites had, and so formulated their own theory in a series of critiques against members of their own school. It would be a mistake then, as Reinhart has pointed out, to see medieval kalam as primarily a dispute between rationalist and traditionalists, between the Mu‘tazilites and the Hanbalites and Ash‘arites.[41] Undoubtedly, disputes did occur within particular schools and formative positions certainly developed out of such disputes. However, it would be equally a mistake to consider Basran moral theory without reference to their very real traditionalist opponents. One of the primary starting points for all the Mu‘tazilites was a desire to secure the Qur‘anic image of God as a just God; it is this concern which in large part drove the rigid moral ontology of the Baghdadis, and it was a concern which did not disappear with al-Hudhayl’s moral ontology. We should then see the Basrans as attempting to construct a workable moral theory given the theological dead ends and pitfalls of their contemporary intellectual landscape. ‘Abd al-Jabbar did just this by largely retaining the basics of the Baghdadi ontological identification of substrate and accidents but loosened their relationship to take into account the particularities of the situation in which the act attempting to be assessed actually occurs.

As we have said, the main problem with the Baghdadi moral theory was the rigidity which resulted from a system built on categorical statements about types of acts; it is a rare instance when an act can be said to be categorically good or detestable. It is not that al-Jabbar denied that some cases such as this might exist, but for the vast majority of

[41] Reinhart, 145.

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acts we have to consider the specifics of the act when as how it occurs to formulate an appropriate assessment.[42] The Basrans still held that an act and its valuation are ontologically linked, albeit in a more flexible way, but also moved the locus of assessment to moral perception. They achieved this through the use of the concept *wajhs* or "faces" to indicate aspects of the thing which emerge with the actual occurrence of the act in the real world.[43] Thus an act of theft has no moral assessment as an abstract intellectual game; it is only with the occurrence of the theft that we can judge its moral value, and only then by considering the faces or wajhs of the act, which might include the intension of the agent, which emerge and are perceived as it actually occurs. It might be the case that the act of theft in question has some good wajhs, perhaps by feeding a starving orphan, while it may have some detestable wajhs by virtue of it being a theft. The question then becomes one of calculating the goodness of the act against its detestability; in total it must be more good than detestable or vice versa as there can be only one appropriate assessment for an act. Reinhart gives a lucid analysis of al-Jabbar's use of the illusive wajh in his moral theory, arguing that the "most important point here is the ephemerality and hence the variability of the wajhs attached to a particular act. The wajh arises only when the act is produced, hence the act in the abstract cannot truly be assessed since its wajh of good or detestability cannot yet have manifested itself."[44] The subtlety with which 'Abd al-Jabbar develops the concept of the wajh into his moral theory effectively undercuts the critiques of the Ash'arites by loosening the ontological relationship between the act and its assessment; the relationship is preserved but in such a way that the moral complexity of lived existence is taken into account.

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[42] Hourani, *Reason and Tradition*, 103.
[43] Ibid, 103-4; Reinhart, 148.
[44] Reinhart, 149.

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But ‘Abd al-Jabbar did not just critique the moral ontology of the Baghdadis, he also implicitly answered the critiques the Ash‘arites leveled against the general Mu‘tazili assertion that that the ‘aql is capable of attaining moral knowledge unbiased by self-interest and emotion. It is in the formulation of al-Jabbar’s moral epistemology that the real ingenuity of his theological system is found. Rather than asserting dogmatically that the ‘aql is indeed capable of objective moral knowledge, al-Jabbar made human psychology the very center of his moral epistemology and thereby left room for emotional states such as anxiety, tranquility, and interior promptings to play a role in moral judgment; all of these emotional states are to be seen a sources of revelation alongside the Muslim Revelational event. In order to understand the moral psychology of the Basran’s ethical theory, we must again revisit their theory of knowledge and the ‘aql.

As we have said, for al-Jabbar the ‘aql was a type of poised common sense responsiveness to the world as well as the body of knowledge this responsiveness generates. But this knowledge (*‘ilm*) is affective in content as well.

> What our sheikhs say about knowledge it that it is a genus of belief. When the belief is related to the object as it is, and occurs in a way that necessitates repose of the mind (*sukūn an-nafs*), it is knowledge. When it is related to it in a way that confirms it but does not necessitate repose of the mind, it is neither knowledge nor ignorance.[45]

So knowledge then is both a correct apprehension of reality but also a subjective tranquility of the soul accompanying that apprehension. A belief, while it may be accurately reflect reality, is merely supposition (*zann*) until it becomes knowledge, in both its objective and subjective senses, by means of the ‘aql through inquiring (*nazar*). Since we are obligated live morally by virtue of the ‘aql, to know what is good and what

[45] Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Mughi* (XII. 25.); quoted in Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 17.

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detestable, inquiry or speculative reasoning (*al-nazar*) become the first duty of the moral agent[46]; this is why al-Jabbar precedes his discussion of the five fundamentals with a brief section on speculative reasoning as the first principle. On the moral plane, some of the things the ‘aql will apprehend innately are the relationship between an act’s detestability and its deserving blame.[47] For ‘Abd al-Jabbar, inquiry or speculative reasoning is initiated by a sign (*dalīl*) which moves us to inquire[48] (again, the ‘aql is not an objective Enlightenment reason but a common sense responsiveness to the world and its signs).

According to al-Jabbar, we may hold moral beliefs which, because they are not knowledge, do not induce a tranquility of the soul. These lacks of repose, and the fear or anxiety about ourselves which accompany them, are indicated by a sort of interior prompting, a private revelation from God, in the form of a warning by (*khatir*). ‘Abd al-Jabbar differed from his teachers on whether the warning which induces fear and thus correct moral discernment comes directly from God in the form of a private revelation or if is more of an interior prompting in the human soul, all the Basran Mu‘tazila held that it was a form of conviction and the “spring of moral life.”[49] The point here is that the Basrans held that the general Muslim Revelational event is unique in scope but not in kind from the numerous private revelations experienced by individuals both before and outside of the boundaries of the Muslim Revelation. Revelation does indeed divulge moral knowledge, but it is built on a preexisting framework of moral knowledge emerging form the ‘aql and speculative reasoning in tandem with private revelation or

[46] Reinhart, 156.
[47] Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 17.
[48] Reinhart, 156.
[49] Ibid, 157.

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interior promptings. These two sources of moral knowledge may at times divulge different prescriptions, such as a prohibition against eating pork, but the two sources can never be in conflict- if the ‘aql were capable it too would confirm the detestability of eating pork. But it is the placement of emotional states (fear, repose, tranquility of the soul) at the very center of ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s moral epistemology which circumvents the criticisms of later Ash‘arites such as Ghazali who charged that the ‘aql, as a human faculty, is not a reliable assessor of moral value. The result of Basran’s moral epistemology is a view of the ‘aql as a valid source of moral knowledge and an optimism concerning man’s ability to make moral discernments in a complex and changing world. It also results in an optimism about the divine, who has created a world which is in fact morally navigable for human beings. It is understandable then that the Mu‘tazila as a school, in general, held the Permitted view on the before revelation complex; indeed, their moral epistemology necessitates as view that man is able to discern the moral valuation of things in the absence of Revelation by virtue of his common rationality.[50]

Given the preceding discussion of Mu‘tazili theology and ethics, the question must be asked whether we can classify the theological debates between the Mu‘tazila and their opponents as one between “rationalists” and “traditionalists.” By and large, scholarship on medieval kalam has been unanimous in describing the debates presented here in just this way, and this can been seen in the classic studies of the period including those by Watt and Hourani, as well as the more recent analyses such as those offered by

[50] Ibid, 38-61. Here Reinhart approaches medieval kalam disputation by way of different answers to the “before revelation complex,” a set of questions used as a *camera obscura* to set the moral boundaries of the Muslim community. He makes the important point that the three positions on the question are not exclusively linked to particular madhabs, but this does seem to be the case for the Mu‘tazila more so than for the others. While it is true that Hanafis such as al-Jassās were Permitters, we know of no Mu‘tazili No-Assessors and we only have the possibility that there might have been very early Mu‘tazili Proscribers.

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Martin. I too have decided to use the terms rationalist and traditionalist as a convenient shorthand way to characterize the participants in this debate (as problematic as these terms might be), knowing full well that this typology has been subject to recent criticisms. In his preface to a translation and commentary of Ghazali's *Faysal al-Tafriqa*, Sherman Jackson has critiqued the rationalist/traditionalist approach, arguing that "it is primarily history that divides these two approaches and that Traditionalism is no more devoid of the use of reason than Rationalism is of a reliance on tradition."[51] The problem Jackson sees is that our classification of the opposing camps as rationalist or traditionalist owes more to how the camps defined each other in the heresiographical literature as both sought to make the claim of transcendence for their particular theological approach.[52] In short, both are rationalist and traditionalist in the sense that both rely on a tradition and on rational argumentation, both are "traditions of reason,"[53] but differ in their process of selecting elements of the past to incorporate and invest with authority. This is undoubtedly true, and if we take MacIntyre seriously we can see that tradition is not that which is opposed to reason and that no individual stands outside of an inherited tradition but participates in that tradition, even in the process of rejection.[54] This understanding certainly helps to qualify our use of the terms rationalism and traditionalism in reference to Muslim theology, but it does not preclude the functions reason (ʻaql) and tradition (the Qurʻan and Sunna) served in the moral epistemologies of the Muʻtazila and the Hanbaliya or Ashʻariya, respectively.

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[51] S. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's Faysal al-Tafriqa* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 19.
[52] Ibid, 26-27.
[53] Ibid, 17.
[54] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

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Kevin Reinhart has also offered a critique of the too-easy rationalist/traditionalist divide in the history of Muslim theology. In the debates surveyed here, he argues that "rationality or the ability of the ʻaql to discern good from detestable is, for the most part, not at issue here…. It is rather a debate between an optimistic view of Providence and a pessimistic one, and between an archaic position and an innovative one."[55] Again, this is an excellent point and should serve as a corrective to the too-easy application of the terms rationalist and traditionalist, but it does not, I think, obviate the utility of these categories of analysis altogether. In an important sense, these debates were, it seems to me, as much about the ability of the ʻaql to make moral assessments (as not all the camps agreed that the ʻaql could do this to the same degree), even if this debate is intimately connected, and constitutive of, debates about the continuity between the mundane and the divine or optimism and pessimism about God, or man, or the world, and their relation. It is, I think, appropriate to refer to the Muʻtazila as rationalists as long as we understand that (1) by rationalist we cannot mean either opposed to tradition or related to Enlightenment rationalism (as Hourani tends to), and (2) that for the Muʻtazila the ʻaql was a religious faculty working in tandem with God's signs to humankind, and finally that (3) for the Muʻtazila the point of being a rationalist was to be open to personal revelation and as such a personal communion with the divine. In Muʻtazili moral theory the ʻaql did indeed serve as a valid source of moral knowledge which is available to all men by virtue of their common rationality, and this moral knowledge is prior to the Muslim Revelational event (as was God I might add, both temporally and logically).

[55] Reinhart, 39. Though I disagree with Reinhart as to the extent to which these issues are indeed about rationality as a source of moral knowledge, it must be said that I am deeply indebted to his work here for informing my understanding of Muʻtazili theology and ethics.

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IV. Mu‘tazilism in the Contemporary Setting

Thus far in our discussion of Mu‘tazilism we have remained in the classical period and have surveyed the more abstract ontological and epistemological theories of rationalist Muslim scholars of the eighth through the eleventh centuries. We need not accept these theories in all their detail in order to understand their importance for contemporary Muslim thought, but we do need to understand that there is a history within the Islamic discursive tradition which is at variance with the type of traditionalist text-centered literalism asserted with new force in the twentieth century. These more strident and puritan forms of Islamic discourse should be seen as both a continuation of a persistent traditionalism in Islamic intellectual history as well as a new form of that traditionalism (a neo-traditionalism?)which defines Islam in relation to the West, and in reaction to modernity and Western colonialism. Regardless, my aim is not to enter the debate on the origins and character of Islamic fundamentalism- that ground has been well covered already. The purpose of these next two sections is to direct attention to contemporary Muslim intellectuals who engage in the discourse by criticizing those modern and exclusive forms of traditionalism. It will be my main contention that one of the ways these scholars seek to resuscitate the Islamic tradition and retrieve it from the grasp of the extremists is through the re-appropriation of Mu‘tazili theology and ethics. Neither of the two scholars to be surveyed here explicitly link themselves to Mu‘tazilism; it is rather their selected use of aspects of Mu‘tazili thought that places them in dialogue with the doctors and shaykhs of classical kalam. This dialogue of past and present is further informed by a similarity in the historical context of both the medieval Mu‘tazila and our

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postmodern critics. The Mu‘tazila formulated their theological positions in response to a situation of religious diversity; indeed, we have argued that one of the ways to see the Mu‘tazili theories on the ‘aql and ontology is precisely as a reaction to diversity. So it is with the postmodern intellectuals to be surveyed here, one in Europe and one in America, who write with an eye to fostering interreligious dialogue and articulating a vision of Islam in a minoritarian, and sometimes hostile, environment. In addition, both the Mu‘tazila and the postmoderns find themselves often on the defensive against their pure-traditionalist opponents who advocate an easy and unreflective piety and textual literalism; for such extremists intellectuals make easy targets. If we see such similarities in their historical and cultural circumstance, then we would expect to see corresponding similarities in their intellectual approach inasmuch as any theology or philosophy is its context raised to the level of thought. We begin picking up our narrative with the work of Tariq Ramadan, a European Muslim and intellectual who has contributed significantly to the debate on issues of Islam and modernity, Islamic revival and the challenges of living as a religious minority.

1. Tariq Ramadan and Muslim Moral Psychology

Tariq Ramadan has a prestigious pedigree in the history of twentieth century Islamic revivalist movements. Ramadan’s maternal grandfather, Hassan al-Banna, was a noted Egyptian activist and founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. His father, Sa‘id Ramadan, was also a prominent member of the organization and was exiled from Egypt by Gamal Abdul Nasser; the elder Ramadan settled in Switzerland where Tariq was born in 1962. Tariq Ramadan studied western philosophy and French literature at the master’s level and

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Arabic and Islamic Studies for his doctorate, but writing his dissertation on Friedrich Nietzsche. Ramadan also spent a year in Cairo at Al-Azhar where he engaged in an intensive study of Arabic and Islam. Ramadan has spent his academic career in a variety of universities in Europe, including appointments at Oxford's St. Anthony College, the College of Geneva and the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. In a now infamous and well documented episode, Ramadan was offered an appointment in early 2004 as a Professor of Islamic Studies in the Classics Department and as Henry R. Luce Professor of Religion, Conflict and Peace Building at the University of Notre Dame. Ramadan was forced to resign the position later that year as the U.S. State Department denied his visa under the U.S. Patriot Act, claiming that he had given financial support totaling $940 to two European charitable organizations, the Comité de Bienfaisance et de Secours aux Palestiniens and the Association de Secours Palestinien, which the U.S. Treasury Department has claimed are terrorist funding organizations. In recent years, Ramadan has become affiliated with several organization in and throughout Europe, including the Lokahi Foundation in London where he has worked with community groups and the British government in the aftermath of the London train bombings, and Erasmus University where he has constantly advocated reform among both European Muslim and European governments and has fostered forums for debate and dialogue between religious communities. The author of over a dozen books on Islamic theology and ethics, Islam and modernity, and minority Islam, Ramadan is well known and regarded among both academics and non-specialists, and among Muslims and non-Muslims throughout Europe, even if he is less well known by the American public.

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Ramadan's work as both an academic and public intellectual has been informed by his experience as both a Muslim and a European, and his facility in both the Islamic sciences and the Western philosophical tradition allows him to analyze both traditions in their own terms. He writes principally for an audience of Western Muslims (primarily second- and third-generation university educated youths) and Muslims who read Western languages (primarily English and French) in an effort to encourage the development of an authentic European Islam. Ramadan has consistently held that too often Islam as a religion and the cultural traditions which may pertain in Muslim countries are conflated, giving the impression that Islam is comprised primarily as a mode of dress or culture.[56] The thrust of Ramadan's work has been to encourage European Muslims to re-approach the foundational Muslim sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah and reinterpret them in light of their European context, thereby establishing a European Muslim identity which is based on the essential sources rather than a simple and unreflective opposition to the West.[57] According to Ramadan, a dynamic return to and mastery of the historical, theological, and judicial resources of the Islamic intellectual tradition will formulate a new and perpetual reinterpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah appropriate to lived context. While Ramadan rarely mentions Mu'tazilism directly and has never publicly identified himself with the medieval rationalist school, his work is interesting because in both the general thrust of his project and in more technical aspects of his theoretical work filiations to classical Mu'tazili thought are recognizable.

It has been argued in this paper that one of the things which distinguished the Mu'tazila was an engagement with the intelligentsia of other religious traditions in the

[56] T. Ramadan, *To Be A European Muslim* (Leicester, U.K.: The Islamic Foundation, 1999), 113.
[57] T. Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 4-5.

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form of theological disputation. This is evident in not only how the Mu‘tazila developed their theology, but also in the form and structure of classical kalam literature. The Mu‘tazila and their theologies were in part at response to a context of religious diversity and an effort towards coexistence among the confessional communities living under the stable and expanding ‘Abbasid caliphate. In a modern context of religious and cultural diversity, Ramadan has argued for “a coexistence which [for European Muslims] rejects both assimilation and isolation”[58] and the necessity of open dialogue among different religious groups in a plural society. Ramadan is interested in carving out a place in pluralist European societies for an authentic Islam, based on a deep understanding of the universal message of the Islamic sources and their applicability to contemporary problems. This means forging a new identity for European Muslims, an identity which is both European and Muslim; for Ramadan, these two terms are not mutually exclusive. To achieve this, argues Ramadan, Muslims must become reacquainted with not only the authoritative sources of Qur‘an and Sunnah, but also with the history and use of the Islamic sciences, such as law, theology and Sufism, which provide methodologies for applying Revelation to the contemporary situation of Muslims living in the West. “For Muslims living in Europe, it is of the greatest importance not only to know what these sciences actually are – and how they are interconnected – but, more deeply, to be able to re-read the Islamic Message with its original life force and acquire a global vision of the fields, studies and means at their disposal so that they can face their current situation.”[59] In this sense, Ramadan’s project is traditionalist as well as rationalist; he is seeking to balance the uniqueness of the Muslim Revelational event with the importance and utility

[58] Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim*, 234. Brackets my own.
[59] Ibid, 42.

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of using reason to interpret the sources and apply their ethical imperatives to lived moral experience.

In *To Be a European Muslim*, Ramadan takes up the project first of reintroducing Muslims to the fundamentals of the Islamic sources and sciences, and second to use the principles of jurisprudence to answer religious and legal questions about the presence of Muslims in Europe- these include questions about citizenship, participation, culture and coexistence. A prominent concern for Ramadan is establishing a framework and methodology for inquiry into the moral boundaries of acts and behaviors for Muslims living in Western culture- what is permissible and what is forbidden. As we have seen, this is a concern not unconnected with the point and purpose of Mu'tazili moral theory. His first crucial move is to separate the Islamic science of *usūl al-fiqh* from the interpretations given it by more strident forms of traditionalism: "Some Muslims, acting – or rather *reacting* – out of fear of Western permissive culture rather than in the light of a deep comprehension of Islamic science, present the Islam juridical frame as if it was in itself, or everything in it, *entirely immutable*, fixed once and for all, because it is from God or because our previous ʿulamāʾ have already formulated all that it has to be known and followed."[60] Ramadan sees the Islamic sciences not as a set of transcendent and binding rulings but rather as a dynamic method of engaging with the Islamic message and the contemporary context, simultaneously. The first principle of usul al-fiqh, says Ramadan, is that of permissibility: "The whole universe is the creation of God: in the absolute, this work is good *per se* and it is the manifestation of good for mankind."[61] This establishes an essential optimism concerning Providence and the world, as well as an

[60] Ibid, 55-56. Italics in original.
[61] Ibid, 64.

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optimism regarding mankind's capacity and responsibility. Ramadan elaborates this position by considering man's responsibility in relation to God and the purposefulness of his creation.

> Regarding our relations with the world and the priority of permission, it would appear clear that the first two states we have to recognize are those of *freedom* and *innocence vis-á-vis* a creation which has been placed at the service of mankind. The human being has to consider the world, of which he is a part, as a gift and all the elements as a kindness offered to him, a witnessing of his responsibility before the creator. What is prohibited is very small when compared to the large latitude of what is permitted.[62]

To admit of this kind of latitude in the revealed law also necessitates that man rely on the 'aql to determine the moral assessment of acts which fall outside of the bounds of those things prohibited by the Muslim Revelational event. Because, as Ramadan argues, "to be a genuine Believer does not mean to neglect our minds, that to seek God's proximity with our heart does not mean to forget intellectual elaboration. Through them [the early Muslim community], we learn that an intensive Faith does not mean a deficit of intelligence."[63]

Though Ramadan does not explicitly engage the medieval discursive tradition on the 'before revelation complex' in his section on the principle of permissibility, it is best to see his position as partaking in that tradition, and doing so in such a way that places him in direct dialogue with Mu'tazilite theology. As we have said, the emphasis Mu'tazili moral epistemology places on the 'aql as a faculty which can discern most assessments of moral value in the absence of the positivist data of Revelation forms the central pillar of a permissibility position on such acts. Ramadan's view on the essential goodness and usefulness of the world mirrors the medieval Permitted position, which Reinhart

[62] Ibid, 62-63.
[63] Ibid. Brackts my own.

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describes as arising from "trust and optimism" and being "more respectful of human intellectual capacity and assumes its harmony with a world graciously created for our use."[64] Ramadan goes further however in insisting that the limited scope of moral prescription laid down in revealed law serves a theological purpose as well. Also echoing the medieval rationalist Permitted position, Ramadan argues that the silence in the Qur'anic Revelation on a great many questions of moral import serves the purpose of an indication or sign to reflection in the 'aql: "The *silence* is, in fact, the specific part given to human analytic reason to stipulate inevitably diverse *Islamic rules*, through space and time, but ones that are still *Islamic*, i.e in complete accordance with the global ordinances to be found in the sources."[65] Here Ramadan stops short of making the radical objectivist claims for moral value as elaborated by the Baghdadi and Basran Mu'tazili, rather, he offers a sort of "rational traditionalism" tempered by religious sentiment, and he certainly does not share their interest in ontology, but the filiations are hopefully quite clear. Ramadan seems to intimate that the purpose of the Qur'anic Revelation is less to lay out specific guideline for ethical behavior, as the instances when it does do this are quite limited, than to provide a general frame of reference for moral reasoning, thus insuring that the 'aql is not left to roam free but instead is always bound in an active process with the Muslim Revelational event and the moral ethos of the scriptural tradition.

The theme of an Islamic frame of reference in a dynamic relationship to reason is articulated more fully in Tariq Ramadan's more recent work *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. Here Ramadan continues the project of his previous works by more fully elaborating on what he sees as the universal values inherent in Revelation, their

[64] Reinhart, 38.
[65] Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim*, 75.

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elucidation through the Islamic sciences in reference to contemporary realities, and their relevance to issues of identity and coexistence for European Muslims. Ramadan also begins to argue more forcefully for the role Western Muslims must play on the global stage for the resuscitation of the Islamic tradition. It is Western Muslims, because of their historical situation on the threshold of two traditions, two worlds, which have the freedom and responsibility to "go back to the beginning"[66] and play out the distinction between what Ramadan sees as the universality of the Islamic message (and therefore unchangeable), and cultural manifestations which are dependant on time and context (and subject to change). To this end, Ramadan's main concern is to provide the tools and framework for "the building of the Muslim personality in the West,"[67] and part and parcel to this project is the development of a moral psychology, and the pluralist view of revelation it implies, which can come to terms with the moral complexity of lived experience. It is in the moral psychology of this emergent Western Muslim personality that is the locus for the dynamic interplay between reason and Revelation (or revelation).

Central to Ramadan's moral psychology are the concepts of freedom, responsibility, and private revelation. What distinguishes humans from the rest of creation in Ramadan's analysis is intelligence and free will- the ability to choose; this of course parallels the Mu'tazilite position on free will, taken over from the Qadarites, in opposition to the traditionalist Hanbalite and Ash'arite predestinarians. Parallel to the freedom of the will is an original and natural faith which already and immediately has knowledge of *tawhid*, God's oneness.[68] An awareness or recognition of this innate knowledge of God's oneness is what makes humankind responsible. What defines the

[66] Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 9.
[67] Ibid, 7.
[68] Ibid, 12.

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human being then, theologically, for Ramadan, is responsibility. "The human being is, essentially, responsible; awareness of *tawhid* invites humanity to set out on the quest along the divine path (*sabil Allah*), to control, in the midst of the fluctuations of life, the contradictions within its being, its weaknesses, and its deficiencies."[69] Through human freedom and an innate religious knowledge, God calls all men to responsibility for their moral performance. For Ramadan, the locus of moral assessment for one's self, characteristics, and actions lies not in a strict ontological structure of the thing itself; unlike the Baghdadis but similar to the Basran Mu'tazila, an act must be examined *in situ* in order to understand it's moral quality. The determining factor in an act's moral assessment, given the situation in which is actually occurs, it the moral intention of the agent.

> In other words, the ethical quality of the elements of which we are constituted (*nafs*, heart, body, and so on), the faculties by which we are characterized (such as perception, intelligence, and imagination), and, of course, the actions we produce are determined only by the guidance our conscience gives them. This teaching reveals a perception of the human that is at once very demanding and very optimistic- demanding because the human conscience must acquire alone ("No one can bear another's burden") responsible control in a world where evil is neither an indelible mark on the being in the world (like original sin) nor *in itself* a constituent part of the being (like the body or the imagination). It is above all optimistic, for it requires us not to reject any part of our being, encouraging us in the confidence that the Only One will give us in every situation the means to meet this ethical challenge.[70]

Given that no element or action is in itself categorically good or detestable, that is to say that to know what a thing is definitionally in not to know *prima facie* its assessment morally, then in what manner is the human conscience to recognize moral value? In answer to this question, Ramadan posits two types of revelation made available

[69] Ibid, 14-15.
[70] Ibid, 115.

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to the human being by the Creator, one which is "spread out in space"[71] and is comprised of numerous signs perceptible to the human conscience, and one which "stands out in history at points in time"[72] and includes the line of prophetic revelation extending from Noah through Jesus and to Muhammad, the seal of the prophets. The second type of revelation which, because of its specific character, we may denote as Revelation, is transmitted through written texts and lays out a limited set of moral prescriptions designed to set the outer limits of morally acceptable behavior. The first type of revelation, private revelation or movement of the soul, occur within the individual and serve as a indication for the 'aql to inquiry and speculative thought. There is no opposition between faith, intrinsic to all human being, which is required to access these private movements of the soul and the 'aql, or reason, which provides a pre-existing framework for interpreting and implementing revelation.

> The quest for the Transcendent cannot be undertaken without the mind. There is absolutely no contradiction here between the realm of faith and the realm of reason. On the contrary, the spark of faith, born in the original testimony, needs intellect to confirm that testimony and to be capable of being faithful to the original covenant. The realm of faith necessarily calls on intellect, which, by accepting the two types of Revelation, allows faith to be confirmed, deepened, and rooted and to grow to fullness in the heart and human consciousness.[73]

In Ramadan's writing, the 'realm of faith' and private revelation are consistently linked to the realm of human emotion and movements of the heart. Indeed, Ramadan's prose seems to show at least some influence from the Sufi discursive tradition of purification and illumination; characteristic terms such as 'movement,' 'dynamism,' and phrases such as 'a return to the beginning,' play an important function in Ramadan's theoretical

[71] Ibid, 17.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

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framework. Regardless, it is apparent that Ramadan presents a moral psychology which emphasizes reason and speculative thought alongside revelation, both the positivist ethical data of scriptural Revelation and those private emotional states and movements of the heart which lead humankind into a union with the divine.

The theological ethics Ramadan presents is certainly not the pessimistic view of human nature as incapable of moral knowledge in the absence of the Muslim Revelation that is evident in Ash‘arite religious ethics. Admittedly, it is also not a mirror image of the complex and definition heavy moral epistemology of the Basrans such as Abu Hashim and ‘Abd al-Jabbar, but we can see similarities in the way their respective moral discourses progress. Ramadan’s emphasis on the intellect as a valid source of moral knowledge in the absence of scriptural proscription and his moral psychology which gives prime place to freedom, responsibility, emotion, and private revelation is best viewed in light of the history of Islamic ethical discourse as a tradition which is generally opposed by the type of strict traditionalism evidenced by the piety-minded *hadith* folk. Historically, the unifying link between the ethical rationalism of the medieval Mu‘tazila and “soft rationalism” of Tariq Ramadan is their similarity in context. Both are primarily responding to a situation of religious and cultural diversity, and so both are attempting to address the questions of communal identity and coexistence in a complex and changing pluralist society. In both, these questions take place within the ethical sphere and show a concern for recognizing the universality of moral principle while simultaneously securing the uniqueness of the Muslim Revelation as a frame of reference for moral reasoning. Though Ramadan’s approach to the sources and the Islamic sciences virulently rejects the approach taken by traditionalist extremists, interestingly, he also in some ways shares

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part of the more traditionalist agenda. By this I mean that Ramadan is certainly not an extremist, or “salafi literalism” as he himself refers to the trend, but nor is he a liberal reformist Muslim working primarily out of the Western philosophical tradition. He seeks to resuscitate the Islamic sciences as a textual tradition which must be reread in light of the current situation of Islam in the West. But over and above all, Ramadan sees it as necessary for Muslims to engage consistently in dialogue and debate, as well as to actively participate in the civic life of European societies through voting, public service, and community organizations, in a world increasingly influenced by materialism, pluralism, and modernity.

2. Khaled Abou El Fadl: Critiquing Religious Authoritarianism

We pick up our narrative by moving from the concern for European Muslims prevalent in the work of Tariq Ramadan by moving to the United States to investigate the thought Khaled Abou El Fadl, a prominent scholar and expert on the Islamic juridical tradition. Born in Kuwait in 1963, Abou El Fadl began his religious training at the age of six in his native Kuwait and then later in Egypt. Abou El Fadl came to intellectual maturity in the United States, studying for his B.A. at Yale University and his J.D. at the University of Pennsylvania before completing his doctorate in Islamic Studies at Princeton University. Abou El Fadl has been at on the faculty of the University of California at Los Angeles since finishing his degree and currently serves as the Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Professor of Law. In addition to his role as an academic, Abou El Fadl has become a public intellectual and speaker on the topics of Islamic law and politics, human rights, as well as an outspoken critic of Islamic extremism and the theologies of Wahhabism and Salafism.

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In recent years, Abou El Fadl has also served on the Board of Directors of Human Rights Watch, and as a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Author of several important texts on Islamic law, ethics, and aesthetic value, Abou El Fadl's work has a wide reach; he is well known as a public intellectual and commentator on the Muslim world and enjoys the reception of both specialists and non-specialists, Muslims and non-Muslims.

Abou El Fadl's roles as scholar and public intellectual have been deeply informed by both his understanding of the Islamic juridical tradition and the Western philosophical tradition. While his academic work largely revolves around the structure and rulings of Islamic law, his work on textual hermeneutics shows the influence of Western thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Umberto Eco, and Stanley Fish. Generally, Abou El Fadl writes for the benefit of a broader audience than does Tariq Ramadan, and this is reflected in the variety of Abou El Fadl's publications, both in style and content. Broadly speaking however, his audience primarily consists of Europeans and Americans, both Muslim and non-Muslim, particularly with his less scholarly works. Abou El Fadl's work has been primarily engaged in advocating a more moderate Islam, and one which is more authentic to the ethical imperatives of the Qur'an and the dynamism of the Islamic legal system over and against an interpretation which we have called strict traditionalism (to indicate its links within the historical Islamic discursive tradition), but which Abou El Fadl generally refers to simply as extremism or puritianism. Even more so than Ramadan, Abou El Fadl is relentlessly engaged in a sustained critique of modern Islamic traditionalism over their hermeneutically flat approach to sacred texts, their abandonment of the structure of Islamic law, and their treatment of women and non-Muslims. Abou El

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Fadl has argued that the lack of depth in contemporary Islaimc legal reasoning is due to the fact that "Islamic civilization has crumbled, and the traditional institutions that one sustained the juristic discourse have all but vanished. The moral foundations that once mapped out Islamic law and theology have disintegrated, leaving an unsettling vacuum."[74] According to Abou El Fadl, this is due primarily to the twin effects of Western colonialism and modernity, which largely replaced legal institutions in the Muslim world with Western styles of civil law and facilitate the emergence of highly centralized and often corrupt regimes.[75] As result, Muslim jurists became state salaried employees and their religious endowments were nationalized; with the institutions of the Muslim juridical structure controlled by the state, the '*ulama*, or community of religious scholars, lost their mediating influence. This vacuum, according to Abou El Fadl, has lead to "the disintegration of the traditional institutions of Islamic learning," and has meant "a descent into a condition of virtual anarchy in regard to the mechanisms of defining Islamic authenticity."[76] It is this anarchy that Abou El Fadl seeks to correct, particularly in his work on authority and authoritarianism within the framework of Islamic law.[77]

Unlike Tariq Ramadan, Khaled Abou El Fadl does make explicit reference to the medieval school of Mu'tazilism, even if he stops short of identifying himself as an

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[74] Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Islam and the Theology of Power," *Middle East Report* 221 (2001): 31. See also Idem, "The Place of Tolerance in Islam" in *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Ian Lague (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 6-7.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), 37.
[77] See especially: Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford, Oneworld Press, 2001). Here Abou El Fadl seeks to work from within the tradition of Islamic legal discourse to clarify Islamic notion of the authoritative. He seeks to emphasize the authoritativeness of the text while limiting the authority of the reader. After presenting his analysis he proceeds to give examples of his approach by reviewing cases studies of legal decisions concerning women. As elsewhere, Abou El Fadl's main concern is to criticize the opportunistic legal reasoning of those he sees as puritians or extremists.

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adherent of their theological positions. It is clear that Abou El Fadl sees the Mu'tazila as symbolic of a vibrant rationalism intrinsic to the Islamic intellectual tradition, even if those rationalist tendencies the Mu'tazila represent have been severely marginalized in the modern age. Speaking of the contradictions which beset the modern day puritan varieties of Islam, Abou El Fadl claims that, among the puritans, "there is great pride taken in the idea that Islam is the religion of reason and rationality but rationalistic schools, such as the Mu'tazilah, are condemned as a corruption of the real Islam. One the one hand, it is often asserted that Islam is the religion of human intuition (*fitrah*), but on the other, there is a pronounced suspicion and hostility towards intuitive notions of natural rights."[78] It seems that for Abou El Fadl, the rationalist tradition and their championing of a framework of intuitive moral knowledge intrinsic to all mankind has resonances with modern theories of natural and human rights, something which the modern puritan traditionalists he inveighs against cannot accept given their strictly limited frame of reference. Elsewhere in his critique of Islamic puritanism, Abou El Fadl explains their contrast with moderate Islam by highlighting the difference both see in the application of the shari'a and the role of the 'aql. He begins by stating the widely held position among all the jurisprudential schools that the purpose of the shari'a is to serve the best interests of human beings, but that "the puritans believe that the best interests of humanity are served by strict application of the law to human conduct and behavior" and so "using reason is an absolute anathema- rather, all Muslims need to do is find the law and apply it strictly and faithfully, and that is the end of the process."[79] On the contrary, moderates, continues Abou El Fadl, hold that God "created a wonder that is worthy of the

[78] Ibid, 175.
[79] Abou El Fadl, *Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, 157.

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highest honors- this wonder is the ability to reason (‘aql),” and asks rhetorically, “why did God grant us reason when in reality God has already resolved most issues in life for us?”.[80] This would imply a purposelessness on God’s part and would presumably be unacceptable, a position the medieval Mu‘tazila also shared.[81]

Although, as we have said, Abou El Fadl’s work is primarily done in the field of Islamic law and the history of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence, it is possible at times to determine precisely what role he envisions for the ‘aql in the attainment of moral knowledge. For Abou El Fadl, like Ramadan, the purview of the Muslim Revelational event is limited in its scope regarding the moral life of humankind; that is not to say that the Qur‘an does not contain moral prescriptions which Muslims are obliged to follow, but when the text does do this it few and relatively clear. Rather than laying a framework to guide the entire moral life, Revelation should be seen as providing a framework of reference- it is meant to provide a guide to moral reasoning in the form of ethical imperatives such as justice and mercy, not strictly determine the ethical quality of every potential act in the abstract. For Abou El Fadl, “God gave humanity the blessing of rationality and the ability to differentiate right and wrong.”[82] This implies a moral framework intuitively available to human beings in addition to a standard of moral value which is outside of Revelation.

> In the moderate conception, God is inherently and fundamentally moral. Puritans give God a whimsical quality- God is just, but justice is whatever God wills it to be. Similarly, God is merciful, but mercy is whatever God wills it to be. So, for instance, if God in the Final Day decides to damn all women or all Caucasians regardless of their actions, that would be just and good, simply because God willed it.[83]

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[80] Ibid.
[81] Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 127.
[82] Abou El Fadl, *Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, 129.
[83] Ibid

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Here Abou El Fadl is clearly alluding to the "divine subjectivism" thesis of the Hanbali and Ash'ari traditionalists, and rejecting it in favor of a view which elevates God's justice, even if it places limits on God's power. Abou El Fadl finishes by stating unequivocally that "God is moral and ethical, in the sense that God shares with human beings an objective standard for goodness, morality, and beauty."[84]

The most damaging critiques of the Ash'arites against Mu'tazilite ethics were, as we have seen, those which claimed that the 'aql was not a trustworthy source of moral knowledge precisely because it was lodged in a human knower and was thus subject to desire, self interest, and all the other psychological weakness of human beings. As a result, or so argued the Ash'arites, the only reliable source of moral knowledge was the positivist data of Revelation. It has been argued that the Ash'arites saw a threat of domination in Mu'tazilite ethics in that it "bound the community to an objectively knowable morality" and carried the insinuation that "those who failed to apprehend reality as such suffered from false consciousness, or deserved to be treated as such."[85] Once the Ash'arite view came to dominate however, the threat of the appetitive self being the determining factor in moral assessment was not dispensed with, it simply insured that any moral assessment must be couched in scriptural terms. Making Revelation the sole repository of moral knowledge also had the unintended effect of fostering the tendency to make the data of scriptural revelation infinitely expandable to every aspect of lived

[84] Ibid. Here Abou El Fadl goes even farther than the Mu'tazilites in claiming that aesthetic value has an objective standard as well. 'Abd al-Jabbar claims that moral value is distinct from aesthetic value in that aesthetic value is by its nature subjective. See Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism*, 53.
[85] Jackson, *The Alchemy of Domination*, 197.

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existence.[86] This problem has been dramatically exacerbated with the advent of modernity and the collapse of the legal institutions in the Muslim world which historically provided some limits on who was authorized to interpret, and thus expand, Revelation. This is, at heart, the problem Abou El Fadl sees with the methods of the puritans he so strongly decries, and this is also, perhaps, the source of both his work to analyze the concept of authority and the authoritarian in Islamic legal reasoning, and the source of his ethical rationalism. Whereas the rationalism of the Mu'tazila, perhaps, has its source in a situation of shared moral principles among different confessional communities, and the "rational traditionalism" of Tariq Ramadan, perhaps, shares the same source, the rationalism of Abou El Fadl, perhaps, emerges as a corrective to Ash'arite theistic subjectivism run amok in the modern age among a set of exclusive and extreme 'hadith-hurlers.' Abou El Fadl's variety of ethical rationalism then is offered as a corrective to the vacuum of religious authority, or perhaps the overabundance, which plagues the modern Muslim world.

> Of course, I am fully aware of the fact that suggesting that there could be a fundamental determination that is not based on God's text is controversial in the contemporary setting. But the reality is that our understanding of God and the moral values that follow from that understanding are not based on text alone. In fact, the Qur'an assumes the existence of a prior relationship between God and a believer that guides and navigates the interaction between text and the reader. That is why we find the Qur'an emphasizing that its meaning and power unfold only to those who have a genuine relationship with God. Furthermore, the Qur'an often refers to terms such as '*adl* (equitable, just), *ihsān* (beneficent), *ma'rūf* (a generally accepted good) without defining them as if the Qur'an assumes a pre-existing relationship to justice, equity, and morality- a relationship that precedes the text. In fact, the Qur'an assumes a pre-existing sense of morality in human beings to which it constantly appeals.[87]

[86] Ibid.
[87] Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 160.

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The overarching concern with subjective readings of the text and a rejection of both the intuitive moral framework which precedes Revelation and the relationship which God that that moral framework implies directs Abou El Fadl's critique of that strident form of traditionalism he calls puritanism. It is central to his project to understand the dynamic relationship between author, text and reader, and to foster a reading of the text in which "the text will morally enrich the reader, but only if the reader will morally enrich the text."[88] This concern necessitates an objective theory of moral value and the presence of a capacity for moral knowledge independent of Revelation and the text but is at the same time emerging from an intimate relationship between the believer and God. This is not the objective and disinterested Universal Reason of the Western Enlightenment tradition; it is an intellect grounded in faith and communion with the divine, and the answers it generates are, in Ramadan's sense, Islamic answers. For Abou El Fadl, this common moral knowledge, imbedded in faith and extended through reason, is not only more authentic to the text itself, but will also mitigate the claims of authoritativeness by the reader over and against the text.

Like Tariq Ramadan, the ethical discourse Khaled Abou El Fadl engages in though his project to articulate a moderate Islam and investigate the role of an interpretative community in relating to authoritative texts is best seen in light of the Mu'tazili discourse on the assessment of acts and the nature of the 'aql. Also like Ramadan, Abou El Fadl does not show the tendency to engage in the type of definition-heavy and abstract metaphysics which serve as hallmarks of the style of theological discourse popular in Muslim lands in the eighth through the tenth century. Nevertheless, it is perhaps best to see both Ramadan and Abou El Fadl as engaged in a discursive

[88] Abou El Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, 15.

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tradition along side the Mu‘tazila which finds itself in opposition to, and an alternative from, the type of traditionalism which hold Revelation to be the only valid source of moral knowledge. Abou El Fadl’s rationalist tendencies are certainly stronger than Ramadan, but this can in part be attributed to the differing trajectories of their particular projects. While Ramadan is speaking within a tradition of an emergent European Islam and attempting to formulate an identity, Abou El Fadl is speaking to a broader audience and often on political issues with relevance to the world at large. Both men have been brought into conflict with traditionalists because of their views, but perhaps more importantly because of the place they occupy on the threshold between to worlds and world views. In important ways, both Ramadan and Abou El Fadl have in their work assessed the importance of theological rationalism for their tradition in the face of strict literalism on the one hand and modern secularism on the other. Are these scholars engaged in the modern re-appropriation of Mu‘tazili rationalism which has been identified in the work of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Sayyid Ahmad Kahn in the past century and a half or Fazlur Rahman and Hassan Hanafi in the past several decades? Or is their engagement with strains of Mu‘tazili rationalism different somehow, embedded in new postmodern context?

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VI. Conclusions: Western Muslims and Mu‘tazilism

One of the primary objectives of this essay has been to show that debates in the intellectual history of a religious tradition themselves have histories. The conflict concerning various interpretations of Islam which burst with such force into the public sphere after the terrorist attacks on September the 11th, 2001 did not originate on that day, nor did they originate with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The two general theological interpretations I have been referring to as rationalism and traditionalism, following the work of Martin and Woodward, have been persistent trends in the history of Islamic thought, and until the last century they received their clearest articulations in the disputations among groups of Muslim theologians in the eighth through the tenth centuries. Though the theological school known as the Mu‘tazila was abandoned and labeled heretical by the majority of Muslims in the central lands of Islamdom by the turn of the eleventh century, I have endeavored to show that selected aspects of their thought continue to influence the theological positions of Muslims in the contemporary world. I have also endeavored to show that we attain the most nuanced understanding of contemporary debates in the Muslim world, indeed in any tradition, if we strive to relate these debates to their contemporary political and cultural context while also keeping an eye to their past. The pre-modern history of Islamic theological ethics is relevant and important to us today, even if the details of the positions advocated are neither justified nor justifiable in our context, if we wish to understand how traditions formulate and reformulate positions and approaches in each new historical setting. Even though neither of the scholars approached in the latter half of this essay identify themselves as

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Mu‘tazilites *per se*, I hope the intellectual filiations between their thought and that of their medieval predecessors have become clear. It is not that the Mu‘tazila serve directly as a doctrinal resource for the likes of Tariq Ramadan and Khaled Abou El Fadl, but rather that the Mu‘tazila represent for modern and postmodern Muslims an unapologetic rationalism which sought to elevate the role of the intellect as a source of moral knowledge, and therefore extend the scope of man’s relationship with the divine.

I have argued that part and parcel of Ramadan and Abou El Fadl’s project has been to re-introduce rationalism to contemporary Muslim theology and jurisprudence, albeit in different ways. Ramadan’s project to develop an authentic Muslim personality in the West involves the image of a moral psychology which privileges intuitive moral knowledge and private revelation reminiscent of the Basran Mu‘tazili’s moral epistemology. Abou El Fadl has advocated an ethical rationalism as a corrective to the rigid and legalistic ethics of modern traditionalists and their usurpation of the authority of the Qur‘an and its ethical imperatives in favor of their own. If it is important that the rationalism, as problematic and varied as that term might be, of Ramadan and Abou El Fadl has parallels with Mu‘tazilism, just as the traditionalism of the Hanbaliya and Ash‘ariya has parallels with modern and postmodern religious extremism, then it becomes equally important to distinguish how these context specific permutations of two fundamental religious orientations are different. That is to say, how is the rationalism of Ramadan and Abou El Fadl different from that of the Mu‘tazilites? And if we see glosses on Mu‘tazilism in modern Muslim reformists over the past century and a half,[89] then how are the projects of Ramadan and Abou El Fadl different from those, or are they engaged essentially the same project of reconciling Islam to modernity?

[89] See Martin, *Islamic Rationalism*, 119-136.

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Unfortunately, the full answers to these complex questions are beyond the scope of this essay, but perhaps a preliminary attempt at an answer can be offered here. The traditionalist response to ethical rationalism, in both its pre-modern and modern permutations, seeks to attack the rationalist emphasis on the intellect as capable of assessing the moral quality of acts. The absence of the ‘aql in both its intuitive and speculative senses renders scripture as the only reliable source of moral knowledge; the effect of rendering scriptural Revelation the only valid foundation for religious ethics has been, in the Islamic context, to assume that the limited positivist moral data of Revelation is infinitely extendable through a complex juristic structure. In classical Muslim jurisprudence a meticulously developed structure for determining the qualifications required to successfully utilize the text and the legal-interpretative methodologies in making ethical judgments mediated the authority any particular interpreter was to be given. In the modern age, however, the structure of the classical ‘ulama has been under increasing stress from the effects of Western colonialism and national liberation movements, thus producing a quandary of leadership in the religious and moral sphere and effectively destroying the mechanism for establishing boundaries on the types of ethico-legal rulings to be derived from Revelation. Given the effects of modernity, the primary result of restricting moral knowing to scripture has been simply to insure that all moral language, however subjective, to be couched in scriptural terms. Being intimately knowledgeable about both the scope and the importance of the history of Islamic theology and jurisprudence, one of the ways both Ramadan and Abou El Fadl have sought to resuscitate their tradition has been to encourage the growth of an indigenous

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European and American ‘ulama capable of dealing with the ethical issues faced by Muslims living in non-Islamic societies alongside secularism and liberalism.

Interestingly, it appears that rationalism as an authentic Islamic orientation is developing an increasing number of adherents in Europe and America, as evidenced through the critical work of scholars such as Ramadan and Abou El Fadl and by the popularity of their writings among Muslims in the West. We should stress again at this point that this is not a type of modern and Western Enlightenment rationalism which opposes faith to reason; Muslims trained in both the Western tradition and the Islamic sciences are becoming increasingly suspicious of the hegemonic discourse of modern, Western epistemologies which conflate truth and objectivity and claim to be self-legitimating while at the same time dismissing all other metanarratives as illegitimate.[90] Indeed, this is why I have elected to refer to the critical projects of Ramadan and Abou El Fadl as postmodern; this and because both are highly critical of both the modern European colonial project and of the influence of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment Orientalist philosophies on Islam. Rather, the rationalism which is emerging among Muslims in the West is an Islamic rationalism which is deeply bound to the Qur‘anic notions of *tawhid* and *‘adl* , and utilizes the ‘aql alongside the positivist data of written Revelation to articulate a vision for a constructive Islamic presence in the West. The growing number of Western Muslim public intellectuals seems to indicate a nascent Euro-American ‘ulama; Muslims scholars trained in the classical Islamic sciences and

[90] And not only Muslims or other ‘subalterns’ are recognizing this. It is becoming an increasing trend for Christian communities in the United States who feel marginalized by the hegemonic discourse of liberalism and, its allergy to religion’s role in the public sphere, to question the legitimacy of the Enlightenment narrative which underwrites liberalism. The classic work on the subject is MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, esp. 51-78; see also S. Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000); and J.K.A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

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Western humanistic disciplines who can provide a measure of authority which is unavailable to the traditional ‘ulama in the modern Muslim world, bound as they are to, often corrupt, regimes. The freedom Western constitutional democracy provides for Western Muslims to choose the legal madhab to which they belong, reminiscent of the Islamic world before the advent of modernity, may provide the avenue for a resurgence of the traditional class of religious scholars. Coupled with this is the desperate need for rational and well trained legal scholars in Europe and America who can provide answers to the unique questions which are bound to emerge as Muslims make their way in a new and sometimes foreign environment. To a certain extent, both Ramadan and Abou El Fadl are already providing this in their public works; Ramadan focuses both the books surveyed in this paper on the unique legal problems of living in the West, and Abou El Fadl is a well known authority on Islamic law and offers legal rulings on Islamic marriage and inheritance law through various outlets. Both Ramadan and Abou El Fadl lament the dearth of knowledge of the traditional science of *usul al-fiqh* among European and American Muslims, so it is only fitting that they represent the vanguard of the developing rationalist-inclined Euro-American ‘ulama.

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