THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MU'TAZILA RECONSIDERED*

Sarah Stroumsa

On several occasions the Zaydi scholar Ibn al-Murtadā (d. 840 H) says, introducing the genealogy of the Mu'azza, that "the tradition from which the Mu'tazilite school is derived is brighter than daylight". For us, unfortunately, this daylight is somewhat eclipsed. Not only are early sources on the Mu'tazila scarce and inadequate, but the information they yield is often tendentious and contradictory. As a result, the attempts of modern scholars to portray Mu'tazilite history are, at best, speculative reconstructions. The aim of the present study is to survey the available evidence relating to the early Mu'tazila for the purpose of sifting firm fact from mere conjecture. Our chief concern in the following pages will be to elucidate the name "Mu'tazila", to survey the emergence of the Mu'tazila as a movement, and to examine its links with Mu'tazilite Kalam.

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All the reports about the beginning of the Mu'tazila as we know it revolve around the persons of Wāsil b. 'Atā' and 'Amr b. Ubayd. It is therefore, natural to start our research with these two key figures. Wāsil b. 'Atā', also known as Abū Hudhayfa, was born in al-Madīna in the year 80 or 81 H, and died in 131 H.² The precision with which these dates are recorded is unusual for his generation.³ Wāsil, however, was an unusual individual, and the gossip of his time noted and recorded about him characteristics which do not usually occur in standard biographical works, while the more common details about his life remain unclear. For example, it is uncertain whether he was a client (mawāli) of the Banū Dabba, of the Banū Mahzūm, or of the Banū Hāshim.⁴ He was nicknamed “the spinner” (al-ghazzāli), and although the sources are unanimous in maintaining that he was not a spinner, they fail both to explain why he was given this designation and to specify his real profession.⁵ His physical appearance, on the other hand, is carefully noted. He was an odd-looking person,⁶ with a remarkably long and twisted neck.⁷ At times he kept silent to the point of being considered dumb,⁸ and when he did speak up, his pronunciation of the consonant rāʾ was painfully ugly.⁹ All in all, he made an unprepossessing first impression.¹⁰ A better acquaintance with him, however, altered this impression dramatically for the better. Our sources vividly convey the surprise, embarrassment and admiration people felt on finding out what lay behind his clumsy, silent exterior.¹¹ Despite his speech defect, he was an eloquent orator, second to none in his time,¹² and his skill in avoiding the problematic rāʾ became legendary.¹³

² Ibn al-Nadim, Al-Fihrist (Beirut, nd.), Tokāla, I.
⁵ Al-Juḥi, al-Bayyān wa-l-Tadbīr, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām al-Harūn (Cairo, 1908), vol. I, pp. 332–343; Abū Ḥālīs al-A‘shārī, Kītāb al-Awa‘il, ed. Muhammad al-Miqīrī and Wafādī Qasībī (Damascus, 1975), vol. II, pp. 1379–1381. Van Ess has suggested that Wāsil was indeed a spinner, but that the Mu’tazila attempted to cover this up, since it was considered a base profession (“Lecture”, p. 42). This low esteem, however, was accorded to the weaver (khāṭib), not to the spinner (ghazzāli). The latter, instead, was considered a praiseworthy occupation for women, and there is no evidence that it was considered a shameful one for men. (R. Brunschvicg, ‘Mé tiers vifs en Islam’, Studia Islamica 16 (1952), pp. 41–60, and esp. p. 45). The versions referred to by Van Ess (ibid., p. 45) as a proof of Wāsil’s being “un marchand de draps”, are, in fact, rhetorical questions the point of which is to emphasize that Wāsil could not have been a merchant. See al-A‘shārī, Amīrī, p. 1385, 13–17.
⁶ It should be noted that a verse of Bashāh b. Burd appears at least in one source with reference to the ‘Azā‘il, not Ghazzālī. One could conjecture that, through a scribal error, an additional diacritical point turned an ‘azā‘il (in the sense of a Mu’tazilite) into a ghazzālī, a spinner. In this case, the words of al-Mubarrad (al-Kamil, ed. W. Wright, Leipzig, 1864, vol. I, p. 546: “wa-rā‘ina mutā‘alīyyan wa-lam yakun ghazzālīan” could be understood as correcting the reading in this way. The bulk of manuscript evidence, however, renders this conjecture unlikely.
⁷ It is perhaps worth mentioning that the root ‘ā in Syriac relates also to spinning. (J. Payne Smith, A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, Oxford, 1967, p. 409). If the term Mu’tazila was originally connected to spinning, then we could assume a connection between Wāsil and Syriac-speaking Christianity. I was, however, unable to find any special role played by spinning in the life of Syriac Christians in general or of Syriac monks in particular.
⁸ “Muṣṭārib al-khāṭīb”; see al-A‘shārī, Amīrī, p. 1307.
¹¹ Al-A‘shārī, Amīrī, II, p. 1303.
This laboriously acquired eloquence was not used for artistic or literary ends. Wāsīl was no aesthete. His main interest was religion, in the broad sense of the word. Personally he was a puritan, always piously on guard against temptations. Although he was married, he lived a life of continence.14 He is known to have shunned money.15 The money which he inherited or received as a prize was distributed for charity,16 and, as mentioned above, he practiced prolonged silence. All these restrictions were common among the early nissākī,17 and indeed Wāsīl constantly strove to be counted among those known for their religious observance (ahl al-dīn).18 His piety, however, was not that of the solitary, and he never missed an opportunity to admonish.19 Thus, when on their first meeting 'Amr made a condescending remark concerning Wāsīl's neck, Wāsīl retorted by reproving 'Amr for finding fault with God's creation.20 On another occasion, when 'Amr lost his temper, Wāsīl sternly warned him against the "devilry lurking in an angry utterance." Yet despite his sternness he also knew how to win people over, allowing them to feel his equals.22

This combination of piety with a didactic bent was probably the driving force behind Wāsīl's public activity. What set him apart from other preachers was the fact that both his intellectual curiosity in all religious matters and his feelings of responsibility knew no bounds. He was careful to give alms only to the pious.23 When Baṣrā's water supply required improvement, Wāsīl offered the honorarium due to him for a khutba (which he would not touch anyway) for that purpose.24 For a while he used to meet with intellectuals of various religious backgrounds, among them a Manichaeans and a Buddhist.25 He is remembered as the first to have grappled seriously with the Buddhist challenge,26 and the first to have written against the various Muslim sects as well as against other religions.27 It is said that he used to spend the night in prayer, stopping frequently to jot down arguments in an imaginary dispute.28

Composed and pious, learned and full of religious fervor, Wāsīl was admired by many. Little wonder that 'Amr was also captivated by Wāsīl's measured eloquence.

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24 Al-Askarī, Awālī, p. 1367-10.
27 Ibid., p. 1811-18; al-Askarī, Awālī, p. 1291-5.
28 Ibn al-Murtadā, Manṣa, p. 1914-16.
29 See, for example, Ibn Khallikān, Wafayāt, III, p. 460.
Al-Hasan apparently thought very highly of 'Amr, and called him "the best among the youth of Basra"; some of the stories about al-Hasan are also told about 'Amr. 23 It is said that he prayed all night, and that his forehead carried the mark of constant prostration. 24 For forty years he performed the hajj every year on foot, giving his mount to the weaker pilgrims. 25 He never laughed, always looked as if returning from his parents' funeral, and behaved as if hell had been created for him alone. 25 Even orthodox writers, who miss no opportunity to discredit him as a Muhaddith, do not deny his asceticism. 25 Like Wāsīl, he was exceedingly careful in his speech, and was famous for his honesty and sincerity. 27 Like Wāsīl, he was a powerful preacher, and compared to Tabaqūt, p. 682: "Iṣnaqila Wāsīl ilā al-Basra, fa-lazima al-Hasan." See also Ta'īrīkh Bayhaḍāl, p. 16612 and al-Murtadāl, Amīr, p. 1658, where 'Amr is the one who is described as "min aṣḥāb al-Hasan wa-ismā'ilihi", whereas Wāsīl is the outsider who pulls 'Amr out of the circle.

19 Al-Ḥār al-In, p. 81-12. See also Ibn Khallikān, Wafayāt, III, p. 4600-10-13. The version which adds: "... provided he does not transmitt ḥadīth" (Ta'īrīkh Bayhaḍāl, XII, p. 170, 81:13) is clearly a later orthodox correction. See also 'Abd al-Jabbar, Fadil, p. 24570 (where 'Amr is called: zāhin aṣḥāb al-Hasan).


33 See for instance Al-Balkhi, Maqāllāt, p. 6811; 'Abd al-Jabbar, Fadil, p. 2437-3, and see Q. 4828.


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39 Which explains 'Abd al-Jabbar's careful distinction between those who are "min aṣḥāb Wāsīl" and those who are "min aṣḥāb 'Amr". See, for instance, Fadil, p. 2524-10.

40 See al-Maṣūḥī, Muraj, VI, p. 21, which describes 'Amr as "shaykh al-mu'tazila fi waqtih wal-anwā'il fīlūr".

41 See, for instance, al-Baghdādī, al-Furq ṣuṣna al-firqā (Beirut, 1977), p. 9811-12.


43 Ibn Manẓūr, Lisan al-'Arab, s.v. 'az; Wensinck, Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane, vol. IV, p. 207.

44 See Ibn al-Murtadāl, Tabaqūt, p. 26-14, and al-Murtadāl, Muryah, p. 29 - 31 where it is said that 'Amr was encouraged to encourage his followers to call themselves 'Mu'tazila' 'tantaqām rāsā'īli al-qalim'. The meaning of this ḥadīth is explained by a hadīth which 'Amr used to quote: "any umma will split into more than seventy sects, and the most pious and God-fearing among them is the one which abstains" (abarrūtā wa-ṣāḥibā al-firqā al-mu'tazila). See also 'Abd al-Jabbar, Fadil, p. 1609-13.
characteristic. They were given the name "Muṭāzila" in reference to their pious asceticism, and they were content with this name.45

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The interpretation of the name Muṭāzila as 'ascetics' is not new. It was already suggested by Goldziher, who assembled many examples of the use of 'Muṭāzili' in this sense46 and pointed out the ascetic character of Ṣawrul and 'Amr.47 The evidence marshalled by Goldziher is compelling, and his explanation of the name "Muṭāzila", which has since gone out of fashion, deserves to be re-instated. To his interpretation, however, I would like to add the following suggestion: the use of the word muṭāzila in the sense of 'ascetics' is independent of Ṣawrul and 'Amr, and probably predates them. Like the Pharisees

among the Jews and the anchorites among the Christians, early Muslim ascetics derived their name from their 'withdrawal'. The question of whether this parallel usage points to some generic relationship between the Muṭāzila and non-Muslim (probably eastern Christian) ascetic trends would require a separate study.48 At any rate, by the first quarter of the second Islamic century ascetics, or even loosely organized groups of ascetics, were called muṭāzila. It follows that Ṣawrul, 'Amr and their early followers were 'Muṭāzilites' before the existence of a Muṭāzila as we know it, and that it was only later, through a process of diversification, that this word became the proper name of a movement, while other words became the technical terms for asceticism.49

Furthermore, since it was 'Amr who belonged to al-Hasan's circle and whose ascetic traits were more pronounced than Ṣawrul's, it is possible that it was 'Amr who brought with him his supporters and the name muṭāzila when he decided to join hands with Ṣawrul.

The following pages will seek to demonstrate that this hypothesis enables us to gain a better understanding of the various

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47 Goldziher, Verlesungen, p. 95. It is remarkable that many modern scholars were aware of the asceticism of the founders of the Muṭāzila, and yet saw no connection between this asceticism and the name "Muṭāzila". See, for instance, R. Nyberg, Encyclopaedia of Islam, s.v. 'Muṭāzila'; idem, 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd et Ibn al-Rawandi', deux reprove, in R. Brunschvig and G.E. von Grunebaum, Classicien et déclin culturel dans histoire de Islam (Paris, 1977), pp. 125-130; Fu'ad Sayyid in the introduction to his edition of Faddl al-isila, p. 12, Van Es, "Lecture", pp. 45-46, 56, 62.
available items of information about the Mu'tazila, and to develop a more coherent account of its early history.

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It should first of all be noted that at the time of 'Amr's Mu'tazila, other meanings of the verb ītāzala are also attested. It can mean any of several kinds of withdrawal, and it may refer to various historical incidents. Refusal to pay the zakāt to Abū Bakr, neutrality at the Battle of the Camel, or at Šīfīn, refusal to be involved in political activity altogether or, on the contrary, active political dissent – all these are referred to as ītāzalā. The temptation to find a way to connect this ītāzalā with the Mu'tazilite movement is great. Already al-Ma'sūdī (d. 956) identifies the supporters of Yazīd b. al-Walīd (d. 126 H) with the Mu'tazila of his own days, attributing to them, in a flagrant anachronism, the full-fledged "five Mu'tazilite principles." One attempt to reconcile the different pieces of evidence is made by al-Nawbakhtī, who suggests that the Mu'tazila we know descend from "the first Mu'tazila," the followers of Ṣadd b. Abī Waqqās and of Šūmān b. Zayd, who had adopted a neutral position in the civil war.

51 Al-Nāširī, Uṣūl, p. 1615, 17 (the ītāzalā of ahī al-ḥadam) and p. 18:4, 8 (the ītāzalā of the perplexed), both relate to the civil war, although the first stems from pious reluctance to be involved in real politics. Uṣūl, p. 1933 applies the term ītāzalā to the act of the Khawārij, as does also Abū Mu'īn al-Nasafi, who speaks of the mu'tasiliyya min al-ḥarāriyya"; see M. Bernard, 'Le kitāb al-radd al-lidād al-Abī Mu'īn Makānī al-Nasafī, Annales Islamologiques 16 (1980), p. 77. This last source can not serve as a proof of the politico-religious origins of the Mu'tazila (compare Bernard, p. 48), but only as evidence of the flexible use of the verb.
52 Murāj, VI, pp. 20, 31. On the attitude of the Mu'tazila to Yazīd see Murāj, VI, p. 32:5-6 and the somewhat obscure passage in 'Abī al-Jahār, Fudūl, p. 2508-9; al-Bakhtī, Maqālid, p. 1735-11.
53 Fīrāq, p. 2526. Al-Nāširī, Uṣūl, pp. 1615 - 173, also uses the term ītāzalā about this group, but he does not associate them with the Mu'tazila.

The author of the Kitāb al-usi'd attributed to Nāšīr al-Akbar (d. 793 H) takes a similar course, but for him it is people like Abī Mūsā al-As'harī and al-Ahmad b. Qays al-Tamīnī who "were given the name Mu'tazila in those days", because they were unable to decide which of the two parties was right. Al-Nāšīrī remarks in this context that Wāṣīl and 'Amr hold the same view, and that they are the leaders of the Mu'tazila, but he stops short of explicitly connecting the Mu'tazila of Wāṣīl with that of Abī Mūsā. At the same time, Muslim authors are aware that during the first few Islamic decades the name Mu'tazila applied to many different groups, and they endeavour to distinguish between a qualified Mu'tazila and the Mu'tazila tout court. This is noticeable in al-Nawbakhtī's first Mu'tazila", which another Shi'ite source calls "those who separated from both parties" (al-mu'tazila al-an al-farīqayn). Al-Nawbakhtī also mentions, alongside the first Mu'tazila", the ītāzalā of al-Ahmad b. Qays al-Tamīnī, who, according to him, withdrew "not in the sense of adhering to the doctrine of ītāzalā (wa al-ta'dayyun bi-ītāzalā) but in the sense of seeking safety from killing and from the loss of property (in war), and he said to his people: Keep away (ītāzalā) from dissension (for) it is better for you. The evidence therefore shows that before the appearance of the Mu'tazilite movement the verb ītāzalā had not yet acquired a single technical meaning. The ascetics, the zuhhīdūn and nussāk of the time, were referred to as "the Mu'tazila," but the verb was also employed for other forms of withdrawal. It should also be noted that later writers, including Mu'tazilites, could no longer determine where the
Mu'tazila got its name.68 The etymologies they give should be regarded as not more than informed guesses.

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The turning point in the history of the Mu'tazila is undoubtedly the encounter of Wāsiṣ and 'Amr. As Madelung has noted, Wāsiṣ recorded the event for the benefit of future generations in his book "On what came to pass between him and 'Amr." Unfortunately the book is lost. It is usually assumed that 'what came to pass' between the two refers to their first meeting, in which 'Amr was won over to Wāsiṣ's stand concerning the religious state of the Muslim sinner. The heresiographical reports are of varying length and precision,69 but the following outline can be extracted from them: 'Amr presented the view of al-Hasan al-Baṣrī, that the Muslim sinner is a hypocrite (munāṣif). By means of a series of syllogisms Wāsiṣ convinced him that this view was untenable, and advanced his own theory of the intermediary state (al-manṣūla bayna al-manṣūlatayn). The Muslim sinner is just that: a sinner (fāṣiq), and does not deserve the title either of a believer (as the Murji'ā claimed) or of an infidel (as the Khawārij would have it). 'Amr graciously admitted his defeat, the two established their own school, and as a happy end Wāsiṣ married 'Amr's sister. We are also told that the Mu'tazila derived their name from this incident, but as to exactly why the heresiographical literature offers more than one explanation.70

I Al-Hasan sealed the rupture by announcing: 'Wāsiṣ proceeded from us (fusala 'analu). H.S. Nyberg suggested that this story was an orthodox slander, designed "to rehabilitate al-Hasan and brand the

Mu'tazilis as heretics."62 At first sight the fact that the anecdote appears in Mu'tazilite as well as orthodox sources would seem to lend it some credence and to invalidate Nyberg's suggestion.63 But there are flaws in the story. In order to "secede" from al-Hasan's circle, Wāsiṣ would have had to have belonged to it in the first place. But as we have already seen, it is unlikely that this was the case.64 The one who belonged to the circle was 'Amr, and indeed in the version given by Ibn Quayba (d. 889 H) Wāsiṣ is not mentioned, and it is 'Amr's secession that al-Hasan deplores.65 But even in this version the story is at variance with what we know of the relations of al-Hasan and 'Amr: 'Amr, for one, never thought of himself as having broken off with al-Hasan; he continued to regard himself as a disciple of al-Hasan who was transmitting his teaching.66 Yet another version is given by Ibn Durayd (d. 321 H), who says of 'Amr b. 'Abd Qays: "It is he who separated from al-Hasan, so that they were named Mu'tazilites."67 'Amir, like Wāsiṣ and 'Amr, was known for his ascetic behaviour as well as for his interest in theology.68 But it is unlikely that his standing was such as to enable him to launch a new movement by his "separation". The fact that the story is told about him too makes its apocryphal character more transparent.69

Nyberg's suggestion should therefore be accepted, with the

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64 See above, note 30 and the corresponding text.
65 Ādārī, p. 24319; see also 'Abd al-Jabāb, Fadi, p. 166/4-15.
67 Al-Iskāfī, I, pp. 219-214, quoted by Sayyīd, in his introduction to Fadi, p. 16.
68 See Sayyīd, ibid., p. 16.
69 It should also be noted that for all practical purposes there was little difference between Wāsiṣ and al-Hasan, and therefore no apparent reason for the break: al-Hasan adopted a neutral position concerning the fitna (Massiğen, Essa, p. 174; Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 50), and as to the hereafter, Wāsiṣ, like al-Hasan, acknowledged the existence of only two abodes (al-Shahrastānī, Mīlāl, p. 336; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, Tabāqāt, p. 43-63).
additional assumption that in later generations the story lost its venom, and became so widespread that even the Mu'tazilites considered it authentic.

2. According to other sources it is not al-Ḥasan but Qatāda who coined the name Mu'tazila when, on seeing 'Amr's group, he asked contemptuously: "What is that Mu'tazila up to?" This anecdote rings truer than the first one, in the sense that there was indeed some rivalry between Qatāda and 'Amr.11 It also allows for 'Amr, and not Wāṣil, as the leading representative of the Mu'tazila's break with orthodoxy. Nevertheless, this story cannot be accepted at face value. Qatāda could not have been the one to coin the term Mu'tazila. He may, however, have been one of those who used this word in a derogatory manner, thus helping to establish the somewhat general term as the name of a specific group.72

3. Some writers, in addition to reporting the above anecdotes, try to derive the name Mu'tazila from the dogma of al-manzila bayna al-mansilatayn itself. This dogma, says al-Maḍūdī, is the core of the i'tizāl.73 The exact way in which the term is explained depends, of course, on the speaker. The orthodox say that the Mu'tazilites got their name because in adopting Wāṣil's position "they contradicted the consensus".74 The Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, claim that their position is the one agreed upon by the consensus of the umma, that all other positions are innovations, and that they took the name Mu'tazila "because they avoided all innovations";75 or because they avoided "both exaggeration and laxity".76

4. Some scholars read political implications into Wāṣil's theory of the intermediary state. They believe that it relates to the status of the parties in the first civil war, and that it indicates Wāṣil's political stance with regard to the events of his own time. According to al-Khayyāt (d. circa 200 H) Wāṣil claimed that in the war between 'Alī, Ẓaf-ha and al-Zubayr, and also in the war between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah, only one of the parties could have been in the right. It follows that the other party was in the wrong, and since it committed a grave sin (kabīra) it should be considered to be in the state of fisq. Since, however, all the witnesses to this war are biased, we have no way of telling which of the parties was right and which was wrong.77 The i'tizāl, according to this interpretation, is the refusal both to brand one or other of the parties as infidels, and to justify the conduct of one or other.

This interpretation is in line with one we have already encountered. As mentioned above, some of the meanings of the verb i'tazala may have had political connotations. The information given by al-Khayyāt puts this line of thought on firmer ground: here we have not only a use of the word, but also see Wāṣil himself subscribing to this use.

But the evidence demands careful examination. It stands to reason that Wāṣil held some position concerning the civil war: he was not someone who would have no opinion on such a major issue. It is also probable that he discussed the matter with 'Amr, and that the latter was convinced by his arguments: 'Amr admired Wāṣil,78 and since he was much less engaged than Wāṣil, he is likely to have let Wāṣil decide in such worldly matters. It is also possible that the position Wāṣil adopted was the one described by al-Khayyāt - although Shi'ite (and even Mu'tazilite Shi'ite) writers fiercely deny this.

73 Murāj, VI, p. 229; al-Balkhi, Maqālāt, pp. 115-12; see also al-Hār al-In, p. 204.
74 "Lamūnā khāli/q fi dhāli/q summā al-mu'tazilāt", Ibn al-Murtadā, Tabaqāt, p. 57; idem, Murāj, p. 431; 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, al-Faqray bayna al-firq (Beirut, 1977), p. 981-3, and see also p. 181 ("al-Qadariyya al-mu'tazila min al-baqy")
77 Al-Nāṣith al-Akbar, Uṣūl, pp. 53-54; Dühahbī, Mīzu, III, pp. 267 ff.
according to them Wāṣīl was whole-heartedly pro-'Ali.79 But we have no indication whatsoever that Wāṣīl ever identified his position as i’izzāl.80 There are no grounds for believing that Wāṣīl encouraged his followers to be mutazilīn in this sense, or that ‘Amr and his followers added this meaning to their name ‘Mu’tazila.’ The writers who connect the name Mu’tazila with Wāṣīl’s view of the civil wars wrote at least two hundred years after the latter’s death. They clearly had no idea of where the name came from, and so they proceeded to associate it with all they knew about the early movement.

The so-called political Mu’tazila deserves further scrutiny. Nyberg, who was the first to insist on the political meaning of mu’tazila (both the name and the movement), argued that “the teaching of Wāṣīl on al-manṣūla can only be perfectly understood if we see in it the theoretical crystallisation of the political programme of the ‘Abbasids before their accession to power.”81 Some of our sources speak of Wāṣīl’s dīrāt, and Nyberg identified them with the bearers of the ‘Abbasid da’wa. According to him, when ‘Amr and his “section of the Qadaris of the ahl al-hadith joined the Mu’tazila”, they “reinforced the more politically inclined Qadariyya of which Wāṣīl was the champion.”82 The i’izzāl was, according to this view, Wāṣīl’s creation; it was decidedly political and ‘Amr’s role in it was secondary.83

Nyberg’s political interpretation of the Mu’tazila has been widely accepted,84 although his specific application of this interpretation was sometimes subjected to refinements. Thus W. Madelung, W. Montgomery Watt and J. Van Ess rejected Nyberg’s identification of the Mu’tazila with the ‘Abbasid da’wa. Wāṣīl’s dīrāt, as we know from a poem of the Mu’tazilite Saffāwān al-‘Anṣāri, were much too conspicuous to have been part of an underground movement.85 But Watt and Van Ess also read into the term i’izzāl some political meaning. For them, the i’izzāl did not represent an active involvement in political dissent but rather political neutrality, which “the Mu’tazilites have practiced for the first time at a time when, in the spasms of a dying empire, almost everybody took sides in one way or another.”86 And still more categorically than Nyberg, Van Ess argues that “Wāṣīl is the only founder of the Mu’tazila: ‘Amr b. Ubayd kept his distance for a long time, until the moment when, after al-Hasan al-Basri’s death and before the advent of the ‘Abbasids, he joined the movement.”87

Both Nyberg’s original theory and its modified versions err in ascribing to the whole Mu’tazila the ideas (or the temperament) of only part of it. Wāṣīl was politically active (although, as we shall presently see, not necessarily in the service of the ‘Abbasids), ‘Amr was not, and he did not become politically active even after meeting Wāṣīl.”88

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80 ‘Abd al-Jabbar, Fatḥ, p. 142 ff. (relying on Abū ‘Ali al-Jabbarī (d. 915 H) seems to see no connection between the debates over the status of the participants in the civil wars and the name Mu’tazila. Neither does al-Shahrastānī, Muwat, pp. 33-34, who clearly distinguishes between the dogma of the intermediary state and attitudes to the civil wars.
81 There is, in fact, no mention in our sources of Wāṣīl ever having used the terms ḳjadi or mu’tazila. As to ‘Amr, there is only one anecdote in which it is implied that he encouraged his disciples to call themselves al-firqa mu’tazila (see above, n. 44). Madelung (Der Imām, p. 30), who sees the hadith mentioned in this anecdote as stemming from the earliest, political Mu’tazila, assumes that Wāṣīl took the name ḳjadi from this hadith and gave it a new meaning. Our sources, however, place this hadith not in political, but rather in ascetic circles (Sufyān al-Thawrī), and it is always connected with ‘Amr, never with Wāṣīl.
82 Nyberg, El, p. 789.
83 Loc. cit.
84 Nyberg, loc. cit.; idem, “‘Amr ibn ‘Ubayd”, pp. 126-128.
89 See below, pp. 284-5.
can be regarded as politically neutral.\footnote{Wâsîl cannot, and he certainly could not have been the sole founder of a movement which had neutrality as its cornerstone.} And, as we have already seen, the description of 'Amr as a secondary figure who joined an already existing Wâsîl Mu'ta'azila is not corroborated by our sources.\footnote{A paragraph in the Shi'ite work \textit{Maqā'il al-Talhibîyyīn}, which has hitherto attracted little attention, helps elucidate the role of political activity in the formation of the Mu'ta'azila.}

Wâsîl b. 'Aţâ and 'Amr b. 'Ubayd met at the house of 'Uthmân b. 'Abd al-Rahmân al-Mahzûmî, of the people of Basra, and they took counsel concerning injustice. 'Amr said, 'Who, then, will take over this commission (i.e. the Caliphate), of those who are entitled to it and who deserve it?\footnote{Wâsîl said, "By God, he who has become the best of this umma." Muhammad b. 'Abdallâh b. al-Hasan, he will undertake it." 'Amr b. 'Ubayd said, "I do not think we should pledge allegiance to, and engage in revolt on behalf of, a man whom we have not tested and whose conduct we do not know."} Wâsîl b. 'Atâ' in \textit{Maqā'il al-Talhibîyyīn}\footnote{Wâsîl responded vehemently, trying to demonstrate that there was none better than Muhammad b. 'Abdallâh.}

Both the position of Wâsîl and of 'Amr can be easily explained. Wâsîl, we are told, was brought up and educated by Abū Hâshim, i.e., 'Abdallâh b. Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya. An over-zealous Shi'ite tradition even presents him as having been brought up by Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya himself, although this is chronologically impossible. At any rate, Wâsîl had a clear sympathy for the 'Alids.\footnote{In the argument as to whether only the best of the umma (al-fâdîl) can be its leader, or whether someone who is less than the best (mafadîl) may also be given the task, Wâsîl advocated \textit{inâmat al-mafadîl}, this allowed him to accept the legitimacy of the first three caliphs while regarding the fourth caliph, 'Ali, as the best of the umma.' 'Amr's hesitant answer is also typical: his position was that only the best Muslim (al-fâdîl) deserves the bay'a. In other words, he had no Alid sympathies, and, as the paragraph from the \textit{Maqā'il al-Talhibîyyīn} testifies, he had no inclination to make practical}

Muhammad b. 'Abdallâh, Al-Tafzuzânî's doubts concerning the chronological soundness of the \textit{Maqā'il} are, therefore, quite in place. But one can, on the basis of this passage, draw an outline of the impression that the personalities of Wâsîl and 'Amr left on al-Isfahânî's sources. Hence, Tafzuzânî's rejection of the \textit{Maqā'il}'s tradition, on the assumption that Wâsîl and 'Amr shared the same political view, is difficult to accept; see Abû 'l-Wâfâ al-Tafzuzânî, Wâsîl b. 'Atâ' in U. Amin, \textit{Etudes philosophique offertes au Dr. Ibrahim Madkour} (Caire, 1974), pp. 49-50. For the reference to al-Tafzuzânî's study I am indebted to Prof. J. Van Ess.

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\footnote{But not for the line revered by the \textit{Imâmîyyâ}: they were too worldly for Wâsîl's taste; see 'Abû al-Jabbâr, \textit{Fadl}, p. 23946; Ibn al-Murtada, \textit{Tâbâqat}, p. 32; Isdâm, \textit{Manûy}, pp. 20-21.}


\footnote{Al-Nâsîhî al-Akbar, \textit{Usâlî}, pp. 546-7, 528-20.}
concessions, and no desire to be involved in politics.  

We are not told whether at that meeting 'Amr was convinced. What we are told is that at some point "a group of the inhabitants of Baṣra, from among the Muʿātazila, amongst them Wāṣil b. 'Ajā' and 'Amr b. 'Ubayd and others" went to Suwaiqa, seeking an interview with Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh. They were not received by Muḥammad, but only by his brother Ibrāhīm, yet this was enough to induce the whole group to pledge allegiance to Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh. In another instance al-İsfahānī tells us that Abū Jaʿfar al-Mansūr himself was in this group, and we can therefore infer that the meeting took place some time before al-Mansūr could openly claim the Caliphate.  

Al-Tabari's report of the same meeting confirms the presence of al-Mansūr and of a mutaṣīla, but does not mention either 'Amr or Wāṣil.  

In fact, it is very doubtful whether 'Amr participated in this plot, and even if he did, his involvement was short-lived. 'Amr respected Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh for his piety, but he did not regard him as the mahdī.  

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101 See al-Tabari, Taʾrīkh al-Rusūl wa l-Mūsā, ed. de Goeje (Leiden, 1964), 3, vol. 1, p. 149/5, where 'Amr is reported to have said: "By God, if the umma were to entrust me with its affairs, I would not know where to put them" (i.e., to whom to entrust them). In another instance al-Tabari reports that 'Amr was resigned to seeing his dīn dwindle away, because he did not trust anyone (ibid., p. 7). This resignation won him the title of "a coward", but even this did not change 'Amr's preference for "the shade and cool water" over the treachery of politics. See 'Abd al-Jabbar, Fadıl, pp. 230/5-8, 14-19, 246/3-4.  

102 Maṣāḥif, pp. 206, 214, 293; Madelung's contention (Der Imām, p. 37, n. 165), that Maṣāḥif fails to mention the presence of any Muʿātazila in this meeting, is incorrect. On Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd Allāh see L. Vezza Vaglieri, El, s.v., and Lassner, op. cit., pp. 71-87.  

103 Maṣāḥif, pp. 206-209.  

104 Taʾrīkh, 3, 1, pp. 143, 152; Madelung, Der Imām, p. 37, following Nallino, identifies this Muʿātazila as the political (as opposed to theological) Muʿātazila. But the participation of "real" Muʿātazilites like Bashir al-Rahbāl in the revolt of Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd-Allāh (145 H, see below, note 105), indicates that the mutaṣīla who came to the meeting was practicing ḫisāʾ as yet another level.  


al-Mansūr was already caliph, 'Abdallāh b. al-Hasan wrote to 'Amr to ask his support against al-Mansūr; 'Amr excused himself.  

When Muḥammad's brother, Ibrāhīm, was preparing his revolt, some of the Muʿātazila joined him, but 'Amr neither supported him nor turned him over to al-Mansūr  

al-Mansūr had great respect for 'Amr; 'Amr, for his part, preferred to keep aloof from him too. The picture of 'Amr's political (or rather, apolitical) behavior as it emerges from these anecdotes is fairly consistent. The anecdote quoted above about the consultation at the house of 'Uthmān al-Mahžūmī can therefore be taken as a fair example of the dynamics of political relations between Wāṣil and 'Amr. Despite his admiration for Wāṣil and his closeness to him, 'Amr did not adopt Wāṣil's political views.  

What brought them together was not a political understanding. Nor was it political cooperation that kept the movement as a whole together. In fact, any attempt to find a political classification that would fit the whole early Muʿātazila is bound to encounter serious problems. We have seen the Shīʿite, particularly Zaydīte, eagerness to claim the Muʿātazila as its own. But al-Maṣāḥif clearly informs us that according to the Muʿātazila anyone can be an imām, i.e., the imām need not necessarily be a Qurayshite (let alone a descendant of Affī). Al-Maṣāḥif's information ties in well with the attempt of some scholars to show the existence of a certain affinity between the early Muʿātazila and...
and the Khawārij.111 There are, however, some equally important indications of affinities between the early Muʿtazila and the Murjīʿa.112 And although the Muʿtazila as a whole accepted the dogma of "the intermediary state", its interpretation by the various Muʿtazilites reveals a wide range of politico-religious views.113

The political pluralism of the Muʿtazila is epitomized in the question of imāmat al-fāḍil wa-t-nafsī.114 In his report on the Muʿtazila, al-Nāṣīhī Al-Akbar distinguishes two groups: those who believe that the Muslim community should always have an imām, and those who regard the imām as dispensable.115 This last group al-Nāṣīhī identifies as the Śūfīyyat al-Muʿtazila. The figures listed in this group are not very well known;116 They are described as puritans who objected to the accumulation of personal property,117 and who aspired to a pious Muslim community, different from all other earthly communities. Their view on the imāma reflects a refusal to deal with

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111 See Šāhīz, Bayān, I, p. 23, and compare al-Muharrad, Kāmil, I, pp. 546, 547, and esp. p. 446; Nyberg, E., p. 789; Bernard, Art. Cit. above, note 51; Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 47, sees a certain resemblance of the Muʿtazila to the Islāfiyya. His attempt to see in Wāṣīl’s muḥājara to ‘Amr ‘a kharjījī tendency’, ibid., p. 53 is, however, mistaken; Wāṣīl’s argumentation is presented as an ʾitāl, an argument ad absurdum, and does not reflect Wāṣīl’s own opinion.

112 Al-Khayyāt, Iniṣārār, p. 975; Ibn al-Muṭtaḍī, Muṣāra, pp. 1120-21, 1127-21; ʿAbd al-Jabarī, Fadīl, pp. 229-40 (concerning the connection with Gharbī), and ʿAbd al-Jazarī, Muṣāra, pp. 331-21, compare al-Shāhristānī, Miṣbāḥ, pp. 331-2 (about faith as a complex of the ‘qualities of goods’), and ʿAbd al-Nāṣīhī al-Akbar, Uṣūl, pp. 634-4-64-3 (about their common view concerning the imāma).

113 See, for instance, al-Nāṣīhī al-Akbar, ibid., pp. 49-61; Malaiʿ, Taḥābih, pp. 305-14, 3213-3316; Al-Muṣāra, Al-ṣanāda, pp. 817 - 132. Al-Balkhī was apparently aware of this political pluralism, and he fidgets in an attempt to reconcile it with the theory that the name Muʿtazila originated from the question of al-manṣūla bayna al-manṣūlatayni (Maṣūlā, pp. 115-15). Al-Muṣāra, Al-ṣanāda, pp. 305-14, 3213-3316; Al-Muṣāra, Al-ṣanāda, pp. 817 - 132. Al-Balkhī was apparently aware of this political pluralism, and he fidgets in an attempt to reconcile it with the theory that the name Muʿtazila originated from the question of al-manṣūla bayna al-manṣūlatayni (Maṣūlā, pp. 115-15).

114 Although, as noted by Van Ess (Frühe muʿtazilische Häresiographie, p. 44), it does not figure in Muslim heresiography among the staple Muʿtazilite dogmas.

115 Uṣūl, pp. 49-50; Al-Muṣāra, Muṣūl, VI, p. 235-7.

116 See Van Ess, ibid., pp. 43-44.

117 ʿAbd al-Jabbarī, Iniṣārār, pp. 5317, 699-10, 774, and see the following note.

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18 On the beginnings of the Śūfī movement see J. Spencer Trimmingham, The Sufi Orders in Islam (Oxford, 1971), pp. 4-5. Van Ess has argued that ascetic tendencies became more pronounced in the Muʿtazila only later, after the revolt of Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zākiyya ("Lecture", p. 66) or from the time of Abū Abī Mūṣā al-Mudār (Frühe muʿtazilische Häresiographie, pp. 114-15) As I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, however, in all our sources draw a picture of an ascetic early Muʿtazila, of which al-Mudār would be a natural descendant.

19 Uṣūl, p. 51.

20 Ibid., pp. 51-52.

21 Ibid., pp. 283-5.


23 "Imāma", which is compared to birds hovering over their heads, see Al-Jāhiz, Bayān, I, p. 26; ʿAbd al-Jabbarī, Fadīl, p. 242-15.

24 "Qās ḥuddāl"; Iṣkhāq, ibid., p. 263-15.
wide rimmed sandals made of two strips. Their lower lip was shaven, and their moustache closely cut. It was not Wāsil who had fashioned this uniform; there are indications that at least some of these peculiarities were commonly recognized as the signs of asceticism and piety. We are told that the du‘ār’s mission kept them away from their families, a trait which, though not necessarily implying continence, is certainly meant to bring to mind the ascetic ‘ūmir. Şafwān also praises the du‘ār’s for their nightly vigils, and says that their foreheads were marked by constant prostration. We recognize here the old Mu’tazili, ‘Armi’s people. But the organizer, the one who launched the movement, was Wāsil. The du‘ār’s were his exclusive concern; he was the one who gave them their instructions, and they showed him total and unswerving obedience.

125 "Li-nā‘īdi qibālūn fī ru’ūd rāhib al-khwāsīn", ibid., p. 2614. The two strips of the sandal were considered suuna, see al-Jāmi` al-Sālih . . . Il-Bubhārī, ed. M. Rudolph Krohl-Th.W. Juynboll (Leiden, 1906), vol. IV, pp. 88-89; Wensinck, Concordance, av. “rū‘.”

126 "Anfāsa ma‘alāma”, Lbmi, ibid., p. 2614.

127 ‘Ilmū fi shābī, ibid., p. 2653.

128 al-Tirmidhī (Nawzid al-wsili fī ma‘ārifat aabādī al-rasīd [al-Madina], p. 919) enumerates a few characteristics of Christian monks, for whom seclusion (ṣa‘la, 118 or ṣarābi, 116) was too demanding, and who substituted for it, superficial worldly zubd (11: 22-23). Among these characteristics are the turban (al-imma na‘ma‘a, cp. n. 123 above), the trimmed garment (‘ashmih al-thiyāb, cp. n. 124 above), and the trimmed moustache (‘u‘f al-shārīb, cp. n. 127 above). Whatever other implications this passage may have, it is clear from it that these external peculiarities were recognizable in the ninth century as signs of zubd, and may have been associated with Christian asceticism. For the reference to this important text I am indebted to Dr. S. Sviridov. It may be worth noting that the Mu‘tazilites saw no harm in their resemblance to monks (al-Khayyām, Imitāt, pp. 690-1/38 - 702).

129 al-‘Askarī, Awārī, p. 1860.

130 See al-Jāhiq, Bayān, p. 2610-12, and note 34 above.

131 al-Hāfi, ibid., p. 257; ‘Abd al-Jabārī, Fadd ; ibid., p. 2374-16 (where ‘Uthmān al-Tawīl is quoted as saying: “As long as Wāsil lived, until he died, we did not consider ourselves as having any dominion over ourselves. For he would say to one of us, ‘Set out to a certain country’, and it was impossible to refuse him.”

The beginnings of the Mu’tazila

According to Abū Ḥillāl al-‘Askarī (d. after 400 H) Wāsil was the first to be called mu’tazili. It is very difficult to accept this statement literally; as we have seen, the assumption that around Wāsil’s time there were other people called mu’tazila is more consonant with the available evidence. But certainly one could claim that Wāsil was the first mu’tazili in the sense that Wāsil turned the mu’tazila into a movement. Before Wāsil the ‘Mu’tazila’ was a term applied, without much precision, to various kinds of ascetics. It is only after Wāsil had appeared on the scene (and probably not immediately thereafter), that the name Mu’tazila came to designate one specific movement, holding specific doctrines.

Yet we should not think that Wāsil’s only contribution to the Mu’tazila was his practical talent. He was the one who gave the pious ascetic Mu’tazila an intellectual twist. ‘Amr too was involved in theological questions, such as free will or God’s unity. But it is to Wāsil that all the records point as the initiator of kalamic discourse.

This is perhaps not the right place to offer a comprehensive analysis of Wāsil’s kalām. We should at least note, however, that in this matter, the cryptic reports to hand corroborate one another, and appear to be authentic. They hardly ever attempt to attribute to him such later developments as ‘the five principles’. Wāsil developed his own terminology, which appears in various unrelated texts, and testifies to Wāsil’s systematic thought. By way of an example of this systematic thought we can mention the concept of the criteria of knowledge (awjii at-lim). Al-Jāhiq mentions four such criteria as Wāsil’s test for the truth. According to ‘Abd al-Jabārī Wāsil produced the concept

‘Uthmān knew this from his own experience (Fadd, p. 241-13).


133 Mașīfi, Mawājī, VI, p. 212; VI, pp. 234-236.

134 Quoted by al-‘Askarī, Awārī, p. 1296-7. Wāsil’s truth does not relate to the correctness or otherwise of legal rulings, as suggested by Madelung (Der Imam, p. 15) following S. Pines, Beiträge zur islamischen Auseinandersetzung (Berlin, 1930), p. 126, n. 3, although Wāsil’s erudition included also faqīh, see ‘Abd al-Jabārī, Fadd, p. 236-16. Nor is he talking about the authenticity or otherwise of hadith, as suggested by Van Ess (‘L’autorité de la tradition prophétique dans la théologie mu’tazilite’, La notion d’autorité au Moyen Age: Islam, Byzance, Occident (Paris, 1980), p. 213; Rather, Wāsil is above all concerned
of the criteria for knowledge in a dispute between Ja‘far b. ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Iṣḥāqī and the Buddhists. On this occasion Wāsīl asserted that one way (waṣj) to know God is by means of the proof by deduction (dalīl)135 Wāsīl’s preoccupation with epistemology is confirmed by the list of his works, which includes the title "a book concerning the way to the knowledge of Truth."136 It is probably in this book that he developed his concept of "criteria". Another example is Wāsīl’s interest in logical treatment of exegetical problems. We hear that he wrote a book on "mā’tāni al-Qur‘ān,"137 and in fact, according to another report, Wāsīl was the first to establish such exegetical rules as the distinction between general and specific verses.138 And, of course, his idea of the intermediary state, a brilliant kalamic solution to a delicate problem, should also be mentioned in this context: both his book on the mansīla bayna al-mansūlatayn and his kitāb al-tawba probably dealt with it.139 Wāsīl’s theoretical, theological interest in this question appears to be undeniable.

These concepts and topics characterizing Wāsīl’s thinking are often mentioned in passing in our sources. The first two examples cannot be regarded as conscious inventions, since they are only marginal in the context in which they appear, no special attention being drawn to them. All three are examples of topics peripheral to later kalamic, Mu‘tazilite thought, and they consequently cannot be suspected of being projections of later problems. We must therefore assume that what we are told of Wāsīl’s preoccupation with theological matters is authentic.

Van Ess has suggested that “the inclination towards systematic

with true as opposed to false religion, see below, notes 146-147 and the corresponding text, and see S. Stroumsa, "The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature", Harvard Theological Review, 78 (1985) pp. 101-114.


137 Ibn al-Nadim, loc. cit.

138 Al-Askarī, Awdīl, p. 1299-11.

139 Ibn Khallikān, Waqayāt, IV, p. 11; Dhahabi, Miftāh, III, pp. 267 ff. On the relevance of the tawba to the intermediary state see, for example, Miftāh, Murūji, VI, p. 22.

140 Van Ess, "Lecture", p. 66.


144 See Abū al-Jabār, Fadīl, p. 2356-7 and notes 25-26 above.


146 Al-Bakhtī, loc. cit.

147 Al-Hūr al-‘īn, p. 2086.
to establish belief in Islam on a sound theoretical footing.

We have only vague information about the ways in which the Mu'tazilite da'wā functioned. Nevertheless it seems clear that it was the kernel from which Mu'tazilite Kalam grew.

It appears, then, that what drew Wāsīl and 'Amr together was the desire to start a movement of religious and intellectual renovation. The movement had a strong pietistic colouring, introduced by 'Amr and his group of early Mu'tazilites, who also brought with them the name Mu'tazila. The movement also had a strong interest in theology, and it sent emissaries to propagate its theological ideas by means of religious disputation.

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If the picture presented above is accurate, then some current views on early religious development in Islam must be modified.

1. The notion, already common among the Muslim heresiographers, that the various religious movements of mature Islam were already distinct and separate in the early Islamic period, appears to be false.148 Theology and asceticism, Kalam and Sufism, all emerged from the same milieu.149 The terms used to describe this milieu, zuhād, nusṣāk, mu'tazila, and even qadariyya, were vague and were loosely applied to a variety of attitudes.150 Only later, as specific attitudes became clearly defined and differentiated, did the various

terms become proper names of specific groups and religious movements.

2. The political interpretations of the rise of the Mu'tazila are indeed very appealing. They fit the prevalent basic assumption of modern research (as well as of many Muslim heresiographers) that every religious development in Islam had originally a political meaning.151 A political interpretation of the rise of the Mu'tazila also makes it easier to account for the Mu'tazilite fervour of the 'Abbasids during the nīla.

But a political understanding of the rise of the Mu'tazila fails to account for the Mu'tazila itself. It provides no explanation for the transition from a supposedly politically centered movement to Mu'tazilite Kalam. There is moreover no one political platform on which all early Mu'tazilites were united. In fact, one could almost see in the early Mu'tazila a miniature replica of political disagreement in Islam. We are therefore bound to reject the political approach to the problem of the Mu'tazila. As the name of the movement indicates, it grew on ascetic, not on political, ground. The Mu'tazilite movement started indeed with Wāsīl and 'Amr, and it was a movement of Kalam.

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148 That Muslim traditional heresiography tends to view the heresies as distinct from the beginning seems hardly to be demonstrated. As for modern scholarship, see, for example, P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarian* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 95, which, while admitting that "there is no intrinsic incompatibility between Sufism and theology", presents the two as emerging from different backgrounds.

149 This was already noted by S. Finch, who suggested that Mu'tazilite Kalam and a dominant Sufi tradition stem from the same school, that of Hasan al-Baṣrī. See *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. II, p. 788.

150 The most conspicuous example of the use of terms in a vague way is the use of the term qadariyya; see, for example, 'Abd al-Jabbar, *Fādi*, p. 167, as opposed to al-Baghdādi, *Fāriq*, pp. 92–93.