ARTICOLI MISCELLANEI

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The *Miḥna.* Deconstruction and reconsideration of the Muʿtazilite role in the "Inquisition"

1. *Introduction. Surfacing of the doctrine of the Created Qur'ān, and wider theological context*

This article begins by briefly setting out the main aspects of the theological background to the *Miḥna,* before going on to concentrate on the political features and to consider this topic in the light of material published relatively recently, which may cast a new light on its implementation. References to a wide range of literature, including contemporary and more recent sources, are included.

Both primary and secondary sources[1] suggest that the first proposer of the idea of the created Qur'ān, was Ğaʿd ibn Dirham, who was executed by the Umayyad caliph Hishām (d. 743/125) for his

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[1] Aḥmad Ibn M. Ibn Hanbal, *Kitāb al-radd ʿalā l-Zanādiqa wa l-Ğahmiyya*, Cairo, Dār al-maʿārif, 1973; ʿAbd Al-Raḥmān Dārimī, *Kitāb al-radd ʿalā l-Ğahmiyya*, ed. G. Vitestam, Lund – Leiden, E.J. Leiden, 1960; ʿAbd Al-Raḥmān Dārimī, *Al-naqd ʿalā Bishr ibn al-Marīsī*, ed. M.H. al-Fiqi, Cairo, Maktabat al-nahḍa al-miṣriyya, 1939; Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Malaṭī, *Al-tanbīh wa l-radd ʿalā ahl al-ahwā' wa l-bidʿah*, ed. S. Dedering, Istanbul, Maarif Matbaasi, 1936; ʿAbd Al-Qāhir Baghdādī, *Farq bayna al-Firaq*, ed. M. Badr, Cairo, Maktabat Dār al-ʿurūba, 1910; Ḥasan ʿAlī Ibn Ismāʿīl Ašʿarī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, Istanbul, 1929; ʿAbd Al-Qāhir Ğurğānī, *Al-Ḳāmil fī Ḍuʿafā' al-Rijāl*, ed. Suhayl Zakkar, Riyad, Dār al-ʿulūm, 1997; M. Ibn Jarīr Al-ḥabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, tr. C.E. Bosworth, Albany (NY), Suny Press, XXXII, 1987; ʿAlī Ibn Al-Ḥasan Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa maʿādin al-*ğawhar, tr. Barbier de Meynard et Pavet de Courteille, *Les Praires d'Or*, Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 1861-1877); Al-Ḥayyāt Abū Ḥusayn, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, tr. Nader, Paris, Vrin, 1957; Aḥmad Ibn ʿAbd Al-Ğabbār, *Kitāb al-faḍl al-iʿtizāl wa ṭabaqāt al-muʿtazila*, ed. Fu'ād Sayyid, Tunis, al-Dār al-tūnisiyya li-l-našr, 1393/1974;

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heretical theology. Ibn Ḫatīr, in *al-Bidāya wa l-Nihāya*, supported
the idea that those who deny ʿAllāh's attributes and say that the
Qurʾān is created are disciples of Ǧahm ibn Sawfān, who, has in
turn been considered as a follower of Ǧaʿd ibn Dirham and Bayān
ibn Samʿān.[2] It is difficult to justify inclusion of Ǧaʿd ibn Dirham
and Bayān ibn Samʿān in the members of the Ǧahamiyya school,
as they probably lived before Ǧahm ibn Sawfān, the school's
founder. Moreover, both of them resided in Iraq, while ibn Sawfān
spent most of his life in Ḫurāsān. Bayān ibn Samʿān, who was
probably of Yemenite origin, has been considered to be a member
of the Kaysāniyya, a proto-Šīʿite messianic sect.[3] As for Ǧaʿd ibn
Dirhām, the information emerging from Vajda's[4] analysis classifies
him as a Ǧahamite, but there are many doubts attached to this
classification. The elaboration of the idea of the creation of the
Qurʾān follows an evolving path of theological analysis that starts
in the first half of the eighth century and begins its association
with the *Miḥna* in the first half of the ninth. In addition to the
argument over the issue of the created Qurʾān, other important
theological topics were subject to discussion at this time, and con-
tributing to the theology which was emerging and maturing over
this period. Arguments surrounding the most prominent of these
are summarised below and their brief analysis is particularly rel-
evant for the understanding of the theological roots of the created
Qurʾān's dogma.

1.1. Authority and predestination

The problem of authority and God's will in the Qurʾān (XVII, 23)
is emphasized through these words: «And your Lord has decreed
(*qaḍä*) that you worship none but him», giving supreme authority
to ʿAllāh, and using the word *qaḍä* for God's command; however,

Aḥmad Ibn ʿAbd Al-Ǧabbar, *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa l-ʿadl*, ed. T. Husayn, Cairo, Maktabat al-nahḍa al-miṣriyya, 1969.

[2] Bayān ibn Samʿān at-Tamīmī, an Iraqi theologian on which we have little information, was accused by the Umayyad governor of Iraq Ḫālid ibn ʿAbdullāh al-Qasrī (he was probably *wālī* of Iraq between 725 and 738) and executed through crucifixion for having claimed to be a prophet. M.G.S. Hodgson, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2ed. (1960-2005), I, pp. 1116-1117, s. v. *Bayān ibn Samʿā*.

[3] M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Oxford, Oneworld, 1998, pp. 54-55.

[4] G. Vajda, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2ed., (1960-2005), III, pp. 748-749, s. v. *'Ǧaʿd ibn Dirham'*.

in XXXIII, 36, this authority to command mankind is also attributed to the joint command of God and the Prophet, with the same verb *qaḍä*, meaning to command, order or decide: «It is not for a believer, man or woman, when ʿAllāh and his Messanger have decreed a matter (*qaḍä*) that they should have any option in their decision. And whoever disobeys ʿAllāh and his Messanger, he has indeed strayed in a plain error». In this second verse it is clear that the power to decree also belongs to the Prophet Muḥammad, as apostle of God, who, although he is only a man, had this granted to him by God himself; in addition, there are other verses which emphasized the authority of the Prophet as Vicar of God on the earth with absolute power: «He who obeys the Messenger has indeed obeyed ʿAllāh, but he who turns away, then we have not sent you as a watcher over them (IV, 80)» and «Say: Obey ʿAllāh and obey the Messenger, but if you turn away, he is only responsible for the duty placed on him and you for that placed on you. If you obey him, you shall be on the right guidance. The Messenger's duty is only to convey (the message) in a clear way (XXIV, 54)». These verses show that God and the Prophet have the power to set out the right path for the *Umma.* However, other verses also indicate a suggestion of human free will and the ability of the human to act unconditionally: «In the right way have we guided him, be he thankful or ungrateful (LXXVI, 3)» and «This is an admonition: Whosoever will, let him take a (straight) Path to his Lord, but ye will not, except as God wills; for God is full of knowledge and wisdom (LXXVI, 29-30)». This means that man may respond to God's guidance either with gratitude and obedience or with ingratitude and unbelief; a human being has the power to choose God or to reject him.

Ghaylān al-Dimashqī (a Qadarite[5] author) tries to draw a distinction between God's will and God's pleasure. «And had ʿAllāh

[5] Al-Ašʿari in the *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* identifies the *qadariyya* as a pre-Muʿtazilite sect; the term *qadar* is also translated as fate and predestination, while the verb *qadara* is transposed with the meaning of decrees, orders, whilst also having the power of (*qadara ʿala*); as M. Watts says, the Qadarites were, like most theological schools, divided into different sects who proclaimed their beliefs in a similar manner. The members of this sect were in sharp contrast with the Umayyad Caliphate, which did not recognize their authenticity; they claimed that if the caliph had not followed the dictates of the Qurʾān, it was necessary that this authority was ousted from power. M. Seale, *Muslim Theology*, London, Luzac & Co, 1964, p. 38.

willed, He could have gathered them together (all) unto true guid-
ance (VI, 35)» and «God elects for himself whom he pleases and
guides unto Himself who turns repentant (XLII, 12)».[6] However, if
these verses could be interpreted as signs of God's pleasure and
not will, others are more focused on the strictness of God's pre-
destination (XIII, 27; II, 24; XXXV, 8 etc.). Prof. Wensinck in *Muslim
Creed* argues: «These quotations show that the advocates of predes-
tination as well as those of free will could claim a scriptural basis
for their views. Yet, to all appearances, the main attitude of Islām
was in favour of predestination».[7] It is evident that the Qur'ān,
on one hand, is the bearer of a message that empowers human
nature, whilst, on the other, proclaims the authority of 'Allāh over
his creature, limiting its scope for decision-making. We there-
fore briefly summarize that the Qur'ān is able to emphasize the
predestination of God as symptomatic of that control on the crea-
ture that the deity hierarchically imposed as an expression of his
omnipotence; nevertheless, human free will, on the contrary, is
indicative indeed of the community and personal individualism
that 'Allāh grants to be a judge of righteousness when it will be
necessary (*yawm al-dīn*, the day of judgement).

1.2. God's justice and human freedom

The concept of the Justice of God, which can be associated with
the doctrine of human responsibility, first emerged with Ḫawārij's
expression of the opinion that as: «a righteous God demand-
ing righteousness from His creatures»[8] God must act for a pur-
pose. There are two important aspects to this notion of justice:
a Good (*ḥasan*) and Evil (*sharr*) as objective concepts of the world,
which precede the determination made by religious laws, and the
existence of a divine tendency to make every day better (*al-aṣlaḥ*)
for man, because 'Allāh can not desire other than the Good. God
can not desire evil, and then order it; his will (*Irāda*) and his com-
mand (*'amr*) are identical and not inconsistent. Looked at from

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[6] All Qur'ān verses have been taken from the English translated version
of Rev. J.M. Rodwell, with an Introduction of Rev. G. Margoliouth, and from: *The
Noble Qur'ān: a Summarized Version of al-*Ṭabarī, *al-Qurṭubī and Ibn Kathīr with
Comments from Saḥīḥ of al-Buḫārī*, by Dr. M. Taqi ud-Din al-Hilali.

[7] A.J. Wensinck, *Muslim Creed: its Genesis and Historical Development*, Lon-
don, Routledge, 1979, p. 51.

[8] Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, pp. 21-38.

this standpoint, Evil is then an exclusively human creation. In the Qur'ān there are also many allusions to Heaven (*Ǧanna*) (II, 25, 82, 111; III, 136, 195-198 etc.) and Hell (*Ǧaḥīm*) (II, 39, 80-81; III, 12, 24, 151 etc.), and God says that believers will be given the opportunity to dwell in Paradise, while the deniers of the faith will sink to Hell. There are also verses within the Qur'ān (II, 123; III, 106-112, 130, 180, 185 etc.) that are related to Judgement Day (*yawm al-Dīn*). A problem which emerges from this approach, which sees God as the symbol and promoter of Justice, is that of predestination. Divine predestination would have the power to dominate man, who would therefore be unable to choose to act by respecting or denying the word of 'Allāh, because his future is already written. The strength and frequency of references to heaven, hell and doomsday within the Qur'ān suggested strongly that man must be free to act, and that there is a relationship between human freedom and God's justice. Before the *Miḥna* is historically and theologically evident that Mu'tazilite theories concerning the relationship between human free will and God's justice, were particularly rooted in a rationalist approach on Islamic thought which highlighted a leading human role to understand divine absolutism.

1.3. Uniqueness – 'God is one'

The Mu'tazilite concept of the uniqueness of God, the *Tawḥīd*, was set out by al-'Aš'ari in his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*. In some of the main passages of this work, he states that:

> The Mu'tazilites unanimously agreed that verily God is One. There is nothing whatever likes unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees. He is neither a body, a phantom, a person, a form, a piece of flesh, a quantity of blood, an individual, a substance, nor an accident. […] Nor does space encompass Him or time pass by Him. Neither does He admit of contact with, of retirement from, nor of penetration into places. Neither can He be characterized with the attributes of created beings indicative of their transitoriness, nor can He be qualified as finite. […] And He is unlimited and infinite. And neither can measures fathom Him nor veils screen Him, nor can the senses comprehend Him.[9]

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[9] Al-Aš'Ari, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, pp. 155-156.

According to the Mu'tazilite viewpoint, the concept of Eternal-
ity (*al-khulūd*), which is attributed to God by virtue of himself,
refers to something which in its existence has neither beginning
nor end.

> The Eternal, in this connection, must not only transcend any
> need of an existing being in order to originate Him, but also
> must be existing without any cause. This is because, if He
> needs an existing being who will originate him, that origina-
> tor definitely becomes more eternal than Him.[10]

A belief which is generally held by Mu'tazilism is that God
is Eternal: «Eternity is the peculiar attribute of the essence
of God. They then deny eternal attributes at all […] because, if the
attributes share eternity, which is the peculiar attribute (of the
essence of God), it means that they share the Godhead with God»[11]
Wāṣil ibn'Atā is reported by al-Shaharastānī as affirming this argu-
ment: «He who posits a *ma'na* and attribute as eternal, posits two
gods».[12] Although Wāṣil ibn ʿAtā denies the idea of assigning attri-
butes to God, as opposed to acknowledging a number of eternal
properties, the successors of this rationalist have regarded these
powers as attributable to the unity that is God. Abū al-Huḍayl
considers God's attributes to be identical with those of the divine
essence; Muʿammar b. ʿAbbād al-Sulamī seeks to free the
essence of God from the multitude of individual approaches,
while Abū Hāshim asserts that God possesses a knowledge that
is identical to his essence and that this does not exist separately
but concurrently with him. Omniscience (*ʿilm*), Life (*ḥayāt*), Power
(*qudra*), Will (*irāda*) and Word (*kalām*) are all attributable to this
essence (*dhāt*). Muʿtazilites theologians, through the divine one-
ness theory, underscores as the absence of the attributes of God
do coincide in the divine essence, as reported above: the world
of God for muʿtazilites is attributable to the essence of God and for
that reason to the same nature of ʿAllāh.

[10] Z. Bin Stapa, *A Discussion on the Concept of Tawhīd: the Viewpoint of the Mu'tazilites*, in «Hamdard Islamicus», XIX (1996), fasc. 1, p. 40.
[11] ʿAbd Al-Karīm Shaharastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, tr. D. Gimaret, G. Monnot, Paris, Unesco – Peters, 1986, p. 58.
[12] Shaharastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal*, p. 61.

1.4. The nature of God's Word

One question which occupied many theologians who were active around the time that the *Miḥna* began was whether God can be the author of a Word that man can directly hear and understand. This question has implications for the idea of a created Qur'ān, and for the *status* of the Qur'ān in time and eternity. Al-Ǧahm ibn Safwān denied that God speaks and that spoke to Moses, suggesting that ʿAllāh does not speak in the literary sense: «In order to communicate he creates the sound of speech which can be heard. This sound is figuratively called speech, although it is not genuine speech»[13] God is seen as being totally different from his creation and not describable using any of the attributes that apply to man, such as speech. The Qur'ān contains the statement: «We have made (*jaʿala*) it an Arabic Qur'ān (XLIII, 3)». The root (*jʿl*) of the verb *jaʿala* is usually translated as *to make*, *to put in place*, *to create*. Ibn Ḥanbal correctly pointed out that the verb *jaʿala* is also used in II, 124 concerning Ibrāhīm: «I shall make you (*innī jāʿiluka*) an Imām for mankind». In this case we could not use the term *create* in place of *jaʿala*, as the words *promote*, or *advance* are a more appropriate translation in this context. The question of the created or uncreated Qur'ān was also based on the commonly accepted dogma that everything besides God is created. Al-'Ašʿari, reporting on a variety of information coming from Kufan traditionalist sources on Abū Ḥanīfa in his *Kitāb al-Ibāna*[14], gives details confirming that the founder of *Ḥanafism supported the idea that the* Qur'ān was created. Sufyān al-Thawrī, Abū Ḥanīfa's chief rival in Kūfa at that time, and Abū Yūsuf, a student of *Ḥanīfa, argued that Abū Ḥanīfa supported this doctrine*. Later authors such as al-Buḫārī and Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal kept silence over the role played by Abū Ḥanīfa in the development of this doctrine. However, it seems fairly certain that the first individuals who supported the doctrine of the created Qur'ān were the members of the Ǧahamiyya and of the Ḥanafite Law school. The Muʿtazila supported this Dogma, assert-

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[13] W. Madelung, *The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Koran*, in «Journal of the American Oriental Society», CXXVII (1977), fasc. 2, p. 506.

[14] Al-'Ašʿari, *Kitāb al-Ibāna*, Haydarabad, Dāʾirat al-maʿārif al-ʿuṯmāniyya, 1948, p. 29.

ing that there is both the *Kalām*, the essence of God, and there is also the Word of God as related to temporality and geography.

If the Word, the Logos of God is eternal, his revelation is exclusively addressed to man to whom we can attribute many qualities, but not perpetuity. As the Qur'ān reached the Prophet in a specific historical age, how can a revelation that came in the seventh century in Arabia be eternal? It is necessary to distinguish what is this revelation and what is the Word of God. Since the revelation is something purely physical, resulting from a required physicality, the Qur'ān, as revelation, can only be created, because what actually belongs to God is not in an exact location and, as maintained previously, is eternal and is the expression of God's essence. Three main assumptions are finally necessary to better understand the findings concerning the theological dogma of the created Koran: firstly, on the one hand, the Qu'rān is a revealed Word for the exclusive use of human beings, whilst on the other hand, man is the only one able to actively seek to understand and interpret it (even centuries after the death of the Prophet). Secondly, 'Allāh is «the one and only, God, the eternal, absolute, he begetteth not, nor is he begotten and there is not like unto him (CXII)», the Word of God is God, the Will of God is God. Thirdly: the materialization of God's word, the Qur'ān as the Torah or the Gospels can only be expressed and understood by humans through a book (made of words), these books are not eternal but created, and even if we consider the Koran as the speech of God, this speech can only be comprehended by humans through words and sentences. The Mu'tazilites supported the view that God created his speech in an earthly substrate, believing that whilst God had made himself understandable to Moses from the tree, as to the prophet Muḥammad on the Ḥirā' mountain, we could not have said that 'Allāh spoke with both of them, because that would be to humanize the prerequisites of divinity.

Therefore, it is relevant to emphasize, as the dogma of the created Qur'ān is the evolution of a theological analysis that before reaching this assumption, had been able to rationally deal with human Free Will and God's predestination, *'adl 'Allāh* and human responsibility, the unity of God, its attributes and its essence. In my opinion, it could have been impossible to discuss on the creation of the World of God without a previous rational under-

standing about who is uniquely granted to exegetically interpret this Word, the relation between justice and religious moral values, the Qur'ān as essence of God and the Word as idiomatically structured to be understandable by humans.

2. *Political aspects of the Miḥna*

Before considering the politics of the *Miḥna* in detail, it is worth noting that the main contemporary sources on the *Miḥna* are in many cases linked to the views of those who actually suffered during this time. By way of example, the main texts on the *Miḥna*, in which the authors describe the events and the connection between the creation of the Qur'ān and the *Miḥna* and that we have already highlight at the beginning of article are the *Kitāb al-radd ʿalā l-Zanādiqa wa l-Ǧahmiyya* of M. Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-radd ʿalā l-Ǧahmiyya* and *al-naqd ʿalā Bishr ibn al-Marīsī* both of al-Dārimī, *al-Tanbīh wa l-radd ʿalā ahl al-ahwā' wa l-bidʿah* of al-Malaṭī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* of al-'Ašʿari and *Al-Ḳāmil fī Ḍuʿafā' al-Riǧāl* of ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Ǧurǧānī.

Also worthy of consideration are the historical texts of al-Ṭabarī, al-Masʿūdī and others, although these works do not fully set out for us the political and theological reasons behind the "Inquisition". All these sources mentioned above are linked to an analysis that originates from those who suffered directly or indirectly because of the *Miḥna* or have sided with the groups who contested al-Ma'mūn's decision to purse it. It is important to underline the fact that these sources show a real opposition to the Ǧahamite sect, which were the first to propose the concept of a created Qur'ān, in advance on the Muʿtazilite school. It is noteworthy that Muʿtazilite or pro-Muʿtazilite sources of the ninth and tenth centuries make very few mentions of the *Miḥna*. The *Kitāb al-Intiṣar* of al-Ḫayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-faḍl al-iʿtizal wa ṭabaqāt al-Muʿtazila* or *al-Mughnī* (as far as we can know) of ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār and also al-Ǧāhīẓ's texts are devoid of any reference to the *Miḥna*. This aspect of many contemporary sources must be borne in mind as we go on to examine the *Miḥna* in terms of a political initiative promoted as a result of the decision making and policy of al-Ma'mūn (r. 813/197-833/217), which was subsequently endorsed by al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 833/217 – 842/227) and al-Wāthiq (r. 842/227 – 847/232).

For Qasim Zaman[15], the *Miḥna* was the move towards challenging the authority of the *'Ulemā* and the caliph's conflict with them was provoked by his assertion of religious authority. To articulate views opposed to the caliph's dogma would be to actively express disagreement with the work of the highest authority of the *Umma*. «The *Miḥna* was the caliphate's most daring attempt to expand this symbolic religious leadership into a structured religious leadership that functioned as interpreters of Islamic Law».[16]

Al-Ma'mūn's effort to centralize power is one of the last challenges intended to maintain religious and spiritual power in the hands of a Caliphate that was a *Ḫalīfa 'Allāh*, and Patricia Crone and M. Hinds support this view.[17] However, al-Ma'mūn's political and religious behaviour with reference to his caliphate's authority showed a different approach. We cannot forget that this caliph had tried to restore a caliphal authority to Shī'ism, «[...] by designating the eighth Imām of the (proto) Imāmī Shī'ite as his successor, and next by assuming for himself the prerogatives of this Imām, displaying the religious authority which he had won thereby in the institution of the *Miḥna*».[18] It is therefore necessary to concentrate attention on the caliph's move towards reshaping the *Umma* in semblance of the early Islamic community, first of all by being united and secondly by reflecting the actions of the prophet Muḥammad. As expressed by P. Crone: «[...] Deputy of God (*Ḫalīfa 'Allāh*) is a title that implies a strong claim to religious authority».[19] If we consider this term it is clear that as Deputy, as Vicar of God, the *Ḫalīfa* had already achieved an authority that is both political and religious. So why has al-Ma'mūn tried to improve his position still further as the main guide of the *Umma*, if the concept of *Ḫalīfa 'Allāh* was already an expression of his position? Why did al-Ma'mūn also need to be addressed as Imām? The term *Imām* was probably used for the first time as a definition of himself by the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd I (680/60-683/63) and as *Imām al-muslimīn wa-ḫalīfat rabb al-'ālamīn*, by 'Abd al-Mālik (685/65-

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[15] M. Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early 'Abbāsids*, Leiden, Brill, 1997, p. 106.

[16] T. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 98.

[17] P. Crone, M. Hinds, *God's Caliph. Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 13.

[18] Crone, Hinds, *God's Caliph*, p. 13.

[19] Crone, Hinds, *God's Caliph*, p. 5.

705/85) and Hishām (724/105-743/125); however, the definition of Imām is that of somebody to be imitated, and applies regardless of whether they are head of the state or not. A simple prayer leader was an Imām: you stood behind him and did as he did in performing the ritual prayer. The first Imām was certainly the Prophet Muḥammad, as the first Muslim, the first repository of a divine message, and the first able to show how to pray. After the death of the Prophet (632/11), the Imamate passed to Abū Bakr. For ʿUthmān's opponents, the third caliph (as Vicar of the Prophet and follower of God) violated the law in a manner incompatible with his status of Imām; it was therefore necessary for him to resign.

It is apparent that the concepts of *Ḫalīfa* and *Imām* in the first period of the *Umma* were quite similar but also subtly different. The *Ḫalīfa rasūl Allāh*, and then *Ḫalīfa Allāh* as Vicars of the Prophet and of God, expressed a role that was political and religious both in respect of Muḥammad's prophetic and political duties and in accordance with the same divine message; «The Imām performed two tasks indispensable for the achievement of salvation. First and most fundamentally, he gave legal existence to the *Umma*. Without him there was no caravan, only scattered travellers; they became a community by their agreement to travel under him. Hence one could not be a member of the Muslim community without declaring allegiance to its leader […] the Prophet is credited with the statement that «he who dies without an *Imām* dies a pagan death».[20]

> Nobody could achieve salvation without an *Imām* […] Thus we are told that when the Prophet died, the Muslims hastened to elect a new *Imām* because they did not want to spend a single day without being part of a community (*ǧamāʿa*). […] The second task of the *Imām* was to lead the way. He did not simply cause the caravan to exist: he also guided it to its right destination. An *Imām* was somebody to be imitated, as the dictionaries say: the believer went where he went and expected to prosper together with him in this world and the next. A true *Imām* needed to be an *Imām al-hudā*, an *Imām* of guidance who could be trusted to show his followers the

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[20] Aḥmad Ibn M. Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, Egypt, Maṭbaʿah al-Maymaniyyah, 1895, IV, p. 96.

right paths. [...] Without him one would not know where to go.[21]

The objectives of al-Ma'mūn's endeavours during the twenty years of his caliphate can be understood as:

1. To reconcile the *Umma* by limiting the divisions within it, reinforcing the role of those who would achieve this result (al-Ma'mūn and 'Alī ar-Riḍā). The failure of this goal is linked both to the failure of the majority of the 'Abbāsid family members to accept the objective of achieving a real reconciliation of the *Umma* (with the outbreak of a second civil war in the 'Abbāsid period after the death of al-Amīn), and to the denial of adequate support from the proto-Shī'a sect to 'Alī ar-Riḍā (only the Zaydites really actively supported this initiative, and after his murder moreover, the situation changed further). It is prominent to underline that only a few minority of the proto Shī'a sects sustained al-Ma'mūn's tentative to improve the unity of the *Umma*; it is therefore possible that this 'Abbāsid's caliph chose to give the inheritance to 'Alī ar-Riḍā for a mere political calculation; however, is it undeniable that al-Ma'mūn took over political risks in pursuing this attempt of unity, that no caliph, earlier or later, would have never consider.

2. To assume for himself the prerogatives of the *Imām*, displaying the religious authority which he had won thereby in the institution of the *Miḥna*.

According to Van Ess,

Like his predecessors, al-Ma'mūn considered himself the heir to the Prophet. In addition, he liked to play the role of teacher, of pastor keeping watch over his flock (*ra'iyya*) − that is, over the community of believers. The *Risālat al-Ḫamīs* refers to him as the people's guide, *Imām al-hudā*, inspired by divine instruction. That *Risālat*, or treatise, appeared at a timely moment. It was composed in AH 198, hence shortly after

[21] P. Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political thought*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 22.

the death of al-Ma'mūn's brother al-Amīn, and in the office of al-Faḍl ibn Sahl, who was al-Ma'mūn's vizier in Marv, Ḫurāsān, where the caliph was residing at that time.[22]

It is certainly apparent that the *Miḥna* is strictly connected with the caliph's effort to, firstly, bring together the *Umma*, and secondly, to renew the coexistence between the *Ḫalīfa* and *Imām* figures, as it was at the beginning of the Islamic era. In the view supported by Patricia Crone, the guidance of *Imām al-hudā* was seen as primarily legal: he declared what was right and wrong, and the coercion he would use to prevent people behaving in a manner not appropriate to Islamic law was part of his guidance too.

This image of the Caliph-*Imām* presupposed a vigorous involvement in both the political and the religious field, with the Caliph persisting as the only authority able to conduct the *Umma* following the Prophet's path and teachings. However, this political-religious vision concerning authority was reconciled with the Zaydite idea of Imām in which, as shown by Aḥmad Maḥmūd Subḥī,[23] the Imām who is able to meet the needs of the *da'wa*, the propaganda requirement, also has the necessary ability to reach the sources of power and to convince the *Umma*, to be the fitting descendent of the Prophet. In comparison with the proto-Imamite sect linked to 'Alī ar-Riḍā, the Zaydites envisaged a much more active figure of Imām, an individual who could be active both politically and religiously. Al-Ma'mūn imagined that his qualifications as a teacher placed him just below the Prophet, in the position of a speaking heir of his message.

Another political aspect of the *Miḥna* is related to clashes between the different religious authorities that lived in the court of Baghdād. The presence of several intellectuals from different backgrounds at al-Ma'mūn's court indicates that the caliph would be encircled by an intelligentsia some of whom would not necessarily be confined to a rationalist approach. Nimrod Hurvitz supports this view:

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[22] J. Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 142.

[23] Aḥmad Maḥmūd Subḥī, *L'école Zaydite: ses mérites et ses faiblesses, al-Madhhab al-Zaydī*, tr. M. Borrmans, in «*Études arabes dossiers*. Textes sur le Shī`isme», Roma, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e di Islamistica, 1993, p. 45.

[…] al-Ma'mūn's philanthropic activities covered the full spectrum of Islamic intellectual currents […] Two features of al-Ma'mūn's religious-political policy deserve emphasis. First, al-Ma'mūn did not display political favouritism towards any of the trends that made up the *mutakallimūn* milieu. He helped all the members of this milieu by placing them in positions of intellectual influence and supporting them financially. Whatever his personal beliefs may be, he chose counsellors from different theological currents. If we want to reconstruct how al-Ma'mūn envisioned the religio-political map, we ought to ignore the theological nuances that distinguished one *mutakallimūn* trend from another, because in a political sense al-Ma'mūn did not have any preferences. Second, the significant religion-cultural divide during al-Ma'mūn's reign was between the traditionalist and the *mutakallimūn.* At the outset, al-Ma'mūn's policy towards the traditionalists followed the lines of previous caliphs, as he, like them, distributed financial aid to the traditionalists. However, when al-Ma'mūn realized that the traditionalists accepted his financial support but not his intellectual directives, he changed his policy. The fact of the matter is that long before the *Miḥna,* al-Ma'mūn failed to attain control of the traditionalists and he was probably aware of their independence and their success in winning the support and admiration of the masses.[24]

The *Miḥna* is also symbolic of the move towards eradication from the community of the members who opposed the caliph and the *mutakallimūn*'s theological point of view. Al-Ma'mūn described them not as the *muḥaddithūn*, but as those who think they follow the dictates of the *Sunna.* The caliph did not use the term of *'Ulemā* which refers to all scholars, but was referring to a specific group of the *'Ulemā,* attacking them through the inquisition and with the support of those who surrounded him, using intelligence and rational argument. Some were more forceful than others in pursuing the policy; al-Ma'mūn, al-Mu'taṣim and al-Wāthiq were protagonists in the inquisition because they decided to act forcefully as inquisitors. Nevertheless, they were actively helped by some relevant protagonists of the court, the governor of Iraq, Isḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm, the Quḍāt (and after al-Ma'mūn, Qāḍī al-Quḍāt) A. ibn Abī Du'ād, Šu'ayb ibn Sahl al-Rāzī, Muḥammad ibn Abī al-Layth al-Aṣamm, and some others who will probably remain unknown.

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[24] N. Hurwitz, *The Formation of Hanbalism: Piety into Power, Culture and Civilization in the Middle East*, New York, Routledge Curzon, 2002, p. 120.

If we only imagine the figure of al-Ma'mūn as being that of a caliph who sought exclusively to centralize his power, we are wrong. As historically maintained by many authors such as Gabrieli[25], Sourdel[26] and M. Watt[27], al-Ma'mūn could delegate substantial power to some trusted people, even at the risk of being deeply disappointed. The experience with his first viṣīr, al-Faḍl ibn Sahl is well known. The caliph, who had placed excessive trust in his vizier, in spite of warnings from his top generals (Ṭaḥir ibn al-Ḥusayn and Harthama), had then to come to the realization that the decision to designate 'Alī al-Rīḍā as his successor had provoked a violent and dangerous insurrection within the 'Abbāsid family, a development with was at variance with the situation reported to him by al-Faḍl.[28] With this in mind, we can not simplistically regard al-Ma'mūn as one who sought to centralize power in his hands; the *Miḥna* still remained an initiative aimed at re-alignment and strengthening of the political and religious structure of the caliphate, encouraging a strict collaboration between the *Ḫalīfa* and the entourage of the theological and juridical court. However, we cannot deny that the power to dismiss a judge and to remove him from his office was solely in the hands of the caliph.

As reported by M. Tillier in *Les cadis d'Iraq et l'Etat abbasside (132/750-334/945)*,[29] during the first half of the third century, the pro-ḥanafite judges played a predominant role in Baghdād and for the period of the *Miḥna*, the theological opinion of the *quḍāt* had a significant role in defining their function.

> La position de force qu'occupaient déjà les ḥanafites à Bagdād favorisa leur maintien sur le devant de la scène: comme le montre N. Tsafrir, leur partage en plusieurs tendances théologiques permit au pouvoir d'y choisir les cadis au gré de sa politique.[30] C'est pourquoi la fin de la *miḥna* et l'instauration d'une politique traditionaliste sous al-Mutawakkil et ses suc-

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[25] F. Gabrieli, *Al-Ma'mun e gli Alidi*, Leipzig, E. Pfeiffer, 1929.

[26] D. Sourdel, *La politique r*éligieuse du Califer Abbasside *Al-Ma'mun*, in «Revue des Études Islamiques», I (1976), pp. 27-46.

[27] Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*.

[28] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, XXXII, pp. 78-83.

[29] M. Tillier, *Les cadis d'Iraq et l'Etat abbasside (132/750-334/945)*, Damascus, Ifpo, 2009, pp. 157-158.

[30] N. Tsafrir, *The History of an Islamic School of Law*, Harvard, Harvard series in Islamic Law, 2004, p. 47.

cesseurs (à partir de 237/851)[31] ne renversa pas l'orientation juridique de la judicature. Les califes modifièrent leur recrutement selon des critères théologiques et méthodologiques: la majorité des cadis nommés sur Madīnat al-Manṣūr après al-Mutawakkil comptèrent parmi les *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīṯ*, alors que le courant des *aṣḥāb al-ra'y* était majoritaire à la période précédente, tandis qu'al-Muhtadī privilégia de nouveau un ḥanafisme non traditionaliste.[32] Cependant, ces variations se produisirent principalement à l'intérieur du *maḏhab* ḥanafite qui restait l'école de la majorité des cadis de Baghdād.[33]

It is therefore evident that, on one side, the caliph's power was still predominant in the process of selecting judges in the first half of the ninth century, while on the other, even within the Ḥanafi school, there were divisions between those who supported the *Miḥna* and those who widely rejected it. It is feasible that al-Ma'mūn's attitude, previously more open toward those with theological and legal skills within his court, was modified in the later years by the emergence of a clearer purpose in the reinforcement of his authority. The role of *Qāḍī al-Quḍāt,* (the chief of judges), as expressed by I. Bligh Abramsky,[34] reached the most significant level of responsibility during the *Miḥna,* due to the close and exclusive partnership established with the caliph, and the political and religious power that the *qāḍī al-quḍāt* achieved maintaining this position. If this office was created by the caliph Ḥarūn al-Rashīd (H. Abū Yūsuf[35] was the first), a more fundamental advancement of this process emerged in the second part of al-Ma'mūn's reign, after the end of the civil war won against Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī. The first relevant *Qāḍī al-Quḍāt* during al-Ma'mūn's reign was Yaḥyā ibn Aktham (a known pederast), a judge who was probably born in Marv but who was culturally shaped in Baṣra. He was almost certainly appointed as *Qāḍī al-Quḍāt* during the 826/210-

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[31] C. MELCHERT, *Religious Policies of the Caliphs from Al-Mutawakkil to Al-Muqtadir, A.H. 232-295*, in «Islamic Law and Society», III (1996), fasc. 3, p. 326.

[32] MELCHERT, *Religious Policies of the Caliphs from Al-Mutawakkil*, p. 337.

[33] TILLIER, *Les cadis d'Iraq et l'Etat abbasside (132/750-334/945)*, p. 158.

[34] I. BLIGH-ABRAMSKY, *The Judiciary, as a Governmental Administrative Tool in Early Islam*, in «Journal of economic and social history of the Orient», XXXIV (1992), p. 46.

[35] H. Abū Yūsuf (d. 798/181) was an eminent member of the Ḥanafite school, some of his opinions differ from those of Abū Ḥanifa, probably on the basis of traditions not available to the earlier scholar.

827/211 period. Al-Mas'ūdī in the *Murūǧ*[36] wrote that the caliph and Yaḥyā ibn Aktham were inseparable, and Ibn Ṭayfūr[37] nicknamed ibn Aktham as the true *visīr* of al-Ma'mūn, whilst Ibn al-Ǧawzī observed that the *Qāḍī* was consistently sitting very close to the caliph's throne. When Yaḥyā ibn Aktham was still a simple *Qāḍī* of Baṣra, al-Ma'mūn asked him to organize some encounters with the most highly accredited *fuqahā'* and *ahl al-ʿilm* of the capital. M. Tillers supports the view that Yaḥyā ibn Aktham became *qāḍī al-quḍāt* at a time when the caliph was already reflecting on:

> […] Muʿāwiya, en 211/826; il l'était certainement en 212/827, lorsqu'il proclama la supériorité de ʿAlī sur tout être humain après le Prophète et adopta officiellement le dogme de la création du Coran, et également en 215/830 ou 216/831, lorsqu'il voulut autoriser le mariage temporaire.[38]

However, Yaḥyā ibn Aktham was not theologically a supporter of al-Ma'mūn's thought, and has been judged by al-Ḫaṭīb, Ibn Ḥallikān and F. Jad'ān[39] to be a traditionalist and a supporter of *ahl al-sunna,* a position that is certainly contrary to the dogma of the created-Qur'ān. The military involvement of al-Ma'mūn against the Byzantines, which would further legitimize his role as *ḫalīfa*, saw, up to 832/217, the presence of the *qāḍī al-quḍāt*. When the caliph was in Egypt with the army, he suddenly accused ibn Aktham of not being sufficiently trustworthy and sent him back to Baghdād. In the letters written to the successor al-Muʿtaṣim, al-Ma'mūn justified this decision, accusing the previous *qāḍī al-quḍāt* of being depraved and corrupted. The choice of Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād as *qāḍī al-quḍāt* was probably suggested by al-Ma'mūn to al-Muʿtaṣim, and confirmed by the latter. Again, it is important to focus on the close relationship between the neo- *qāḍī* and neo-Caliph; the lack of knowledge of the Islamic religion on the part of al-Muʿtaṣim (who had always been a soldier and not a scholar of religious sciences), was compensated for by the supreme judge's high level of ability in rhetoric and dialectic, although, as reported

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[36] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ al-ḏahab*, voll. III, p. 434.

[37] Ibn ʿAbī Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Bagdād*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid b. al-Ḥasan al-Kawṯarī, Cairo, Maktab našr al-ṯaqāfa al-islāmiyya, 1949, p. 139.

[38] Tillier, *Les cadis d'Iraq et l'Etat abbasside (132/750-334/945)*, p. 446.

[39] Jad'Ān, Fahmi, *Al-Miḥna. Bahth fī jadaliyyat al-dīnī wa-l-siyāsī fī l-islām*, Ammān, Dār al-shurūq, 1989, pp. 117-118.

by Ibn al-Nadīm,[40] Abī Duʾād was not the author of essays on Islamic Tradition or *Kalām.* His power and influence over al-Muʿtaṣim was so great as to effect a change in the caliph's opinion and the interpretation of the *ḫalīfa*'s thought.[41]

Finally, during his mandate, stopped only after the rise of al-Mutawakkil, Abī Duʾād worked to eliminate those who denigrated and accused him of not being orthodox and being at variance with Islām.

> Bien plus, Ibn Abī Duʾād profita de son influence pour nuire à ses ennemis: comme le père du poète Saʿīd b. Ḥumayd, un important savant muʿtazilite, manifestait son désaccord avec le grand cadi sur certains points de doctrine, celui-ci l'accusa publiquement d'être un *zindīq* et un *šuʿūbī,* et al-Muʿtaṣim le fit emprisonner.[42]

With this and other examples, it emerges ever more clearly that the deployment of the *Miḥna* was basically a political decision limited to a few actors in this historical period. However, we need to be cautious before identifying Ibn Abī Duʾād as being one of the main individuals responsible for the inquisition, as is reported by many authors. We also need to exercise caution because it is historically clear that the caliph al-Wāthiq, like al-Maʾmūn and more than al-Muʿtaṣim was certainly a staunch supporter of the created-Qurʾān. Unlike other *qāḍī al-quḍāt,* Ibn Abī Duʾād had a deep understanding of *Fiqh,* even if linked to a system of consensus based on sympathy and patronage, but he was probably not an implacable opponent of *ahl al-ḥadīth;* as reported by Ṭabar (†), Jadʿān[43] and Patton[44]. Ibn Abī Duʾād tried to save al-Ḫuzāʿī from the hands of al-Wāthiq, who killed him using the sword *Samsama.*

> La place exceptionnelle qu'occupèrent successivement Yaḥyā b. Aktham et Aḥmad b. Abī Duʾād auprès de trois califes abbas-

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[40] Ibn Al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist,* ed. Yūsuf ʿAlī Ṭawīl, Beyrouth, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, p. 296.

[41] Tillier, *Les cadis d'Iraq et l'Etat abbasside (132/750-334/945),* p. 451.

[42] Al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aġānī,* 25 voll., Beyrouth, Dār Iḥyāʾ al-turāṯ al-ʿarabī; W.P. Heinrichs, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2ed., (1960-2005), VIII, p. 856, s. v. *Saʿīd b.* Ḥumayd.

[43] Jadʿān Fahmi, *Al-Mihna. Bahth fī jadaliyyat al-dīnī wa-l-siyāsī fî l-islām,* p. 107.

[44] M.W. Patton, *Ahmed Ibn Hanbal and the Mihna: A Biography of the Imâm Including an Account of the Mohammedan Inquisition called Mihna, 218-234 A.H.,* Leiden, Brill, 1987, pp. 117-118.

sides semble donc liée à deux formes d'instrumentalisation de la judicature suprême. Le premier apporta au règne d'al-Ma'mūn la façade respectable nécessaire à la reconnaissance de sa légitimité, préalable indispensable au renforcement de son autorité. Le second joua un rôle inverse: al-Muʿtaṣim, de formation militaire, voulut compléter l'œuvre d'al-Ma'mūn par sa célèbre réforme de l'armée. Son objectif final était similaire – renforcer l'autorité califale –, et la *miḥna* fut poursuivie. Mais étant lui-même piètre théologien, al-Muʿtaṣim préposa à cette mission son principal conseiller, Ibn Abī Du'ād. Donner au grand cadi un rôle de premier plan mettait en outre le calife à l'abri d'attaques dogmatiques auxquelles il aurait sans doute été en peine de répondre, contrairement à Ibn Abī Du'ād.[45]

It is also significant to recall that during the second period of al-Ma'mūn's reign, during the al-Muʿtaṣim and al-Wāthiq caliphates, the role of the *qāḍī al-quḍāt* was superior to that of the viṣ†r, as decided by Hārūn al-Rash†d's son and reported in the testament left to his heir. It is relevant to stress this aspect, as, in the first part of the ninth century, scholars of religious studies were close to the acquisition of more political power than the members of the caliphate's administration and chancellery, through the *Miḥna*.

I rather disagree with what M. Hinds argues in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*[46] concerning the inquisition, and, specifically, on the profound influence of Muʿtazilite thought on the *Miḥna*. His entry on this topic includes the following:

> In addition, there is the striking association of many Muʿtazilīs of the period with *Ḥanafī fiqh* (e.g. Watt, 286); and since the Muʿtazilīs never elaborated a system of legal doctrine of their own, it can be concluded that such people found "hardline" *Ḥanafī fiqh* perfectly congenial. In short, in the context of the *miḥna*, Muʿtazilī interests overlapped considerably with those of al-Ma'mūn, for all that they were not identical, and this is reflected in al-Ma'mūn's testamentary stipulation that al-Muʿtaṣim should make Ibn Abī Du'ād his closest confidant.[47]

First of all, it is prominent to underline that in the first half of the ninth century the difference between the role played by

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[45] Tillier, *Les cadis d'Iraq et l'Etat abbasside (132/750-334/945)*, pp. 452-453.
[46] M. Hinds, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2ed., (1960-2005), VII, p. 5, s. v. *Miḥna*.
[47] Hinds, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, pp. 5-6, s. v. *Miḥna*.

fuqahā', quḍāt and *mutakallimūn*, specifically in al-Ma'mūn's court, is of significance.

The connection between *ḥanafī* scholars and Mu'tazilite theologians is certain, but in this historical period there is not a member of this juridical school that has never defined himself as a Mu'tazilite and a *mutakallimūn* of this sect that, as theologians, has assumed the role of *qāḍī*. Did Ibn Abī Du'ād write anything relevant during his entire life? This author is the only Mu'tazilite *qāḍī* in the first half of the ninth century, and nothing is reported about his works. Within the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* is described as a poet and a master of poetry of many Mu'tazilite theologians.[48] The main question which still remains is why a caliph as intelligent as al-Ma'mūn and as historically recognized, deeply experienced in theology and jurisprudence, chose as *qāḍī* for the *miḥna* such an insignificant expert? Why did the caliph not asked the support of a more prominent mutakallim, such as al-Naẓẓām, Abū al-Hudhayl, al-Ǧāhiẓ or others? There are two main logic answers: the first is that al-Ma'mūn knew their appointments would be refused. Thumāma ibn Ashras, a Mu'tazilite theologian and a close friend of the caliph, had already refused to become viṣīr after the murder of al-Faḍl ibn Sahl in 818/202; secondly, the political Mu'tazilite doctrine on free-will would prevented them from being the main actors in a political inquisition, they were theologians only. Both of these two aspects, in contrast with the Ǧahmite authors, were usually rejected by al-Ma'mūn. As long as it enabled them to actively participate in the meetings on theological subjects sponsored by the caliph, no Mu'tazilite author would ever have declined this opportunity: being a part of a theologian intelligentsia associated with the role of *mecenate* played by the caliph was the specific function that they had achieved at court. To become a member of the caliphate bureaucracy, occupied with the enforcement of al-Ma'mūn's position on juridical aspects, even if well enrooted in Mu'tazilite and Ǧahmite attitudes, would be a completely different proposition for them, and much less acceptable.

What is lacking within the Hinds analysis, in my view, is a reflection on the main political elaboration of Mu'tazilite

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[48] C. Pellat, K.V. Zettersteen, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2ed., (1960-2005), I, p. 271, s. v. *Aḥmad Ibn Abī Du'ād*.

authors such as al-Naẓẓām, Abū al-Hudhayl, al-Ǧāhiẓ, and others that remained indifferent to al-Ma'mūn's policy of strongly promoting the conciliation of the roles of the caliphate and imamate. Mainstream political opinion of Mu'tazilites, in particular for the mutakallimūn coming from Baṣra, was still inclined towards a ḫārijite idea of religious- political authority (ibāḍite and naǧdite). The second problem with earlier views is the opinion of the rationalist Mu'tazilites concerning free will, and the way in which this view impinges upon their involvement in the Inquisition. It would be difficult to argue that the Mu'tazilites, the leading advocates of the role of human free will, not just in taking action, but also in thinking, supported such an essentially political action as the *miḥna*, although they cannot themselves be considered as freethinkers. Abū Mūsā al-Murdār (d. 226/840), one of the main ascetic figure of the Mu'tazilite school is recognized also as an intolerant supporter of an absolutist personal revelation of Islamic faith and rational theology; the human being free will is a theological axiom that focus the attention on the human power to act freely but within a political system still based on an autocratic state centralism. The contrast between *kalām* supporters and *muḥaddithūn*, especially to those who did not recognize the weakness of some traditions, is clear; however, even in the Buyid era (945-1055), when the theological conflict between rationalist theologians and traditionalists surfaces again, the degree of conflict remained very small. The dogma of the created Qur'ān is still seen in this context as a theological assumption that al-Ma'mūn tried to transform into the basis of a political referendum on his position as caliphimām and his religious authority in the theological field.

It is prominent, as argued by F. Jad'ān and J.A. Nawas,[49] to emphasize the limited function played by the Mu'tazilites during the *miḥna* as advertisers and promoters of this exercise. The main primary sources directly attacked the Ǧahamite sect and the figure of Ibn Abī Du'ād, who we have considered earlier in this text. There were no others involved who were from the group of most prominent Mu'tazilite theologians, and the "dirty work" was done mostly by *quḍāt* and by local governors. If the Mu'tazila can really be seen to be behind this Inquisition, it is only from

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[49] J.A. Nawas, *A Re-Examination of Three Current Explanations for al-Ma'mūn's Introduction of the Miḥna*, in «Int. J. of Middle East Studies», XXVI (1994), p. 623.

the perspective of theological thought; politically and juridically, the presence of members belonging to this school as inquisitors, with exception of Ibn Abī Du'ād, is not noticed among the primary sources here analyzed.

J.A. Nawas, in his closing paragraph of *A re-examination of three current explanations for al-Ma'mūn's introduction of the Miḥna*, says:

> The point at issue during the *Miḥna* was therefore not a particular theological doctrine, but the authority of the caliph versus the authority of those men who saw themselves and not the caliph as the legitimate repository and authentic transmitters of religious knowledge and tradition. Although Mu'tazilism and Shi'ism may have played a role in shaping al-Ma'mūn's thought, as they did the thought of many men, it is most unlikely that either or both had been the reason for his actions.[50]

Finally it is important to try to focus not on the historicity of the *Miḥna* (about which we have sources and critical studies), nor on the five letters written by al-Ma'mūn to the governor of Baghdād, Isḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm, concerning the violent events which brought some of the traditionalists to death, nor on al-Mu'taṣīm and al-Wāthiq's engagement and role in the Inquisition, but on what, concerning the *Miḥna*, has in the past been deliberately misrepresented. M. Watt suggests:

> Van Ess goes so far as to suggest that Bišr al-Marīsī was closer to al-Ma'mūn than the Mu'tazilites who are usually credited with having influenced him to adopt the policy of the *Miḥna*; for Ibn Ṭayfūr describes al-Ma'mūn as a Ḍirārite, presumably meaning among other thing he rejected the Mu'tazilite doctrine of qadar or free will, and Bišr is known to have been opposed to the Mu'tazililtes on this point.[51]

We cannot support the proposition that Mu'tazilite theological thought has been fully adopted by al-Ma'mūn to fortify his caliphate; of course, some axioms of rationalist thought lent themselves well to the process of centralization of the caliph (*Tawḥīd, Al-'amr bil-ma'rūf wal nahy 'an al-munkar*), but others (*qadar* and free will), were positioned contrary to his political purpose.

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[50] Nawas, *A Re-Examination of Three Current Explanations*, p. 624.
[51] Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, p. 197.

The *Miḥna*, then, emerged as an inquisition likely to purge those who opposed the Caliphate's will on a subject that had been firstly ǧahamite, qadarite and ḥanafite and secondly Muʿtazilite.

3. The Miḥna as Exotericism – a new point of view

We had to wait until 1981 before we could begin to consider the *Miḥna* as being not only a historical event with profound implications for the political and theological fields, but also as a development with a substantial exoteric implication. W. Madelung, with the article entitled *New documents concerning al-Maʾmūn, al-Faḍl Ibn Sahl and ʿAlī al-Riḍā*,[52] declared that the decision regarding the choice of ʿAlī al-Riḍā as heir of the caliph was probably also linked to an exoteric inclination of the caliph.

It is now important to seek an understanding of whether the inquisition can be seen as linked to an exoteric approach. We have already mentioned the manifestation of the caliph's authoritarianism with his adoption of the title *leader of guidance* and *God's caliph*, with his rise to the status of a major *mecenate*, a commander in chief against the Byzantines and the man who would be able to reunify the *Umma*. A few years after the caliph's return to Baghdād, al-Maʾmūn began announcing his notorious religious opinions. Hayrettin Yücevoy gives this example:

> In 827/212 al-Maʾmūn proclaimed that no protection would be given to anyone who mentioned Muʿāwiya favourably and preferred him to the other companions of the Prophet. […] Following his proclamation regarding Muʿāwiya, al-Maʾmūn took yet another step and proclaimed ʿAli the most virtuous of all the companions of the Prophet Muḥammad.[53]

Having thus shown his pro-Alid affiliation, al-Maʾmūn continued to further demonstrate his pro-Alid or rather pro-Imām policy in the period from 827/212. Re-opening the case of judgement on the *Fadak*[54] palm grove resulted in the tolerance of temporary

[52] W. Madelung, *New documents concerning al-Maʾmūn, al-Faḍl Ibn Sahl and ʿAlī al-Ridā*, in *Studia Arabica et Islamica*, Beirut, American University of Beirut, 1981, pp. 333-346.

[53] H. Yucesoy, *Messianic Belief & Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2009, p. 129.

[54] Fadak was a village situated thirty miles from Medina. There were water wells and date palms there. After its conquest during the battle of Ḫaybar, the

marriage, *mut'ah* in 830/215, although most of the proto-Sunni circle considered this to be fornication. Al-Ma'mūn decided to add a *takbir* to the format of the prayer when the troops performed their regular prayer in Syria, and finally declared the dogma of the created-Qur' ān, in the face of disagreement from the majority of proto-Shī'te sects.

Al-Ma'mūn's political strategy to regain religious authority for the caliphate is well described by Crone and Hinds and many others; the caliph's policy was political on one side, but the need for maintenance of political leadership was closely related to the playing of a prominent role in the religious side of public life too. However, the determination of the nature of the Qur'ān entailed acceptance of the unity of God, *tawḥīd*, as the most fundamental principle of the faith, in the face of opposition from an anthropomorphist *tashbīh*.

Nevertheless, if analysis better understanding of Al-Ma'mūn's strategy depends on both theological and political analysis, we need to take into consideration the prophecies and exoteric messages which had been circulated in written form in many works from 'Abdallāh ibn al-Mubārak, 'Abdallāh ibn Lahī'a, Ibn Abī Shayba and Nu'aym ibn Ḥammād by the early ninth century. These prophecies concerned the Mahdī, the end of time, the *yawm al-Dīn*, traditions attributed to the Prophet and subsequent apocalyptic visions.

Nu'aym ibn Ḥammād's *Kitāb al-Fitan* is a text in which the exoteric approach which engages the lower classes is not taken into consideration, while, on the contrary, the apocalyptic analysis of the learned religious class is presented. Antagonistic to Ḥanafī circles, Ibn Ḥammād was probably a Mu'tazili before he adopted a more traditionalist point of view, prior to his death during the *Miḥna* under the caliph al-Mu'taṣim.

According to Yucesoy,

> Apocalyptic and historiographical sources pose problems of both interpretation and perception, and, by their nature, they can only offer an image of historical reality. However,

entire oasis came under the control of the Prophet's family, however, during the Abū Bakr and 'Umār's caliphates, Fadak was assigned to the Alids, causing a conflict that would not be easily resolved. After two centuries, and many changes of ownership, al-Ma'mūn gave back Fadak to the Alid, al-Mutawakkil, although he regained control of the oasis for himself.

while the historiography of the early ʿAbbāsid period appears
chronologically further removed from the events, prophecies
seem to come out of the milieu itself. They are produced, cir-
culated and recorded in the same period in which events took
place.[55]

The first prophecies emerging during ʿAbbāsid caliphate are
associated with millenarian anxiety related to the year 200/815.
Subsequent prophesies had sectarian and political associations
with the Sufyānī[56] and Shīʿa uprisings, and were often focused on
the role played in the Islamic *umma* by different clans. However, it
seems that the emergence of both millenarian and esoteric aspects
of prophesy are related to specific historical events.

> Thus in a tradition concerning the rise of the Sufyānī, illumi-
> nating details about the uprising of Abū al-ʿAmayṭir appear:
> Buqayya and ʿAbd al-Quddūs narrated to us on the authority
> of Abū Bakr from elderly individuals, saying the Sufyānī will
> come forth from the valley of Yābis. The governor of Syria will
> come out against him to fight him, but as soon as he looks at
> his banner, he (the governor) will be defeated. ʿAbd al-Quddūs
> said that the governor of Damascus will be a governor of the
> ʿAbbāsids at the time.[57]

[55] Yucesoy, *Messianic Belief & Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam*, p. 12.

[56] «Sufyān» is a term that refers to a possible descendant of Abū Sufyān,
a tyrant who will arrive on Earth and will precede the coming of the Mahdī.
This dictator who will bring death to women and children will seek to exter-
minate all those who belong to the family of the Prophet. Only the Mahdī, who
reaches Earth, will send against him an army that will defeat him. This tra-
dition is related by some *aḥādīth*, as reported by Abū Hurairah; the Sufyān is
identified as a member of the family of Banū Umayya (H. Lammens, *Le "Sofiani".
Héros National des Arabes Syriens*, in Études sur le siècle des Omayyades, Beirut,
Imprimeire Catholique, 1930, p. 396, emphasizes that the Sufyānī was ʿAbdallāh
bin Ḫālid ibn Yazīd bin Muʿāwiya, who expressed resentment of the Marwānid
usurpation of the caliphate, as a result of an internal clash within the Umayyad
family), who come to take revenge for wrongs suffered. However, it is very dif-
ficult to understand whether this player can be identified as a human being in
all respects or whether this is an apocalyptic figure like the Dajjāl (the Beast).
W. Madelung, *The Sufyānī Between Tradition and History*, in «Studia Islamica»,
CXIII (1984), pp. 5-48.

[57] N. Ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, pp. 166-168. However, it is relevant to empha-
sise that this Sufyānī would became an anti-Marwānid and subsequently an
anti-ʿAbbāsid figure within the pro-Umayyad supporters and advocates of a pos-
sible restoration. Only then, in the ʿAbbāsid age, was he taken over by the Shīʿtes,
at first probably by the ʿAbbāsids, who initially relied on Shīʿte backing, and was
transformed into an opponent of the Mahdī resembling the Dajjāl. R. Hartmann,
Der Sufyānī, in Studia Orientalia Ioanni Pedersen dicata, Copenhagen, Hauniae,

Abū al-ʿAmayṭir did indeed revolt in Damascus; he defeated the ʿAbbāsid governor and controlled Damascus and its surrounding countryside for a brief time. What the prophecy does not tell – the fall of the Sufyānī – reveals the date of its composition as 811-814 / 195-198, during which time his revolt was still successful».[58] It is unclear if this revolt, which occurred during the caliphate of al-Amīn, was exoterically used later, during al-Maʾmūn's reign, to make an enemy of the Sufyānī (to support the anti-Umayyad ideology and to propel the ʿAlid cause) or whether Abū al-ʿAmayṭir, identifying himself as the Sufyānī, did revive the Umayyad rule with the local support of old Banū Umayya supporters. T. Nagel[59] considers that at the beginning, in the Umayyad period, the Sufyānī legends had not already acquired an eschatological significance; we need to wait until the Abū al-ʿAmayṭir revolt, under al-Amīn, to provide a more religious-esoteric credential and qualify him as an inheritor of Ḫālid ibn Yazīd. «A leading scholar in Damascus at the time, Abū Mushir, who was later interrogated in the *Miḥna,* not only supported Abū al-ʿAmayṭir but also transmitted some of the Sufyānī prophecies that are still in existence today».[60] It is historically established[61] that during the triumphal march of Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn (al-Maʾmūn's main general) to Baghdād, Al-Amīn sought military support from Syria, where the presence of pro-Umayyad movements was still fostered. Hayrettin Yücevoy reported that in fact Abū al-ʿAmayṭir's movement disintegrated after al-Maʾmūn's conquest of Baghdād, leaving an ideological legacy which was to be far more significant than its political impact.[62]

It is clear that the insurgence of an almost unknown pro-Umayyad rebel was used politically to allow the emergence of millenarian visions which were already partly rooted in ʿAbbāsid thought (al-Mansūr's fear of the emergence of new conflicts with pro-Umayyad sects was already manifested in the second half of the eighth century). It is also noteworthy that al-Maʾmūn's pro-

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1953, p. 146. Only this Shīʿte version of the Sufyānī has been preserved, although it does originate from Sunnite sources.

[58] Yucesoy, *Messianic Belief & Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam*, p. 14.

[59] T. Nagel, *Rechtleitung und Kalifat,* Bonn, Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1975, p. 257.

[60] Yucesoy, *Messianic Belief & Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam*, p. 75.

[61] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-*Ṭabarī, XXXI.

[62] P.M. Cobb, *White banners. Contention in ʿAbbasid Syria (750-880)*, Albany, Suny Press, 2001, pp. 60-62.

alidism and pro-Imamism (for himself) were clear demonstrations of an anti-Umayyad attitude.

The *Miḥna* shows not only the power of a caliph who can decide on religious dogma, but of an ʿAbbāsid *Ḫalīfa* who, fighting the Christian Byzantines in Syria, interrogates jurists, theologians and *ahl al-ḥadīth* members on the *tawḥīd* of God as a Mahdī during the *yawm al-Dīn*, a further proof of al-Maʾmūn's attempt to enhance his primary role in the *umma*. According to Yücesoy:

> The correction and renovation of the faith to its pristine state; hence the determination of what is Islamic and what is not. [...] The secretary of al-Maʾmūn, Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf says: [People] follow his road of salvation, *hadyihi*, and in their religion is guided through a dark path by his light.[63]

Al-Maʾmūn is the *Ḫalīfa ʿAllāh*, is the *Imām al-hudā*, and in fighting against the Sufyānī, he also acquired the role of Mahdī; he has the authority to pursue the Inquisition.

The figure of the Mahdī, conceived in the first half of the ninth century, could not be an expression of a Shiite Islamic eschatology yet to come (because these ideas were still in formation), but the coming of a figure who will restore faith to its original form and eradicate moral corruption.

This authoritarianism follows five fundamental principles:

> establishing God's religion and guarding it faithfully; protecting the heritage of prophethood of which they were inheritors; preserving the tradition of knowledge, which God entrusted to their keeping; acting justly with the government of their subjects; and being diligent in obeying God's will in their conduct towards those subjects.[64]

Al-Maʾmūn sees himself as being responsible for this salvation and sees the *Miḥna* as being the only way to induce religious repentance. Even if the majority of proto-Shīʿte sects rejected the figure of al-Maʾmūn as Imām, it is clear that from the beginning of his caliphate that the seventh ʿAbbāsid ruler tried to obtain their political and religious support.

4. *Conclusion*

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[63] Yucesoy, *Messianic Belief & Imperial Politics in Medieval Islam*, p. 134.
[64] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, XXXII, pp. 199-200.

The *Miḥna* ended under al-Mutawakkil, a prominent supporter of Ibn Ḥanbal, although there is a possibility that, as reported by C. Melchert, its cessation took place gradually over the period from 848/234 to 852/237.

> Al-Dhahabī states that al-Mutawakkil put an end to the Inquisition fourteen years after al-Muʿtaṣim renewed it, and two historians of Egypt, al-Kindī and al-Musabbihī, state that the Inquisition came to an end immediately on al-Mutawakkil's becoming caliph in 847/232. In Iṣfahān, the Ḥanafi jurisprudent Bakkār ibn al-Ḥasan was examined, refused to affirm the Qurʾān created, and was about to be expelled from the city when news came of al-Wathīq's death.[65]

However, we certainly know that Ibn Abī Duʾād was not removed until 851/237, continuing to influence *qāḍīs*. In 848-849/234, the new caliph ordered a traditionalist, invited to Sāmarrā, to relate *ḥadīth* against the Muʿtazila and the Ǧahamiyya,[66] and it is probably from 849 onwards that al-Mutawakkil started to dismiss the *qāḍīs* as closed and protected by Ibn Abī Duʾād. However, even if we take into consideration the information emerging in the C. Melchert article, some doubts remain: we know, for example, that the Ḥanafī *qāḍī* of the East side of Baghdād (protected by Ibn Abī Duʾād), ʿUbayd ʿAllāh, was dismissed in 848/234, while in the West side of Baghdād, al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī ibn al-Jaʿd, appointed by al-Wathīq, remained *qāḍī* until his death in 856/242, and in the al-Sharqīya district ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḫalanǧī, even though appointed by the preceding caliph (Melchert reports that this *qāḍī* was certainly supporters of the created Koran) was not dismissed.

There are similar examples in Kūfa, where the *qāḍīs* placed under the previous caliphs were not exonerated until 850/235, and in Damascus and Egypt, where al-Sukkarī remained a judge until 852/237 and Ibn Abī al-Layth, who had prosecuted the Inquisition, was dismissed only in 850/235. It is therefore important to support the idea that the *Miḥna* did not end immediately, but, as is said in Arabic, *baṣūra tadrjiyya*, step by step. More evidently, only after the dismissal of Ibn Abī Duʾād and the choice of Yaḥyā ibn Akhtam (d. 857/242) did the Inquisition officially come to an end. This judge, who was a friend, was close to al-Maʾmūn and

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[65] Melchert, *Religious policies of the Caliphs from Al-Mutawakkil*, p. 320.
[66] M. Shamsuddin, *The Reign of al-Mutawakkil*, reports that the issue in the Inquisition was Muʿtazilism, not a brand of Ḥanafism.

had been one of his important advisers, was approved by al-Mutawakkil and ibn Ḥanbal despite both being well aware of his known pederasty (demonstrating that the problem concerning the Inquisition was political, not moral or theological). As supported by Melchert: «[…] Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal may have refused to embrace the caliph in part because there were plainly limits to his repudiation of the Inquisition.[…]»[67] however, (the caliph) was still so concerned to maintain caliphal authority, even though it had been used to uphold the doctrine of a created Qur'ān, that he forbade the populace to gather in mourning. Al-Mutawakkil took a different line to al-Ma'mūn, al-Mu'taṣim and al-Wāthiq and did gradually end the Inquisition, but like his predecessors he tried to maintain a strict control of the caliph's prerogatives; however, he naively failed to understand that in limiting the political support of the *mutakallimūn*, but not convincing A. ibn Ḥanbal and the traditionalists to effectively support them, he would be left alone to face the divisions within the court and the emirate, being overwhelmed by them in 861/247.

Abstracts

The *Miḥna* has usually been attributed to the Mu'tazilite theological school as expression of something unusual, a bid'ah (Islamic innovation) related to a rationalist group of theologians that tried, in strict political cooperation with al-Ma'mūn, to subvert the 'Abbāsid caliphate system.

The full support of relevant political and religious authorities, during the *Miḥna*, to the caliph's purpose permitted at the 'Abbāsids to post-pone for few decades, a period of decadence which started with the murderer of al-Mutawakkil in 861/246.

It is significant to analyze the role played by the Mu'tazilite school during the *Miḥna*, which if was theologically evident, it was also politically non-existent; a reconsideration of the importance of this rationalist school is necessary to make clearer who were the main persecutors during this short inquisitorial period in early 'Abbāsid age.

La *Miḥna* è stata attribuita alla scuola teologica Mu'tazilita in quanto espressione di qualche cosa di inusuale, una *bid'ah* (innovazione nella fede islamica) legata a un gruppo di teologi razionalisti che cercarono, in stretta collaborazione con il califfo al-Ma'mūn, di sovvertire il dominio 'Abbasside.

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[67] MELCHERT, *Religious Policies of the Caliphs from Al-Mutawakkil*, p. 321.

Il totale sostegno di ragguardevoli autorità politiche e religiose, concesso, durante la *Miḥna*, all'autorità califfale, permise loro di post-porre l'inizio di un periodo di decadenza che sarebbe cominciato con l'omicidio di al- Mutawakkil nell'861/246.

È quindi significativo analizzare il ruolo assunto dalla scuola Muʿtazilita, il quale, se è stato teologicamente evidente, non lo fu dal punto di vista politico; riconsiderare l'importanza di questa scuola razionalista è necessario per chiarire quali siano state le effettive autorità atte a perseguire alcuni oppositori, in questo breve periodo d'inquisizione durante il primo secolo della storia ʿAbbasside.