



# Memories of Tomorrow: The Modern Relevance of the Mu‘tazilah in the Writings of Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954)

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This article discusses modern interpretations of Mu‘tazilism, a rationalist tradition of Islamic thought that flourished during the time of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258). Modern endeavours to rediscover and revive this tradition since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, often referred to as ‘Neo-Mu‘tazilism’, span geographical, cultural, and political divides. The focus of this article is on the contribution of the prominent Egyptian intellectual Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954) who is credited with rehabilitating Mu‘tazilism in his works on the intellectual history of Islamic civilization. Aiming to explore the intellectual efforts involved in ‘thinking tradition forward’, this article examines the ways in which Aḥmad Amīn envisaged the relevance of Mu‘tazilism for the present and future of Muslim societies and the strategies he employed to convey its modern relevance to his readers.

**Keywords** West Asia, futures, Islam, Mu‘tazilism, Neo-Mu‘tazilism, Aḥmad Amīn

## I. Introduction

In his essay “Colonizing the Future: The ‘Other’ Dimension of Futures Studies,” published in 1993, the influential British-Pakistani intellectual and prolific scholar of futures studies Ziauddin Sardar offered a critical evaluation of the then emergent discipline of futures studies from the perspective of non-Western ‘others.’ He concluded this essay with an ominous prediction that the discipline of futures studies was ‘set to become another academic and intellectual instrument for the colonization of the non-West. Orientalism colonized the history of non-Western cultures. Anthropology colonized the cultures of non-Western societies. Development colonized the present of the Third World. Futures studies is becoming the tool for

the colonization of the last frontier – the non-Western future itself’ (Sardar, 1993: 187).<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of this process of the ‘colonization of the non-Western future,’ according to Sardar, lie three factors. The first is forecasting, which despite using various sophisticated techniques, ‘simply ends up by projecting the (selected) past and the (often privileged) present onto a linear future.’ The second factor is globalization, which ‘promotes a dominant set of cultural practices and values, one vision of how life is to be lived, at the expense of all others.’ And finally, it is the way in which futures studies itself has been developing into an academic discipline (Sardar, 2003: 247–254). Having emerged in the West, with Western concerns dressed as universal concerns and Western experts both setting the agenda and suggesting the solutions on behalf of humanity, the non-Western perspectives have in the process been largely ignored (although occasionally appropriated by Western futurists). It appeared that non-Western nations had little stake in shaping the future.

In such a situation, the pressing task for the people of non-West, according to Sardar, is to ‘liberate the future’ by transforming futures studies into ‘the site of both real and symbolic struggle’ (Sardar, 2003: 254–255). Part of this struggle is to critique and resist the very forces that have been ‘colonizing the future.’ Another task, alongside raising future-consciousness among the people of non-West, is to draw on the emancipatory potential of non-Western traditions that have a power ‘to upset the limited vision and self-satisfied composure of futures forecasters’ (Sardar, 2003: 256). However, this is not simply a recovery of past traditions, but rather a complex process of orienting these traditions towards the future, wherein their recovery needs to be accompanied by the ‘imaginative capacity to

<sup>1</sup> For responses to Sardar’s essay, see Slaughter, 1993; Inayatullah, 1993; Goonatilake, 1993; Ravetz, 1993; and Nandy, 1993.

think traditions forward' (Sardar, 2003: 255).

The growing number of contributions advocating for inclusive futures and focusing on non-Western traditions, made by Sardar and other futurists (for an overview, see Davies, 1999) have firmly put the exploration of alternative futures on the map of futures studies. However, the recovery of the emancipatory potential of non-Western traditions is an ongoing task. The future of West Asia (and other Muslim-majority parts of Asia) has often been implicitly treated under the broader civilizational category of 'Islamic futures' thought of as involving the whole Muslim *ummah*. The prospects and challenges of Islamic futures have been the subject of various discussions (Inayatullah, 1998; Sardar, 1985, 2008, 2019; Sardar et al., 2019) and specific projects, such as the project Umran, which aimed to develop a conceptual and operational plan for the Muslim civilization of the future (Sardar, 1987: 122–137). On the other side, there is a rich tradition of thought in Muslim societies which, despite not being framed or named as futurist projects, nor based on futures studies methodologies, is nevertheless oriented towards the future. Indeed, as Sohail Inayatullah points out in responding to the argument about the scarcity of sophisticated visions of the future in non-Western traditions, 'the future occupies different spaces' therein. The non-Western traditions are 'filled with compelling alternatives to modernity, with alternative images of time, with different constructions of the ideal' (Inayatullah, 1993: 191), naturally rooted in their own history and culture, but this rich reservoir of alternatives has not yet been fully explored by scholars of futures studies.

The visions of alternative futures in 20<sup>th</sup>-century West Asia is the theme of the Special Issue on *Asian Transformations and Futures*, of which this article is a part. It calls attention to West Asian intellectuals of the past century who in the context of Western domination, colonialism, and the ongoing decolonization in the region, envisaged better futures for their

societies while drawing on their own historical and cultural traditions. Any discussion of the emancipatory potential of traditions inevitably brings to the fore a host of familiar concerns about the factors that determine the choice of a tradition and evaluation of its potential. It also prompts one to consider various roles that a tradition can fulfil with regard to the future. Likewise, from the perspective of an intellectual endeavour to ‘think tradition forward’, which is of interest to this article, it raises essential questions about the processes involved in actualising a past tradition and orienting it towards the future. How can this tradition be made relevant, and its relevance communicated to contemporary audience? Furthermore, under which circumstances would this ‘thought-forward’ tradition be able to become a living tradition that resonates with people across various divides, especially considering the rich diversity of the Muslim world?

Against the backdrop of the above questions, this article explores the future-oriented interpretations of the Mu‘tazilite tradition, a rationalist school of Islamic thought that flourished in West Asia at the time of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258). Modern endeavours to revive this tradition since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, often referred to as ‘Neo-Mu‘tazilism’, span geographical, cultural, and political divides. This article focuses on the interpretation of Mu‘tazilism by the prominent Egyptian intellectual Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954) who has been credited with the rehabilitation of this tradition after centuries of its marginalisation, and is described as ‘a populariser of Mu‘tazilism’ (Caspar, 1957).

A prominent scholar, prolific author, and witness to the times of Egypt’s liberal experiment, Aḥmad Amīn’s life and thought have been attracting scholarly attention since the 1950s (Cragg, 1955), resulting in several monographs (Mazyad, 1963; Shepard, 1982; Mizutani, 2014) as well as various article-length studies. Amīn’s views on Mu‘tazilism have been discussed within the framework of his overall views on Islam (Shepard, 1982: 170–189)

and also as part of the phenomenon of ‘Neo-Mu‘tazilism’ (Caspar, 1957; Detlev, 1969; Hildebrandt, 2001 and 2007a: 206–226; Demichelis, 2010). Yet this topic is far from being exhausted; for instance, even the question of whether Aḥmad Amīn considered himself as a ‘Neo-Mu‘tazilite,’ as Caspar mentions, referring to Amīn’s close friends who informed him about Amīn’s privately made declaration and intentions to revive Mu‘tazilism (Caspar, 1957: 200 f. 2), remains unresolved. This article approaches Aḥmad Amīn’s interpretation of Mu‘tazilism from the perspective of the intellectual efforts involved in ‘thinking traditions forward’, which the previous studies have not fully explored. Based on his well-known series on the intellectual history of Islamic civilization, the article examines how Amīn envisaged the relevance of the distant past of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, the peak of Mu‘tazilite influence, for the present situation and the future of Muslim societies. It also discusses how he conveyed this relevance to his readers, with an aim to highlight the frameworks and strategies that Amīn employed in his future-oriented reading of Mu‘tazilism.

Structurally, besides this introduction and the conclusion, the article includes two major parts. The first introduces the classical Mu‘tazilah and discusses the phenomenon of its modern revival, known as ‘Neo-Mu‘tazilism,’ as a context for Amīn’s intellectual endeavour. The second, longer section is devoted to his future-oriented reading of Mu‘tazilism and examines his presentation of its modern relevance to his contemporaries.

## II. Classical Mu‘tazilah and Neo-Mu‘tazilism

### 1. The Classical Mu‘tazilah: An Overview

Mu‘tazilism was an Islamic rationalist tradition that flourished in West

Asia during the ‘Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) and played a vital role in the development of Islam. The name ‘Mu‘tazilah’, meaning ‘those who have separated or withdrawn’, has been variously explained. It has been associated with the position of neutrality that a group called Mu‘tazilah adopted during the first Muslim civil war in 656–661, or to the ascetic tendencies of the founding figures of Mu‘tazilism who ‘have withdrawn from worldly affairs.’ It has also been explained by the story in which the founder of the Mu‘tazilite movement Wāṣil ibn ‘Atā’ (d. 749) disagreed with his teacher al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728) about the position of a Muslim who has committed a grave sin, and for this reason ‘separated himself’ from the circle of his teacher (Campanini, 2012; el-Omari, 2016). Likewise, various explanations have been suggested for the origins of the Mu‘tazilite movement and different periodization schemes offered for its five-hundred-year history (van Ess, 1987; Gimaret, 2012).

The Mu‘tazilah originated as a religious movement in the city of Basra in Iraq in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century at the time of the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750). With the subsequent shift of power and the foundation of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate with its centre in Iraq, Mu‘tazilite scholars found patrons among the ‘Abbasid caliphs and other dignitaries. Under this patronage, Mu‘tazilism flourished, the culmination of its influence usually seen in a controversial episode of the *mihnah* (‘the inquisition’) which the Caliph al-Ma‘mūn (r. 813–833) introduced in 833. Elevating the Mu‘tazilite doctrine of the created Qur‘ān to the status of an official dogma, it led to the persecution of the state officials and religious scholars who refused to accept this doctrine, and at the same time to resistance by the population of Baghdad. The Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–861) revoked the *mihnah* decree and drastically changed his religious policy, as the result of which Mu‘tazilite scholars lost their influence at the court and became prosecuted in turn, at least for openly propagating Mu‘tazilism.

Nevertheless, the school remained influential in the capital city of Baghdad where it later found patrons among the Būyid rulers, as well as in other parts of the Caliphate to where it had spread by that time. Mu'tazilism has also influenced other theological traditions including Shī'ism, both Twelver Shī'ism and Zaydism, and Judaism. The Mongol conquest of West Asia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century is usually considered as a watershed event after which the Mu'tazilite tradition disappeared (van Ess, 2005). In retrospect, the Mu'tazilah came to be seen as 'heretics' by the mainstream Sunni tradition.

The Mu'tazilah are known as rationalists of Islam, due to their emphasis on the importance of reason, to which they assign a crucial role as a source of religious knowledge. As is the case with many other intellectual traditions, Mu'tazilism was not homogenous, nor did it remain static over the course of its history. Indeed, in the early period it was characterized by a wide diversity of people and doctrines (Gimaret, 2012), and later developed into a more coherent system of doctrines around the two major schools of thought – known as the schools of Basra and Baghdad – with subsequent emergence of other trends from within them (Schmidtke, 2016). Mu'tazilite thinkers have made important intellectual contributions to theology, epistemology, natural philosophy, anthropology, ethics, polemics, and apologetics. Of their main doctrines, formulated as the five principles of theology (*al-uṣūl al-khamsab*) (Martin et al., 1997; Gimaret, 2012), the principles of *tawḥīd* (God's oneness) and *'adl* (God's justice) were fundamental and Mu'tazilites often referred to themselves as 'people of God's oneness and justice' (*ahl al-tawḥīd wa-l-'adl*). The implications of these two doctrines are also significant for the modern revival of this tradition, which is the focus of this article. For example, from the principle of God's oneness, as it was understood by the Mu'tazilah, followed their denial of anthropomorphism and the doctrine of the created Qur'ān; and the doctrine of God's justice, in Mu'tazilite interpretation, implied that human

beings were capable of distinguishing between good and evil by using their reason alone, independent of revelation, and that it was necessary for God to act justly in accordance with these abstract categories of good and evil. It also entailed the doctrine of human free will and responsibility for their own actions.

## 2. The Phenomenon of 'Neo-Mu'tazilism'

After centuries of suppression, Mu'tazilism was rediscovered at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the phenomenon of its revival often being referred to as 'Neo-Mu'tazilism' to distinguish it from the 'old' or 'classical Mu'tazilism'. The term 'Neo-Mu'tazilism' was introduced into Western scholarship around the same time by the Hungarian orientalist Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) (Goldziher, 2006: 200, 203) when referring to contemporaneous South Asian Islamic modernists such as Sayyid Amīr 'Alī (1849–1928). The term is not without its problems (for discussion, see Hildebrandt, 2007a: 13–89), especially since it has come to cover a wide variety of diverse phenomena. For instance, it has been applied to those who self-identify as Neo-Mu'tazilah, as does the contemporary Iranian thinker Abdulkarim Soroush (Soroush, 2008), but also to scholars such as the Egyptian modernist thinker Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) who avoided using it (Caspar, 1957: 158). Similarly, it has been applied to those who deeply engaged with the theological doctrines of the classical Mu'tazilah, as well as to those for whom this tradition had a more symbolic meaning. Moreover, the term has come to cover references to Mu'tazilite tradition that span geographical and cultural divides, from West Asia (Hildebrandt, 2007a) to South Asia (Detlev, 1969) and Southeast Asia (Martin et al., 1997: 119–196; Saleh, 2001: 196–294), and similarly from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until today.

The apparent tension between the systematic and thorough revival of



the Mu'tazilite theological doctrines, on the one hand, and the selective and symbolic uses of this tradition, on the other, has long been recognised. Already Goldziher has noted the ahistorical, symbolic uses of Mu'tazilism among the Neo-Mu'tazilites. 'The Indian-Islamic modernists,' he says, 'like to call themselves new Mu'tazilah. There, the goals and endeavours of the original Mu'tazilites – this liberal Islamic party whose continuation they represent – was roused to new life. It is in the nature of such movements that some of their own teachings are read into the system of the old school which, at that time, could not even think of it' (Goldziher, 2006: 200).

This tension led Thomas Hildebrandt, who authored a comprehensive work on the phenomenon of 'Neo-Mu'tazilism' in the Arab world (Hildebrandt, 2007a), to the following conclusion:

I did not find in the Arab world a single author or group of authors whom I felt could be defined without reservation as "Neo-Mu'tazilite". Instead, what I found was a large number of authors from the most diverse intellectual backgrounds, who had chosen, for very different reasons, to speak about the classical Mu'tazilite school in positive terms and to present it, or at least some of its ideas, as a solution to a whole range of modern problems (Hildebrandt, 2016: 495–496).

Even regarding the two Arab authors who identified themselves with the new Mu'tazilites, Hildebrandt doubts that they are 'worthy of the name, since these self-designations were accompanied by far too much rhetoric, wishful thinking and deviation from old Mu'tazilite ideas' (Hildebrandt, 2016: 496).

Leaving aside the controversial question of the appropriate uses of the term 'Neo-Mu'tazilites', the rich diversity of modern engagements with Mu'tazilism – Hildebrandt classified these in the Arab world into five categories, corresponding to the intellectual trends of liberal thought, historical materialism, political Islam, academic discourse on literary exegesis

of the Qur'ān, and ethical discourse (Hildebrandt, 2007a) – demonstrates the broad appeal and, in the eyes of its proponents, the great potential of this tradition to address various modern problems. Many of these modern engagements shared a common perception of Mu'tazilism as a symbol of rationality, freedom, and a better future, inspired by Mu'tazilite rationalism and their doctrines of free will and divine justice. At the same time, their particular visions of that better future inevitably shaped their ways of 'thinking this tradition forward.' An example of such a future-oriented reading of Mu'tazilism by the Egyptian intellectual Aḥmad Amīn is the focus of the next part of this article.

### III. The Modern Relevance of the Mu'tazilah in the Writings of Aḥmad Amīn

#### 1. The Life and Writings of Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954)

The phenomenon of 'Neo-Mu'tazilism,' as already mentioned, has been traced to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Mu'tazilism was rediscovered by Islamic modernists in countries under Western domination as an intellectual response to it. Modernist thinkers saw the reason for the Western ability to dominate as lying in its scientific knowledge, rationality, modern education, and constitutional government. To enable the adaptation of these achievements of Western modernity while preserving the Islamic tradition, they argued that Islam was compatible with modernity, provided it was properly understood and freed from the shackles of tradition, superstition, and blind imitation of the past authorities. In this context, the role of the Mu'tazilah as Islamic rationalists becomes significant in the efforts to reconcile Islam with modernity.

In Egypt the beginning of the revival of Mu'tazilism is usually associated with the famous modernist thinker Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905). However, it is Aḥmad Amīn (1886–1954) who has been credited with the rehabilitation of this marginalised tradition and described as 'a populariser of Mu'tazilism' (Caspar, 1957). Amīn was part of the Egyptian cohort of liberal intellectuals which included such eminent authors as Ṭahā Ḥusayn (1889–1973), Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898–1987), and 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād (1889–1964) (on Arabic liberal thought, see Hourani, 1991). In line with this intellectual orientation, he advocated social and moral reform and emphasised the importance of rationality, the spirit of enquiry, freedom, and responsibility for a better future for Islamic civilization. However, in contrast to his colleague Ṭahā Ḥusayn who considered Egypt as part of the Mediterranean civilization with its roots in the Pharaonic past, Amīn was interested in the Islamic past, an interest that has been explained by his background and education. Vatikiotis, for instance, characterises him, in comparison with his more famous colleagues, as 'more conservative, with far less formal education, and with limited travel experience outside Egypt'. However, he also praised Amīn's intellectual contribution as 'a more subtle attack upon tradition; yet one that was intellectually most imaginative, if not altogether successful' (Vatikiotis, 1991: 314).

Aḥmad Amīn grew up in a devout Muslim family, his father being a teacher at al-Azhar (for his biography, see Amīn, 1978; Mazyad, 1963: 5–33; and Shepard, 1982: 12–30), and received a traditional education having himself studied at al-Azhar, where on two occasions he also attended the lectures of Muḥammad 'Abduh. But his outlook gradually began to change from traditional to more liberal when he attended the newly established School for Islamic Judges, part of Muḥammad 'Abduh's proposed reform of the Islamic courts, listened to lectures by several European orientalisks at the newly founded National University, took lessons in English and French,

and interacted with friends and colleagues. The turning point came in 1926 when Amīn joined the Egyptian National University as a lecturer in Arabic literature. It was during his time at the University that he wrote his *magnum opus* on the intellectual history of Islamic civilization, and contributed numerous essays to literary reviews and magazines, some of which were later collected in the ten-volume *Fayḍ al-Khāṭir* (The Stream of Thought). While at the University he also held leadership appointments at several important cultural organizations, for example at the Cultural Bureau in the Ministry of Education and Cultural Department of the Arab League. Moreover, as a member of the University delegations he visited various Arab countries, as well as Turkey, and Europe.

Aḥmad Amīn left a rich scholarly output (Mazyad, 1963: 34–52; Mizutani, 2014: 11–17, 154–155; Shepard, 1982: 235–241). His most important contribution, however, is the series of books on the intellectual history of Islamic civilization. This work was conceived as part of a joint project together with Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-‘Abbādī that aimed at comprehensive research and publication on the development of Islamic civilization. It was planned that al-‘Abbādī would write about its historical development, Ḥusayn would cover literature, and Amīn would deal with its intellectual history (Amīn, 1978: 150). Only Amīn was able to complete his part of the project. The results were published as a series of three titles over a period of twenty-six years. These were *Fajr al-Islām* (The Dawn of Islam), published as one volume in 1928 and surveying the intellectual developments from the origins of Islam to the end of the Umayyad period; *Ḍuḥā al-Islām* (The Morning of Islam), published in three volumes in the period from 1933 to 1936, and devoted to the first hundred years of the ‘Abbasid rule; and *Zuḥr al-Islām* (The Noon of Islam), published in four volumes during 1945–1955 and covering further developments until the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, having changed his original plan to write *‘Aṣr al-Islām* (The Afternoon of Islam),

Amīn wrote a single volume work titled *Yawm al-Islām* (The Day of Islam), which was published in 1952. In it he discussed the overall development of Islam until modern times (Mazyad, 1963: 34–35).

Amīn's *magnum opus* has been praised as 'the first detailed and critical historical investigation made by a Muslim Arab into the formative processes of Islamic culture' (Mazyad, 1963: 36). In this series, especially in the third volume of *Dūḥā al-Islām* (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 21–207), he discusses the origins of the Mu'tazilah, their history, doctrines, and prominent personalities. This series is the basis for our discussion of his future-oriented interpretation of Mu'tazilism, supplemented with a few of his essays that also include references to the Mu'tazilah.

## 2. Memories of Tomorrow: Aḥmad Amīn's Interpretation of Mu'tazilism

Aḥmad Amīn's presentation of Mu'tazilism in his writings reveals two perspectives – that of a historian and that of a social critic and advocate for moral reform. As a historian, Aḥmad Amīn has brought the Mu'tazilah from the margins of the Islamic tradition towards its centre. As he himself acknowledges, 'I raised the prestige of the Mu'tazilah after the Sunnis had placed them in the lowest esteem' (Amīn, 1978: 173). At the same time, he emphasises that his is the work of a historian, not an apologist for any sect, and that he considers 'the triumph of truth to be better than the triumph of the sect' (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 355). His attitude towards the Mu'tazilah, one among the many traditions discussed in his writings, is a nuanced one. It varies with the subject of his discussion. For instance, he criticises them, directing this against the famous Qur'ān commentary of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), for making their doctrine the basis for the interpretation of the Qur'ān and not the other way around (Amīn, 1957–1961, IV: 55), but highly praises the Mu'tazilah for their effort in defending the nascent Islam against

its adversaries. This is also explained by the general 'shift in mood' in Amīn's writings regarding his views on speculative theology (*kalām*) and the Mu'tazilites as its founders. The mood, as Shepard observed, moves from emphasising its positive contribution in his earlier writings to a more neutral position and later to comments on the fruitlessness of speculation and its negative effect in dividing the community (Shepard, 1982: 173–174). Furthermore, Amīn could have also naturally revised some of his views on the Mu'tazilah over the course of his career, as he did regarding the origins of the term 'Mu'tazilah' (Actes, 1932: 224–225).

As a social critic and advocate for moral reform (Shepard, 1982: 31–55), Amīn's engagement with the Mu'tazilite tradition is also oriented towards the future. Presented in a work of history, it is a reminder of a diversity of 'spaces occupied by the future'. Although Amīn did not develop a comprehensive future-oriented project, as a solution to the challenges faced by Muslim societies at his time he seems to have envisaged a harmonious adaptation of the main achievements of Western modernity without compromising the identity of Islam, so that the foreign borrowings become 'like sugar dissolved in water, not like oil mixed with water' (Shepard, 1982: 137). In the context of this future orientation, in his exposition of the history of Mu'tazilism Amīn highlights the modern relevance of this tradition. How does he connect this tradition from the distant past to his contemporary situation? The various connections that he makes could be grouped, for convenience, into the three major frameworks of relevance, discussed in more detail below. The first is his perception of the age of Mu'tazilism as the 'golden age' of Islamic civilization and his explanation of the current crisis by the demise of the Mu'tazilah as one major factor. Second, Amīn posits a similarity between the challenges faced by the Islamic civilization of his time and those of the time of Mu'tazilism and highlights the success of the Mu'tazilah in overcoming them. This success in turn gives inspiration

and hope for solving the current situation. Finally, viewing the Mu'tazilah as 'social reformers' of their era, Amīn presents their ideas and actions, of which some, in his view, proved successful and others otherwise, as fine examples and fair warnings to the social reformers of his own time.

#### 1) Explaining the Current Crisis

Amīn saw one of the reasons for the current challenges faced by Muslim societies in the downfall (*inbiyār*) of the Mu'tazilah (Amīn, 1958–1962a, IV: 9–10). This view is linked to his perception of the first century of the 'Abbasid rule, from 750 to 850, the peak of Mu'tazilite influence, as the 'golden age' of Islamic civilization. Following the evolutionary perspective on history, Amīn envisages Islamic history as undergoing five stages of development comparable to such stages in human life. They are: 1) Childhood or the age of superstition, which in Amīn's scheme corresponds to pre-Islamic period (*Jābiliyyah*); 2) Adolescence or the age of doubt, which he places at the eve of Islam; 3) Young adulthood or the age of faith, which covers the early Islamic and Umayyad periods; 4) Maturity or the age of reason, which corresponds to the 'Abbasid period; and finally 5) Old age and senility, coming after the fall of the 'Abbasid Caliphate (Shepard, 1982: 136).

In this scheme, the early 'Abbasid rule, which was the time of the greatest influence of Mu'tazilism, is considered by Amīn as the 'age of reason'. Accordingly, the decline of the Mu'tazilah after the abolition of the *miḥnah* and the ensuing triumph of the traditionalists and their method,<sup>2</sup> marks the beginning of the decline of Islamic civilization. In an often-cited statement Amīn expresses his own position on this decline in the following words: 'In my view, the end of the Mu'tazilah was one of the greatest catastrophes for Muslims, which, [moreover], they inflicted upon themselves' (Amīn, 1961–1962,

<sup>2</sup> On the method of the traditionalists as contrasted with that of the Mu'tazilah, see below.

III: 207; Detlev, 1969: 335).

According to Amīn, the method of the Mu'tazilah, which first presupposed doubt (*al-shakk*), then experiment (*al-tajribah*) and last the verdict (*al-ḥukm*), resembles the method of the European intellectuals (Amīn, 1958–1962b, IX: 199). Naturally, after the downfall of the Mu'tazilah this method was no longer in use, but Amīn wonders 'what if?' and tries to imagine what might have happened if history had taken a different course:

Let us now imagine what would have happened had the Muslims continued following this Mu'tazilite method until today. I think that the tradition of doubt, experiment, and certainty (*al-yaqīn*) would have grown, flourished, and matured in the course of a thousand years that have passed after them, and we would have surpassed the Europeans in their boasting and bragging about doubt and experiment which they attribute to [Francis] Bacon, although he did not do more than [did] the school of the Mu'tazilah. (Amīn, 1958–1962b, IX: 200)

Eventually, this Mu'tazilite method would have led to inventions (*al-ikhtirā'*) and these inventions would have been made, according to Amīn, hundreds of years before Bacon and Descartes. The world would have reached the same stage then as it has now, and this achievement would have been accomplished through the agency of Muslims and not Westerners (Amīn, 1958–1962b, IX: 200).

This alternative, however, remains just a 'what if?' scenario, even though it is likely to raise the prestige of the Mu'tazilah and their method in the eyes of Amīn's readers. The contemporary state of Islamic civilization is likened to that of an old person. Yet this pessimistic view on the lost opportunity is not without a glimmer of hope. The 'old person', according to Amīn, will engender a child who will once again repeat the cycle of life (Shepard, 1982: 138).



## 2) The Model of Success

The crisis experienced by the ‘old person’ of the contemporary Islamic civilization, in Amīn’s view, is not unlike the crisis it had already experienced at the beginning of the ‘Abbasid rule, even though this parallelism does not fit neatly into his five-stage scheme of Islamic history. That early crisis is portrayed by Amīn as follows (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 205–207; Amīn, 1958b: 87). During the early ‘Abbasid times, when the Caliphs established themselves in Iraq, they became dependent on the local Persians, Jews and Christians who were influential in various important spheres such as medicine or translation. The freedom and power they enjoyed encouraged them to preach their respective religions – Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Manicheism. Some of them did so under the cover of Islam, while others propagated their doctrines openly and engaged in disputations on various questions. Neither Muslim jurists nor traditionalists could oppose them in these disputations, because they were relying on references to the Qur’ān or *ḥadīth* as their proofs. These proofs, however, were insufficient for their opponents who demanded rational arguments that would prove the existence of God and the prophethood of Muhammad and refute their doctrines. Since these opponents of Islam in framing their own arguments had already ‘armed themselves’ with Greek philosophy and logic, it was only possible to argue with them using their own methods. The Mu’tazilah responded to this great challenge. They confronted the opponents of Islam using their own methods, converting some of them and composing refutations of their beliefs. This constituted ‘the invaluable service’ (*khidmah lā tuqaddar*) that the Mu’tazilah offered to Islam, and ‘only God knows what evil would have fallen on the Muslims if the Mu’tazilites had not taken up this task at the time when the adversaries of Islam attacked with such a force’ (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 206–207; Shepard 1982: 175).

This early ‘Abbasid crisis resembles the modern challenges that contem-

porary Muslim societies were facing under Western domination and the pressure to modernise. The Mu'tazilah, who by adopting the methods of Greek philosophers had defended Islam from its adversaries and provided a strong rationalist foundation to Islam without compromising its Islamic identity, have demonstrated that it is possible to overcome such challenges, and have shown the way to do so. They set an example of the successful assimilation of foreign elements while at the same time safeguarding the identity of Islam – 'like sugar dissolved in water'.

However, as if anticipating the sceptical reader who might disagree with this optimistic vision and argue that it is precisely due to these foreign adaptations that the Mu'tazilite tradition itself lost its truly Islamic character, Amīn also asserts that Mu'tazilism is an integral part of Islam. The Mu'tazilah are portrayed by him as sincere Muslims, and to demonstrate that speculative theology (*kalām*), founded by the Mu'tazilah, is a truly Islamic discipline, Amīn contrasts them this time not with the traditionalists but with the Islamic philosophers, a more favourable scale of comparison for the Mu'tazilah.

Both the Mu'tazilite theologians and the Islamic philosophers were influenced by Greek thought, but there is a crucial difference between them. The theologians, says Amīn, believe in the tenets of faith first, and then adopt rational arguments in order to prove these tenets rationally. Philosophers, on the contrary, start with the investigation of various questions based on pure rational argumentation and follow the result of this investigation regardless of where it leads them. In this process, a theologian acts as a 'sincerer advocate' who firmly believes in the truth of the cause and takes up its defence, adducing the arguments and evidence to prove it. In contrast, a philosopher is like a 'just judge' who does not form an opinion until he has listened to the arguments for and against the cause and has evaluated them without prejudice. Only then does he form

his opinion and deliver his verdict (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 18; Detlev, 1969: 329–331).

Amīn's further evidence for the Islamic character of speculative theology vis-à-vis Islamic philosophy comes from the origins of both disciplines. Theology, he says, was formed gradually and in response to various controversies that were emerging in the early Muslim community, similar to other Islamic disciplines like jurisprudence, grammar, or rhetoric. In contrast, philosophy was developed by the Greeks and then 'transferred' in its complete or almost complete form to Islamic philosophers who began to study it, comment on it, offer some of their own views and reconcile some of its problems with the tenets of Islam (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 200). For this reason, in Amīn's view, theology is an authentic Islamic discipline, even if it includes some elements of Greek philosophy, whereas the philosophy of thinkers like al-Kindī, al-Farābī or Ibn Sīnā can only be called 'Islamic philosophy' in a figurative sense (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 18; Detlev, 1969: 329–331).

### 3) Lessons for Social Reformers

To highlight another aspect of the modern relevance of Mu'tazilism, Amīn presents the Mu'tazilah as the 'social reformers' of their time who promoted the spirit of enquiry and belief in free will and human responsibility (against predestination) among the population and combated ignorance and superstition. The successes and failures that, according to him, they experienced when undertaking this task, could offer valuable lessons to their contemporary counterparts. It is noteworthy that in his discussions of Mu'tazilism, Amīn appears less preoccupied with their specific theological doctrines (for his nuanced views on the five principles of Mu'tazilite theology, see Shepard, 1982: 182–188) and is more interested in their social impact and, in the long run, their role in the development of Islamic civilization.

Rationalism is one crucial factor in the contemporary appeal of the Mu'tazilah. Amīn considers the authority of reason (*sulṭat al-'aql*) to be

among their most important principles, as manifest in different aspects of thought and life. One manifestation is their freedom of enquiry, the ‘scientific spirit’, belief in free will, human responsibility, and self-awareness. The Mu‘tazilites’ method of free enquiry, as already mentioned, is favourably contrasted by Amīn with the method of the traditionalists. According to him, the traditionalists’ complete dependence on the letter of the sacred text and on faithfully handing down the traditions from generation to generation, without deviating even in a single letter, is understandable and suitable for the discipline of *ḥadīth*, but it should be restricted to this discipline alone. Its application to other disciplines has led to the tendency to imitate and has resulted in the lack of originality (Amīn, 1958a, V: 156; Shepard, 1982: 176). The Mu‘tazilite method was different, as they ‘gave reason (*al-‘aql*) free reign in investigating all issues without any restrictions. They gave it the right to investigate the matters of heaven and earth, God and human beings, the trivial and the exalted. It is not [the case] that it has the right to operate in one limited sphere and has no right to do so in another, rather reason was created for knowledge, and it has the power to know everything, even [the matters of] metaphysics’ (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 68; Detlev, 1969: 175). Amin also appreciated the Mu‘tazilite spirit of ‘scientific enquiry’ and experiment, and the contributions made to natural philosophy by its representatives, such as al-Nazzām (d. 835) (Amīn, 1957–1961, IV: 23–24; Detlev, 1969: 331–332; Shepard, 1982: 177).

Besides the spirit of free enquiry and scientific pursuits, the rationality of the Mu‘tazilah is also manifest in their outlook on miracles, magic, and spirits (Amīn, 1957–1961, IV: 20), which had a positive influence on society by combating popular beliefs and superstition widespread among the masses. One example of such an influence is the Mu‘tazilite belief that human beings have no ability to see the *jinn* or spirits, and, as a consequence, the adherents of Mu‘tazilism as well as their women and children were not

afraid of these creatures. On this point, Amīn quotes the famous medieval author al-Muḥassin ibn ‘Alī al-Tanūkhī (d. 994) who heard his companions say that ‘It is a blessing for the Mu‘tazilah that their children are not afraid of the *jinn*’ (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 88). Amīn also retells a few of al-Tanūkhī’s anecdotes which reveal the practical implications of this belief for the common people. One of them has as its protagonist a pious old lady who was a steadfast Mu‘tazilite. Because as a Mu‘tazilite she believed that people were not capable of seeing the *jinn* or spirits, she refused to be tricked by the thief who entered her house pretending to be Jibrīl, sent by God to admonish the lady’s sinful son. On her own, the old lady managed to lock the thief in the strong-room and refused to let him out, unmoved by his ‘angelic’ arguments, until her son returned and the thief was apprehended (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 88; for the full version of this story, see al-Tanūkhī, 1922: 284–286).

Amīn also views in the light of ‘social reform’ the efforts of the Mu‘tazilah to spread their beliefs by sending missions (*da‘wah*) across the Muslim world, thereby opposing ignorance and promoting the ‘spirit of enquiry’. Even their controversial partaking in the *miḥnah* was triggered, as Amīn believes, by the good intentions to spread the beliefs that they thought to be true Islam among the common people (Hildebrandt, 2001: 182–187).<sup>3</sup> They seized the opportunity to make Mu‘tazilism an official doctrine, he says, and had they been successful, Mu‘tazilism would have spread and the majority of Muslims would have become Mu‘tazilites and free in their thought, including the common people whose ‘minds would have been liberated and they would not fear the *jinn*, because the *jinn* could not be seen, nor

<sup>3</sup> The *miḥnah* episode has been the subject of a substantial body of scholarship which have suggested different motives behind its introduction – from al-Ma‘mūn’s support of Mu‘tazilism, to the influence of Shi‘ism and the intention to assert Caliphal authority in religious matters and undermine the power of the religious scholars. For these interpretations and bibliography, see Nawas, 2015.

would they believe in *ghūls* or demons. And in general, they would not be paralysed by the fear coming from the superstitions or by the fear of God, because God in the view of the Mu'tazilah is not a despotic ruler, but God who has made the laws of justice obligatory for Himself ... Then, people would have believed that they are the masters of their will and have the power to do good and evil. Whatever good occurs, it is created by them and occurs by their will, and whatever evil occurs, it is also created by them and occurs by their will – and for these they will receive the good reward and the unpleasant recompense' (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 196–197; Shepard, 1982: 179–180). Because of these noble intentions, which would have resonated with those among Amīn's readers who were concerned about social and moral reforms, the Mu'tazilites allowed the Caliph al-Ma'mūn and his successors to enforce their doctrine of the created Qur'ān on the people. As is well known, the result was calamitous for the Mu'tazilah – the *miḥnah* brought about their demise and the victory of the traditionalists.

However, even from this unsuccessful Mu'tazilite attempt at 'social reform' valuable lessons could be learnt. These lessons, evidently, were intended for the liberals of Amīn's time (Hildebrandt, 2007a). With regard to the *miḥnah*, the Mu'tazilah committed two mistakes, according to Amīn. The first was their decision to share the theological doctrine of the created Qur'ān with the masses who did not understand speculative theology. The Mu'tazilah, he says, were right in the truth of this doctrine, but their opponents, who were mostly traditionalists, were also right in that this theological issue should not have been brought up before the common people (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 191; Hildebrandt, 2001: 185–186). Elsewhere, Amīn also mentions as a failure the miscalculation of the Mu'tazilah in their efforts to appeal to the common people through the arguments of reason, whereas for them the arguments of the Qur'ān and emotions would have been more appealing (Amīn 1958b: 88; Shepard, 1982: 181). The second mistake of the Mu'tazilah was

that they brought along the government to intervene in this matter with ‘its power, swords, whips, troops, and local governors’ (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 191–192). They used force and invoked power in order to impose their doctrine on the people, but ‘whenever power interferes in anything, it corrupts it’ (Amīn 1958b: 87). These two mistakes were the causes of the popular resistance to Mu‘tazilism that soon led to the triumph of the traditionalists over the Mu‘tazilah. This triumph meant that Islamic civilization would remain under the rule of the traditionalists for over a thousand years.

Finally, it is also worth noting that in Amīn’s vision of the successful adaptation of foreign elements while preserving Islamic identity, the latter aspect is equally important. While criticising the method of the traditionalists and the blind imitation of the past authorities which discourage originality, he is equally critical of the blind imitation of the Westerners (Amīn, 1958a, V: 154). The Mu‘tazilah in this context are important not only because they are rationalists, but because they are Islamic theological rationalists, and their method assumes ‘free thought within the boundaries of the fundamentals of faith’ (*minhaj al-tafkīr al-ḥurr fī ḥudūd uṣūl al-dīn*) (Amīn, 1958a, V: 155; see, however, Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 68). Describing the new age – the age of the ‘modern renaissance’ (*al-nabḍah al-ḥadīthah*) to which Amīn and his contemporaries were witnesses, he says that it shares some traits with Mu‘tazilism, for in it one finds ‘doubt and experiment, both of them among the methods of the Mu‘tazilah’, and ‘faith in the power of reason and free will’, ‘freedom of debate, research, and discussion’, and ‘awareness of a human being of his personality’ which are the principles of the Mu‘tazilah (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 207). The only difference between the two is that the Mu‘tazilite teaching of these principles was grounded in religion, but today’s teaching is based on pure reason. In other words, the Mu‘tazilah considered these principles to be religion (*dīn*), but during this new renaissance they are seen as reason (*‘aql*).

For the Mu'tazilah, these principles were fully connected to religion, but they are not connected to religion today, and rather in many aspects and cases they go against it (Amīn, 1961–1962, III: 207). Thus, the example of the Mu'tazilah is also a reminder to the modern generation of Muslims to safeguard the religious foundation of Islamic civilization in these changing times.

### 3. Communicating the Modern Relevance of the Mu'tazilah

As we have seen, Aḥmad Amīn sought to bring the distant Mu'tazilite past into the present of his readers by highlighting the points of its modern relevance. On a number of occasions he states these points explicitly in his comments, while in other cases they are implied but no doubt would have been recognised by his readers. Furthermore, the potential appeal of the Mu'tazilite history to his audience is reinforced by Amīn's uses of modern concepts and themes when relating this history. For instance, speaking about the common people's opposition to the *miḥnab*, he refers to the concept of 'public opinion' (*al-ra'y al-āmm*), which would have been easily understood by his audience (Amīn, 1958b: 87). When he laments the victory of the traditionalists over the Mu'tazilah, he says that it has led to stagnation (*rukūd*) and stronger dependence on the sayings of the compilers (*mu'allifūn*) rather than original thinkers (*mubtakirūn*) (Amīn, 1958b: 89), thus associating the Mu'tazilah with the modern concept of originality (*ibtikār*). Amīn also draws on familiar modern dichotomies. For example, alongside the opposition of reason (*'aql*) and tradition (*naql*), commonly found in the classical sources, he employs a modern dichotomy of reason (*'aql*) and emotions (*shu'ūr*) (Amīn, 1958b: 88). Trying to make it easier for his readers to grasp the relative positions of the traditionalists and the Mu'tazilah, he refers to them respectively as 'the conservatives' (*al-muḥāfiẓūn*), and 'the liberals' (*al-aḥrār*).



Amīn's presentation of Mu'tazilite personalities is sympathetic and vivid, with anecdotes, poetic lines, and sayings attributed to them or about them (for example, see the presentation of Wāṣil ibn 'Atā' in Amīn, 1959: 300) which his readers would find entertaining and emotionally appealing. He seems committed to this sympathetic image even when discussing the *Maqāmab of the Asylum* of the famous Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008) which describes an encounter of a Mu'tazilite theologian and his friend with an asylum inmate who vehemently criticises the Mu'tazilite doctrine of free will. While this is usually taken to indicate al-Hamadhānī's own view on this matter (al-Hamadhānī, 1973: 103 f. 3), Amīn offers two other possibilities. It could be, according to him, that al-Hamadhānī, as a man of letters, simply wanted to portray the prevalent popular views about the Mu'tazilah in his time. But it could also be, he suggests, a deliberate strategy on al-Hamadhānī's behalf – for by naming it *Maqāmab of the Asylum* and making the critic an inmate in the asylum, he might have intended to show that only an asylum inmate can really oppose the Mu'tazilite doctrine of free will (Amīn, 1957–1961, IV: 59–61).

#### IV. Conclusion

This article has discussed the future-oriented reading of Mu'tazilism by Aḥmad Amīn and his intellectual efforts at 'thinking Mu'tazilism forward' and conveying its modern relevance to his readers. The three frames of relevance enabled Amīn to make the distant past of the 'Abbasid Caliphate speak to his 20<sup>th</sup>-century Egyptian readers: the age of the Mu'tazilah as the 'golden age', and their downfall, accordingly, as one major reason for the current crisis and the Western domination over Muslim societies; the parallels that Amīn draws between the current challenges and those faced by

Islam before its 'golden age', and the inspiring achievement of the Mu'tazilah in successfully integrating the foreign elements into Islamic civilization without compromising its Islamic identity; and finally, the lessons that his contemporary social reformers could learn from the successes and failures of the Mu'tazilite experience.

Notwithstanding this intellectual contribution, there remains an open question which has implications for the task of 'liberating the future' by drawing on future-oriented non-Western traditions. How could Amīn's 'thought-forward' reading of Mu'tazilism (or that of others with regard to other traditions) become a living tradition that speaks to people across various divides? The works of Amīn, 'a populariser of Mu'tazilism', were popular among the readers and underwent several editions. The interest in Mu'tazilism increased among contemporary intellectuals and academics and became the subject of books and dissertations (Caspar, 1957: 184–195). Mu'tazilite sources were being rediscovered and published, and in 1951–1952 new Mu'tazilite manuscripts were discovered in Yemen by the Egyptian delegation, sent by Amīn's colleague Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, then the minister of education (Caspar, 1957: 195–199). When Robert Caspar was writing his article in Cairo in the late 1950s he observed a sympathetic attitude towards the Mu'tazilah among the educated classes, but was also cautious in his assessment of its potential revival (Caspar, 1957: 200–201). Needless to say, this 'popularisation of Mu'tazilism' in Egypt, where the illiteracy rate in 1939 amounted to 82 per cent (Mizutani, 2014: 34), could only be restricted to the educated classes. Thirty years after the publication of Caspar's article, Josef van Ess, commenting on the 'renaissance of Mu'tazilism' in some Sunnī countries, especially in Egypt, gave a sobering verdict on the hope for its success. 'Modern fundamentalism,' he wrote, 'has proved that view premature. Mu'tazili ideas are again pushed into the corner of heresy' (van Ess, 2005: 6321). It remains to be seen whether Mu'tazilism would be able

once again to reclaim its place within Islamic tradition, but the works of Aḥmad Amīn and his successors from among the ‘Neo-Mutazilites’ (whether they self-identified as such or not) have already revealed its potential as a source of inspiration for envisioning better futures in West Asia and beyond.

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