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The Islamic Inquisition (*al-Mihna*): A Case study in Academic Warfare

By

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In spite of the accelerated growth of the Islamic domains that occurred under Umayyad¹ rule, by the mid 8th century the Umayyad Amirs (Governors) had fallen out of favor with the masses due largely to governmental policies that gave primacy of the Arabs over their newly conquered non-Arab/Muslim populace. There emerged among the non-Arab segments of the Dar al-Islam “alienation”² and resentment over the rule of the Umayyad’s that had become synonymous with political nepotism, religious impropriety and oppression of the—ahl’l bayt, family of the Prophet Muhammad³. Adding to this was the fact that many of the Umayyad rulers justified their shortcomings by exclaiming that everything they did was the will of God, even if their actions ran contrary to Islam’s religious prohibitions.⁴

In response to the Umayyad’s theological fatalism there emerged a group of scholars lead by Hasan al-Basri who utterly refuted the idea of God sanctioning “the evil that men do.” Al-Basri argued that God, indeed, had pre-determined the fate of mankind, however, He also gave man the limited free will to choose between right and wrong. The theologians who clung to this idea of God allowing man the ability to choose became known as *Qadariyya* (believers in free will). This debate between the fatalist Umayyad Caliphs and scholars who upheld the concept of “free-will” was the first of several theological arguments centered on two key questions: 1) who possessed the authority to interpret revelation—The Caliph or the scholar? And 2) what was the correct way for man to understand the nature of God and the divine, or stated another way, could reason be used to understand scripture, or, was scripture to be understood by means of scripture alone?

The theological unrest and civil dissatisfaction that plagued the later years of the Umayyad dynasty led to a series of violent revolts throughout the Dar a-Islam,

¹ The Umayyads were the second of four great Caliphal empires in Islam who ruled from 661-750AD. Their name indicates that they were from tribe of Umayya, a group of Arab noblemen from the city of Mecca. They were the first Islamic dynasty based on lineage. The first four Caliph’s, or successors to Prophet Muhammad, were collectively known as the Rashiduun (Rightly Guided) Caliphs. These four men were some of the Prophets closest companions and between them they shared no blood relations.

² Egger 87

³ The phrase literally means “people of the house” and denotes specific members of Prophet Muhammad’s family namely his daughter, Fatima, her husband and the Prophet’s cousin Ali ibn abi Talib, and their two twin sons (the Prophets grandsons) Hasan and Husayn. Anyone who descends from Hasan and Husayn are also considered ahl’l bayt.

⁴ Watt 26

particularly among sectarian factions like the Shi'a⁵ (supporters of the Prophet's descendents) and the *Khawarij*⁶ (extremist egalitarian rebels). It is out of this milieu of social upheaval and political unrest that the Abbasids emerge.⁷ Unlike the Umayyads the Abbasid's claimed lineage from the family of the Prophet and had appropriated the cause of the Shi'a as a socio-political galvanizing force. Thus, the Abbasids believed that their blood relation to the Prophet of Islam, not necessarily God's divine will, legitimized them as the rightful heirs to Muslim rule.⁸ Also, from the very beginning the Abbasid saw themselves as not only the temporal rulers of the Caliphate, but they believed themselves to be possessed of a particular insight that gave them the authority to dictate and discuss matters of religion as well. (Site) There "...active role in encouraging the development of a legal system based explicitly upon Islamic values"⁹, may have endeared them to a Muslim society who had lived under a kind of tyranny sanctioned by God.

The Dar al-Islam that the Abbasids inherited was not only predominantly non-Arab by the time they had taken power, but by the mid 8th century this non-Arab population had managed to exert significant influence of over its Abbasid rulers. The huge swath of territory over which the Abbasid Caliph's presided, now Persians, Berbers, Sub-Saharan Africans, Turkic speaking Central Asians and people from Sind the Hindu-Kush regions of South Asia.¹⁰ Muslim governors had as their subjects Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Hindus and individuals who adhered to an array of pagan customs and traditions all subsumed under Islamic suzerainty. Thus as one might expect, the Abbasid capitol at Baghdad had become a cultural nexus, and "melting pot" of cultures and ideas from civilizations far older than the nascent yet burgeoning Islamic state.¹¹

Under the Abbasids, there emerged a sea of social, political and cultural changes that would forever shape the contours of the Muslim world. From the 8th century onward Baghdad flowered as an epicenter of trade, intellectual exchange, and Islamic learning the influence of which could be seen in the opulent palaces, bathhouses, mosques, market places and libraries that dotted the this bustling "metropolis"¹². Traders, scholars, students and those seeking stability and a new life, flooded Baghdad and by the 9th century the Abbasid capitol had become "the centre of a Muslim civilization and culture of very wide extent"¹³. The influence of the myriad cultures that comprised the new capitol could now be seen in the government. A

⁵ The Shi'a were "the party" of Ali ibn abi Talib and his descendents. They believed that all successive Caliph's after the Prophet Muhammad should be members of the Prophet's family, and since Ali was the prophet's cousin and companion, the Shi'a felt he should have been the first to succeed the Prophet.

⁶ The Khawarij were a group of rebels who emerged during the reign of the fourth Rashidun Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib. During the battle of Siffin (657AD) the Muslim community was split between those who sided with the Caliph Ali, and those who sided with the heir-apparent to the Umayyad Caliphate, Mu'awiya bin Abu Sufyan. The two sides agreed to an armistice but thereafter a third group emerged from the side of Caliph Ali who rebelled and insisted that Ali had no right to agree to a truce with Mu'awiya. They are called the Khawarij because "they left"—*kharaja*, both sides and formed their own.

⁷ The Abbasids were the 3rd great Islamic dynasty who ruled from 750-1258AD. Like the Umayyads, Abbasid rule was based on lineage, which in their case meant being a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁸ Watt 28

⁹ Egger 116

¹⁰ *ibid* 57

¹¹ Smith 1

¹² Egger 86

¹³ Smith 1

synthesis of Persian and Arab culture now dominated the Abbasid court, such that the ascension of a new Amir or the appointment of a Sultan (regional governor) or Waizir (minister), now resembled the coronations of the Pre-Islamic “Sasanian kings” of Persia more than it did the humble simplicity indicative of the transfer of power amongst the Prophet and his companions¹⁴.

Early on the Amirs of the Abbasid Caliphate had been keen to extract from their newly conquered subjects, those skills most suited to knowledge acquisition, or that was deemed useful within the realm of government and politics. The seeds of religious plurality were sewn under the 2nd Abbasid Caliph beginning with Caliph al-Mansur who ruled from 754-775AD¹⁵. Thus within the Abbasid Court it was quite common to see Christians employed as “secretaries” “scribes” “physicians” and “interpreters” (Smith p.2). In fact it was during al-Mansur’s reign that the Dar al-Islam began to enter its intellectual peak, or what many historians call the “Islamic Golden Age” (site). Caliph al-Mansur’s zeal for philosophy and intellectual pursuits was said to be so acute that as a part of his peace treaties with the Byzantines emperors, he would bestow lavish gifts upon the Christian emperor in exchange for Greek philosophical text.¹⁶

The third Abbasid Caliph, Abu Jafar Abdullah al-Mamun, who ruled the Dar al-Islam from 813-833AD, was also a fervent patron of the arts and under his administration the building of Bayt al-Hikmah (“The house of Wisdom”)—an enormous library equipped with an astrological observatory, was commissioned.¹⁷ along with the largest translation project in human history. Caliph al-Mamun had set out to translate many of the Greek philosophical texts that had been amassed during the time of his brother—the previous Caliph al-Mansur. As historian Gaston Weit explains, Caliph Mamun had managed to procure from these Byzantine rulers “...works on Plato, Aristotle Hippocrates, Galen, Euclid and Ptolemy...” The Caliph would then choose:

“...the most experienced translators and commissioned them to translate these works to the best of their ability. After the translating was done as perfectly as possible, the Caliph urged his subjects to read the translations and encourage them to study them. Consequently, the scientific movement became stronger under this prince’s reign. Scholars held high rank, and the caliph surrounded himself with learned men, legal experts, traditionalists, rationalist theologians, lexicographers, annalists, metricians, and genealogists.”¹⁸

The language skills required to translate these works necessitated that a person be fluent in Greek, Syriac and Arabic—competencies that were predominant among the Caliph’s Christian subjects.¹⁹

New knowledge flowed into the Dar al-Islam from every corner of the empire, finding its niche within the scholarly circles in and around Baghdad. The intellectual revolution Caliph al-Mamun had nurtured, flourished following the creation of Bayt al-Hikmah. As a result of his state sponsored patronage the Persian literary movement known as Shu’ubiyya blossomed. This group was known for its affinity towards the Abbasid Caliphate, anti-Arab sentiment, prodigious literary output, and philosophical debates around religion. Poetry, prose, satire and literature related to proper etiquette

¹⁴ Egger 87

¹⁵ Weit "Wiet. Baghdad." *FORDHAM.EDU*. Web. 28 Mar. 2011.
<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/wiet.html>>.

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ Smith 3

¹⁸ Weit "Wiet. Baghdad." *FORDHAM.EDU*. Web. 28 Mar. 2011.
<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/wiet.html>>.

¹⁹ Smith 3

(adab) flourished as a result of the Shu'ubiyah movement. (Look at Encyclopedia of Islam)

This patronage also extended towards other networks of intellectuals around Baghdad particularly those “who had distinguished themselves in dialectic disputation and debate” (Hurvitz 117) One such group who had earned the Caliph's clientage were the *Mutazilah*.

Many historians consider the Mutazilah an outgrowth of the *Qadariyya* based on the connection between a student of Hasan al-Basri—Amr ibn ‘Ubayd who figures prominently in the narrative surrounding Mutazilah origins.²⁰ Amr was said to have separated or withdrawn (*‘itazala*) from the circle of al-Basri after giving a controversial answer on theology for which he was ridiculed. There is no doubt however that the Mutazilah were not only adherents to the doctrine free will, but they shared Caliph al-Mamun's propensity for Greek philosophy and are thus credited for “...bringing Greek conceptions into the discussions of Islamic dogma, that is, in the first elaboration of the discipline of *Kalam*.”²¹ During the 9th century Muslim theologians used the term *kalam*²² rather broadly to denote any manner of dialectic to explain matters of religion: reason, analogy, speculative-theology, neo-Platonism and Aristotelian logic.

During the reign of Caliph al-Mamun the Mutazilah were the champions of *kalam* and set about establishing the parameters for what may have been the first formal Islamic school of theology. (Egger 154) The Mutazilah upheld five key principles²³, two of which provided the foundation upon which their theological doctrine was predicated. The first of those principles was the belief in tawhid, or “oneness” of God. The Mutazilah conception of monotheism differed from the popular notion of tawhid that all observant Muslims recognized. The Mutazilah argued that God's “99 attributes” as enumerated in the Quran, did not function in any “hypostatic” way but were merely a part of his essence. To consider God's attributes as independent of his essence, according to the Mutazilah, was tantamount to disbelief.

The second principle which formed the foundation of Mutazilah doctrine was ‘adl—justice. The idea being that since God endowed man with free-will, and God showed man all that is necessary to obey Him, the place man “earned” in either heaven or hell, must of necessity be an act of God's justice. Thus, the Mutazilah conception of justice insisted that God's system of rewards and punishments hinged on man's actions alone. Therefore, God was “bound” to be just by punishing the “sinner” and rewarding the obedient.²⁴

These two principles were so integral to the core of Mutazilah doctrine that its proponents began to refer to themselves as *ahl al-tawhid wa al-‘adl* —“the people of monotheism and justice.” The ideas of monotheism and justice fomented a type of insistence on moral Puritanism that made the Mutazilah akin to the Khawarij in both belief and controversy. However, the Mutazilah differed significantly from the Khawarij in the extent to which they deployed reason to arrive at their theological conclusions. In addition to their complete rejection of the idea of God creating evil

²⁰ Watt 47-52

²¹ Ibid 46

²² Discuss what ‘ilm al-kalam is now

²³ Watt outlines the five key principles of Mutazilah doctrine as follows: 1) tawhid—monotheism 2) adl—justice 3) al wa’d wa’l wa’id—the promise and the threat (of punishment or paradise) 4) al-manzilah bayna manzilatayn—the intermediate position (between sinner and believer) and 5) al-amr bi’l ma’ruf wa nayhi ana’l munkar—commanding the good and forbidding the evil.

²⁴ Egger 134

and man's free-will, the Mutazilah understanding of the principle of *tawhid* led them to believe that the Qur'an, as "God's speech", was an attribute of God—a "created" thing, and not "coeternal" with God's essence. Therefore, accepting the Qur'an as the eternal, uncreated word of God would have completely undermined the Mutazilah construction of *tawhid* and was thus unacceptable.

The works of Plato and Aristotle circulated widely throughout the Caliphate during the 9th century, fueling the environment of debate around the place of reason in Islamic theology. We also begin to see the usage of *kalam*, and its partisans taking center stage at the Abbasid court at Baghdad; its most loyal patron being none other than Caliph al-Mamun himself.

Through their intellectual prowess, the Mutazilah had managed to grab the attention of Caliph al-Mamun and were thus welcome to join him and a host of scholars to debate their ideas at his court. These scholars were from a plethora of ideological sects: Murji²⁵, Zaydi Shi'a, Mutazilah and Sunni's or traditionalists. All enjoyed the Caliph's fiscal support, as well as, being appointed to prominent positions as judges and scholars endowed with the official sanction of Abbasid authority.

Caliph al-Mamun had spent practically his entire life studying the sciences and philosophy and erected institutions precisely for the preservation of such pursuits. Scholars like Hurvitz and others suggest that as a result of his pension for "intellectual endeavors" and perhaps with the support of scholars who shared his intellectual proclivities²⁶, the Caliph became a staunch partisan of *kalam* and had adopted the Mutazilah view that the Qur'an was created.

During the last four months of his life he had indeed become convinced that his ideas and the intellectual culture he helped create²⁷, had to be preserved—even if by force. Thus in the year 833AD, and for reasons that are highly debated among scholars and historians, Caliph al-Mamun set about instituting a policy of state sponsored interrogation, that quickly devolved into terrorism, known as the inquisition, or *al-mihna*.

Caliph al-Mamun's adoption of the view that the Qur'an was created became the litmus test by which loyalty to his ideas, and authority, were tested. The Caliph insisted that all of the judges and scholars of repute adopt the view that the Qur'an was created or else face torture, imprisonment or death. Anyone who did not acquiesce to the Caliph's ideas was subject to persecution. (Egger 135) What actually provoked Caliph al-Mamun to institute the *mihna*, has been highly debated by historians. Scholars, like Egger argue, that; "Mutazilism appealed to him (Caliph al-Mamun) in part because he was a rationalist himself, and in part because the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an could more easily allow the caliph, like the Shi'ite Imam, to interpret and expand on the Qur'an as he felt was necessary"²⁸

Egger's ideas combine to form what historian Nimrod Hurvitz calls the "single person approach" in unraveling Caliph al-Mamun's motivations for the *mihna*. Hurvitz argues that, until fairly recently, scholars have made Caliph al-Mamun the center of the discussion around the *mihna* and have (inadvertently) ignored the "historical context" out of which the policies of the *mihna* emerge by asserting the

²⁵ The Murji—"those who postpone judgement" were a sect that emerged out of the conflict with the khawarij during the Umayyad period. They believed that "the punishment of sinners should be left to god and that we should postpone judgement of them." Seale, Morris S. *Muslim theology: A Study of origins with reference to Church Fathers*. London. Luzac and Company: (1964).

²⁶ Hurvitz. *The Mihna as Self-Defense* 102

²⁷ Nawas 698

²⁸ Egger 135

following: 1) "...al-Mamun was inspired by the Mutazilah and Shia'is" and 2) "...the mihna occurred because the caliph wanted to establish himself as the supreme arbiter of spiritual matters."²⁹ According to Hurvitz, both of these narratives adopt the "single person approach" while neglecting the perspectives of those scholars around the Caliph and the debates that had taken place between them prior to the *mihna*.

Hurvitz asserts that the events of the mihna were not about who had the power to interpret scripture. The Caliph, in his opinion, never makes the mihna a personal issue between him and a particular group of ulema (scholars)³⁰; nor was the mihna about one specific doctrinal issue like the createdness of the Qur'an. For Hurvitz the *mihna* was "...about the *mutakallimun*'s (rationalists) right, better yet obligation, to debate its createdness." For him the issue "...was first and foremost about the politics of theology."³¹

That the *mihna* did set in motion a debate around theological issues that became the very touchstone for Islamic orthodoxy. Walter Patton, one of the earliest scholars to elucidate the history of the *mihna* makes no bones about the magnitude of issues at stake when he writes: "The importance of them [theological questions raised] lies in the fact that they settled the orthodox character of Islam for all following ages; and in the preservation of orthodoxy lies the preservation of Islam itself, in our judgement."³² Ironically perhaps, Patton was considered by Hurvitz to be the progenitor of the "single person approach" to the mihna, claiming that author's simply followed Patton's lead after his publication of the *mihna* in 1897.³³

For Hurvitz and others, at the heart of the issue of the mihna was the role of *kalam* within religious Islamic discourse, and the evidence suggests that the scholars who engaged in these intellectual duals saw the mihna in the very terms which Patton suggests. The issue of whether or not to use reason for the purpose of understanding the Qur'an and habitual practice of Prophet Muhammad—known collectively as *sunnah*, reached an apex during the *mihna* and split the Muslim theologians into two distinct camps.

There were the *Mutakallimun*—those who engaged in *kalam*. This was initially a pejorative term used by the traditionalist but was later reconciled by Muslim theologians to describe any scholar who deployed rational proofs, reason, or any myriad of philosophical techniques to explain matters of religion. Caliph al-Mamun and the vast majority of those scholars at the Abbasid court during his reign were considered *mutakallimun*. The head of these "partisans of diallectic"³⁴ was Ibn abi Du'ad; a mutazilah scholar who was brought into the Abbasid court by Caliph al-Mamun. Ibn abi Du'ad was also considered the first among the Caliph's courtly entourage to engage in *kalam* during debate.³⁵ Ibn abi Du'ad had managed to impress the Caliph to such an extent that he was eventually appointed "chief judge"—a position from which he wielded tremendous power.³⁶

On the other side of the debate were the *muhadduthun* or "traditionists" camp. This group of scholars that adhered to a literalist interpretation of the Quran, eschewing *kalam* while vehemently insisting that textual evidence from the *Qur'an*

²⁹ Hurvitz. The Mihna as Self-Defense 94

³⁰ *ibid.* Hanbalism 20

³¹ *ibid.* The Mihna as Self-Defense 102

³² Patton 2

³³ Hurvitz The Mihna as Self-Defence 93

³⁴ Egger 134

³⁵ Patton 55

³⁶ Hurvitz 124

and *sunnah* alone, be used to explain matters of religion. The *muhaddithun* were a unique brand of scholars who gained prominence during the 8th century; their specialty was indentifying, compiling, memorizing and transmitting the thousands of Prophetic “narrations” or “traditions” known as *hadith* that circulated throughout the Dar al-Islam³⁷.

Despite his philosophical bent, Caliph al-Mamun was no stranger to traditionist discourse, for he had received at least part of his Islamic education under Imam Malik, one of the most celebrated jurists and *muhaddithun* of the 8th century.³⁸ Further, Caliph al-Mamun had a cadre of traditionists among his courtly patrons who received judicial appointments and stipends for their services.³⁹ Yet, not all of the *muhaddithun* were accepting of the Caliph's favors and that at some point al-Mamun began to view certain key individuals from among the *muhaddithun* as a threat to his authority and ideas.

From the thorough empirical analysis of Nawas⁴⁰ we know that of the hundreds of scholars and judges targeted and interrogated during the *mihna*, forty of them were, “highly esteemed for their intellects as well as for their social status and influence—indeed the “crème de la crème” of Baghdadi hadith-scholarship...”⁴¹ The most ardent of the hadith scholars to reject the Caliph's overtures was Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

Ibn Hanbal's family was from the region of Khorosan, an area now encompassing eastern Iran, Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries bordering the Caspian Sea. Ibn Hanbal's parents migrated from Khorosan to Baghdad while he was still in his mother's womb, and it was there in Baghdad, during the year 780AD, that Ibn Hanbal was born.⁴² Ahmad quickly developed a reputation as a gifted student and became the pupil of the most venerated jurist and *muhaddith* of the time—al-Shaf'i. It is even recorded that al-Shaf'i took Prophetic traditions from ibn Hanbal, and may have perhaps even acknowledged the latter's superiority as a *muhaddith*.⁴³

Ibn Hanbal did indeed become a celebrated traditionist who was known for his scrupulous piety, prodigious memory, “mild asceticism” (*zuhd*) and “social criticism”⁴⁴. It was as a result of these qualities that ibn Hanbal earned the respect and support of thousands of followers throughout the Dar al-Islam. Ibn Hanbal was also assertive in his preaching and consciously sought out individuals who shared his passion for religious devotion. With his vast knowledge and religious zeal ibn Hanbal quickly galvanized around him a following of like-minded scholars and disciples dubbed the *Hanabila* by his later students. The followers of ibn Hanbal not only shared his passion for religious devotions, but meticulous piety became the very bulwark by which an individual was inducted into his circle of disciples.⁴⁵

Throughout his career Ahmad ibn Hanbal may have amassed as many adversaries as he had students. He was never shy to speak out whenever he felt that his contemporaries had plunged into heretical innovation. The practice of *kalam* was simply one of the many practices for which ibn Hanbal had disdain. He rejected the practice of *ra'y* (sound reasoning) and *qiyas* (analogy) which caused him to diverge

³⁷ Nawas 705

³⁸ Patton 2

³⁹ Ibid 119

⁴⁰ Nawas uses the scientific method to look at various hypotheses around the cause of the *mihna* in his journal article *The Mihna of 218 A.H./833 A.D. Revisited: An Empirical Study*.

⁴¹ Nawas 705

⁴² Patton 10. The author gives the Hijri year of 164AH

⁴³ Hurvitz 54

⁴⁴ Ibid 67

⁴⁵ Ibid 93

from the teachings of his teacher, al-Shaf'i, and the other canonical schools of Islamic jurisprudence who deploy it.⁴⁶ Ibn Hanbal also disliked the Shi'a because they slandered the four Rashidun Caliphs who assumed power after Muhammad's death.

It seems that Caliph al-Mamun embodied myriad qualities that, ideologically, would have made him the object of Ibn Hanbal's criticism. After all, the Abbasid Caliphate was built on the back of Shi'a propaganda and the Caliph's adoption of kalam, particularly the Mutazilah notion of that the Qur'an was created, made him no ally of Ibn Hanbal. However, as the history of the mihna demonstrates, Caliph al-Mamun and the mutakallimun were the aggressors during the mihna and Islamic sources record a series of letters written by the Caliph to his governor at Baghdad, Ishaq ibn Ibrahim, that clearly demonstrate that fact.

These letters were written over the course of four months and delineate al-Mamun's theological position regarding the use of kalam, his attitude towards the muhaddithun (Sunnis), as well as, a series of ultimatums outlining exactly what he expected from those being interrogated. The following tract from Caliph al-Mamun's first letter articulates the rationale behind the interrogation:

'I (The Commander of the faithful) realized⁴⁷ that the broad mass and the overwhelming concentration of the base elements of the ordinary people and the lower strata of the commonalty are those who, in all the regions and far horizons of the world, have no farsightedness, or vision, or faculty of reasoning by means of such evidential proofs as God approves along the right way which He provides, or faculty of seeking illumination by means of the light of knowledge and God's decisive proofs. They are a people sunk in ignorance and in blindness about God, plunged into error regarding the true nature of His religion and His unity and faith in Him; too far off the right track from His clear marks for guidance and the obligation of following in His way; a people who fall short of being able to grasp the reality of God as He should be recognized, to acknowledge Him exactly as He should be acknowledged and to distinguish between Him and His creation. This is because of the feebleness of their judgment, the deficiency of their intellects and their lack of facility in reflecting upon things and calling them to mind.'⁴⁸

The Caliph sees his intervention, clearly, as one of necessity brought on by a preponderance of ignorance and ineptitude regarding the reality of God that had befallen the masses. The next passage below demonstrates the manner in which Caliph al-Mamun interpreted verses of the Qur'an to explain and defend his view that Qur'an was created by God and not the "eternal" speech of God:

'All this arises from the fact that they consider as perfectly equal God Himself and the Qur'an which He has revealed. They have agreed with one voice and have asserted unequivocally that it is eternal and primordial, not created nor originated nor invented in any way by God. Yet God has said in the clear and unambiguous parts of His Book—which He has set forth as a healing for the anguish in people's breasts and as a mercy and guidance for the believers—"Indeed, We have made it an Arabic Qur'an" (43:2). Now everything which God made He must have created. He has also said, "Praise be to God who has created the heavens and earth and has made the darkness and the light" (6:1). He has further said, "In this way, We recount to you some of the stories of the past" (20:99), and He gives the information that this is an account of events which He brought into existence subsequently to those events happening, and with it He followed up the beginnings of the events. He has also said, "Alif, lâm, râ'. A book, whose miraculous signs have been clearly set forth and then made distinct, from One wise and well-informed" (11:1). Now everything which has been clearly set forth and made distinct must necessarily have an agent who brings these actions to

⁴⁶ Melchert 235-36

⁴⁷ Patton's translation says "Commander of the faithful" which is a translation of the Arabic word "Amir".

⁴⁸ al-Tabari 200

pass; God is the One who has clearly set forth His Book and made it distinct, and He is its creator and originator.⁴⁹

The above citation shows the extent to which Caliph al-Mamun was familiar with the theological proofs used to defend the position of the created Qur'an. Al-Mamun also includes within his letter some disparaging remarks aimed at those "who claim to follow the Sunna"—a reference to the *muhaddithun*. The tract reads as follows:

'They consider themselves adherents of the Sunna, whereas in every section of the Book of God there is an account related by Him which invalidates their words and gives the lie to their claims, turning their sayings and their call to adopt their professed beliefs back on themselves. Despite all this, they go on to make an outward show of being people of the divine truth, the real religion and community of Muslims, and assert that all other are people of false beliefs, infidelity and schism. They raise themselves up importunately against the people with these assertions, and thereby deliberately lead astray the ignorant; to the point that a group of adherents of the false way, who display submissiveness to someone other than God and who lead an ascetic life—but for another cause and not the true faith—have inclined towards agreement with them and accordance with their evil opinions, thereby acquiring for themselves glory in their eyes and securing for themselves leadership and a reputation for probity amongst them. These people have forsaken the divine truth for their own delusions and have adopted for themselves a supporter for their error to the exclusion of God. . . .'

These are the people whom "God has made deaf and has blinded their eyes. Do they not consider the Qur'an, or are there locks on their hearts?" (47:23-24) I consider that these people are the worst of the Muslim community and the chief ones in error, the ones who are defective in their belief in the divine unity and who have an imperfect share in the faith. They are vessels of ignorance, banners of mendaciousness and the tongue of Iblis, who speaks through his companions and strikes terror into the hearts of his adversaries, the people of God's own religion.⁵⁰

This last citation lists the demands and expectations the Caliph wishes to enforce on those being interrogated.

'Therefore, summon together all the judges in your sphere of jurisdiction and read out to them this letter from me to you. Begin by testing them out concerning what they say and by finding out from them their beliefs about God's creating and originating the Qur'an in time. Inform them too that I will not seek the assistance in any of my administrative tasks of anyone whose religion, whose sincerity of faith in God's unity, and whose own religious beliefs are not deemed trustworthy, nor will I place any reliance on such a man in the responsibilities laid on me by God and in the affairs of my subjects which have been entrusted to me. Then, when they have publicly declared that the Qur'an is created and have shown full agreement with me concerning it and are on the road of right guidance and salvation, order them to interrogate closely the legal witnesses within their sphere of jurisdiction and to question them about their knowledge of the Qur'an. They are no longer to recognize the validity of the testimony of those failing to affirm or hold the view that the Qur'an was created and originated in time, and they are to prevent the admission and countersigning of such testimony in the judge's own court. Write me back what you learn from the judges over the people within your administrative province as to the results of their enquiries and their ordering these processes to be set in motion. Then keep a close oversight of them and search out what they have been doing, to such a point that God's decrees are only put into execution on the testimony of people clear-sighted in religion and wholly sincere in belief in the divine unity. Write me about what happens in regard to all this, if God wills.'⁵¹

There was a second letter sent by Caliph al-Mamun intended specifically for the seven leading *muhaddithun* of Baghdad, which initially included Ahmad ibn Hanbal. However, sources allege that Ibn Hanbal's name was erased by the Mutazila and chief

⁴⁹ Ibid 201

⁵⁰ ibid 201-02

⁵¹ ibid 203

judge Ibn Abu Du'ad.⁵² These scholars were then summoned to Caliph al-Mamun who was stationed at Raqqa (Syria) at the time.⁵³ They were made to profess, under threat to their lives, that the Qur'an was created in front of the Caliph himself. The seven scholars were then sent back to Baghdad and further shamed by being made to proclaim that the Qur'an was created in front of the most venerated jurists and muhaddithun of Baghdad.⁵⁴

There was a third letter written by Caliph al-Mamun where he again explains his rationale and how he, "...the Commander of the Faithful has made plain to himself by reflection, and has situated intently by his thinking..." the need to enforce his policy of interrogating given "...the great danger...", "corruption" and "harm" to the religion "...the sayings which Muslims are passing around among themselves about the Qur'an..."⁵⁵. With each letter it seemed that the Caliph's sense of urgency increases; according to many historians this has to do with the fact that his ideas were not popular with "the influential masses."⁵⁶ In spite of this lack of popular support, the Caliph persisted in his demands, and under his deputy Ishaq ibn Ibrahim, yet another group of jurists and muhaddithun were summoned and questioned at Baghdad; this time Ahmad ibn Hanbal was among them.

The following is a tract from the incident of the mihna as recorded by the Muslim historian al-Tabari. After interrogating several other scholars over the createdness of the Qur'an, Ishaq ibn Ibrahim turns to ibn Hanbal for questioning. Below is the exchange between the two of them:

'He then came back to Ahmad ibn Hanbal and said to him, "What is your view concerning the Qur'an?"

Ahmad replied, "It is the word of God."

Ishaq said, "Is it created?"

Ahmad retorted, "It is the word of God; I cannot add any more to these words."

Ishaq then put him to the test with the contents of the document. When he came to the words "There is nothing like Him, and He is the hearing and seeing one," he held back from the phrase "whom nothing of His creation resembles in any meaning or sense whatsoever." Ibn al-Bakka' al-Asghar interrupted him and said, "May God grant you righteousness! It speaks of 'a hearing one' because of ears and 'a seeing one' because of eyes!"

Ishaq said to Ahmad ibn Hanbal, "What do the words 'a hearing and seeing one' mean?"

Ahmad replied, "God is even as He has described Himself."

"But what does it mean?"

"I don't know; He is even as He has described Himself..."

In regard to Ibn al-Bakka' al-Akbar, he replied that the Qur'an was something made because of God's words, "Indeed, we have made it [ja'alnahu] an Arabic Qur'an" (43:2), and something originated because of His words, "No recently-originated (muhdath) warning has come to them from their Lord" (21:2).

Ishaq said to him, "Is, then, what is made, created?"

"Yes"

"So the Qur'an is created?"

"I don't say that it is created, but that it is something made."

Ishaq then wrote down what he had said.⁵⁷

The above mentioned citation is interesting because it demonstrates the reticence with which Ahmad ibn Hanbal spoke on the issue of the Qur'an's createdness. The governor Ishaq, following the Caliph's orders, reported the testimony exactly as ibn

⁵² Patton 64

⁵³ Al-Tabari 199

⁵⁴ Patton 65

⁵⁵ ibid 206

⁵⁶ Hurvitz. The Mihna as Self-Defense 102

⁵⁷ Al-Tabari 212

Hanbal had stated it. His reply was, of course, completely unsatisfactory as far as Caliph al-Mamun was concerned. This caused al-Mamun to proclaim, "As for Ahmad ibn Hanbal and what you write about him, tell him that I have understood the significance of that view and his conduct regarding it, and from it I deduce as proven his ignorance and defective intelligence."⁵⁸

Of those scholars gathered during this particular round of questioning, only two refused to acknowledge that the Qur'an was created—Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and a lesser known muhaddith, Muhammad ibn Nuh. They were placed in iron fetters and sent to the garrison town of Tarsus where they were to remain, imprisoned, until the arrival of Caliph al-Mamun. Perhaps fortunately for the two of them, Caliph al-Mamun died before ever having reached them at Tarsus.⁵⁹ After having been transported back and forth between various towns throughout the Caliphate, ibn Nuh finally died at the town of Raqqa, Syria.⁶⁰ Now alone, ibn Hanbal performed the prayer of the dead over his friend, and was again shipped off to Baghdad where he was, badgered for his beliefs, beaten, often to the point of unconsciousness⁶¹ (Patton 111) and imprisoned.⁶² Ibn Hanbal was now the only man remaining from among those who were interrogated that not only refused to profess that the Qur'an was created, but he had stood his ground and endured horrific conditions for his beliefs.

Through various political machinations and cunning, the mutazilah judge, Ibn Abi Du'ad was able to maintain his post for some time following Caliph al-Mamun's death in 833AD⁶³. He also became the chief administrator of the mihna's proceeding and continued to viciously persecute the traditionist and Ibn Hanbal under the administrations of Caliph al-Mu'tasim (833-842AD) and al-Wathiq (842-847AD). The story of ibn Hanbal's continued interrogation under ibn abi Du'ad is recorded in a text written by the famous scholar al-Jahiz of Baghdad.

Al-Jahiz was a Mutazili and literary polymath who wrote hundreds of books on everything from zoology to philosophy. The following tract is from a text regarding the createdness of the Qur'an and the history of the Islamic inquisition written after the mihna in 869AD. The account below is an exchange between Abi Du'ad and Ibn Hanbal during the latter's interrogation that took place in the presence of Caliph al-Mutasim in 834AD. In the comments by al-Jahiz one may notice his disdain towards the muhaddithun through by his insults of Ibn Hanbal. The passage reads as follows:

"The man's stubborn refusal to acknowledge the truth when it was before his eyes reached its highest point when Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ad (the Mu'tazili chief qadi) asked him, "Is it true that a thing must be either created or uncreated?"

"Yes."

"And the Qur'an is a thing?"

"Yes."

"Is it true that only God is uncreated?"

"Yes."

"So the Qur'an is created?"

"I am no dialectician," he replied at last. This was his way when dealing with questions; when he reached an impasse, the point at which a single word from him would have lost him the support of his followers, he would reply, "I am no dialectician." He neither said at the outset that he was unskilled in dialectic nor, having had his say and arrived at a crux in the disputation, was he willing to acknowledge the truth.

⁵⁸ ibid 217

⁵⁹ ibid 222

⁶² Patton 86

⁶³ Hurvitz 124-25

At this point the caliph exclaimed contemptuously, "Shame on this man, who is ignorant at one moment and obstinate the next!"

The moment when he had the effrontery to lie brazenly to the caliph and insult the community, thus demonstrating his indifference and incurable stubbornness, was when Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ad asked him, "Do you consider God the lord of the Qur'an?"

"If I had heard anyone say so, I would say so also."

"Have you never heard it in an oath or a question, on the lips of a stump orator, or in verses or hadiths?"

The caliph saw that he was as untruthful as he was stubborn in the face of irrefutable arguments. Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ad was too skilled at this sort of dialectic, and other methods also, to suppose that he could make these questions a main issue in the hearing; he merely wished to bring out the insolence of the man's lies, just as he had exposed the shamelessness of his obstinacy. It was at this point that the caliph struck him.

He maintained on that day that the word of God is like His learning: just as it is impossible to accept that His learning is created, so it is impossible to accept that His word is. Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ad said to him, "Is it not true that God can substitute one verse for another, or withdraw this Qur'an and put another in its place, seeing that all this is plainly written in the Qur'an?"

"Yes."

"And is the same thing possible with His learning? Can God amend it, or put another in its place?"

"No."

"We have supported our argument by quoting prophetic hadiths, by reciting verses from the Qur'an, and by showing you the rational proof that distinguishes truth from falsehood; now it is your turn to answer us in one of these three ways."

But he could make no reply.

Our friend said, "Mental reservation (*taqiyya*) is permissible only when a Muslim is in infidel territory." If his statements about the creation of the Qur'an are the result of his using mental reservation, then he has practised it in the territory of Islam, and has been dishonest with himself. Conversely, if what he says is what he really thinks, then you no longer have anything in common with him, and he is not one of you."⁶⁴

Ahmad ibn Hanbal's unyielding criticism of *kalam* was demonstrated in his "stubbornness" and refusal to acquiesce to the Caliph's demands. This made him the focus of al-Mamun's hostility and the primary target of the *mihna* which lasted for some fifteen years. The *mihna* did finally come to an end in under Caliph al-Mutawwakil, two years into his reign in 234 A.H. (849AD)⁶⁵, and with it began the genesis of Sunni dominance of Baghdad until the coming of the Mongols in 1258AD.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal's life and public persona are important to the history of the *mihna*, and the subsequent development of Sunnism (traditionalist Islamic theology), because they illustrate the power and influence wielded by scholars of his caliber, and the difficult circumstances out of which they and their ideas emerged. After the *mihna*, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal became the epitome of an emerging cadre of grass roots religious scholars that were able to readily accommodate the common person's need for pragmatic approaches to sacred law that addressed every aspect of their lives.

I have identified Caliph al-Mamun and ibn Hanbal as being representative of the two opposing sides in this debate in lieu of Hurvitz's rejection of the Caliph verses the ulema hypothesis.⁶⁶ Nawas is also in disagreement with Hurvitz and accepts what essentially amounts to a "single person" or "caliphal authority hypothesis"—the idea being that in order to understand the Islamic inquisition one needs to recognize that "...the *mihna* (functioned) as an instrument which al-Mamun used to secure for the

⁶⁴ Al-Jahiz 48-50

⁶⁵ Patton 122. In most of the sources used for this research paper, the writers use the Hijra (immigration) year or Islamic calendar year to mark events in Islamic history. The 1st hijra year began in 622AD when the Prophet Muhammad and his companions migrated from the city of Mecca to Medina, Arabia.

⁶⁶ Hurvitz 94

generations of caliphs to come the total and unquestioned authority —on all matters religious and secular...⁶⁷

I agree with Nawas's view that the muhaddithun represented the greatest threat to the authority of Caliph al-Mamun, not simply because of their not engaging in *kalam*, but by their creating an alternative source of religious authority that was outside the control of the Caliph. They were able to accomplish this feat by taking on the enormous task of collecting and codifying the thousands of Prophetic traditions that were circulating through-out the Dar al-Islam—throwing out those traditions deemed spurious and preserving and transmitting those validated as authentic and in accordance with Qur'anic injunctions.⁶⁸ The religious institutions that developed out of this “daunting task” were the 'ijma—or a “scholarly consensus” of the traditionist, and the codex of ethical religious behavior for the four schools of Sunni Islamic law. That these activities were happening out side of the Abbasid court posed the greatest threat to Caliphal authority.⁶⁹

Hurvitz also notices that with the proliferation of hadith and the “rijal literature” connected to it—that is, the science of authenticating the men in the chains of hadith transmitters, the mutakallimun suffered from having been labeled as unreliable transmitters.⁷⁰ This status of unreliability remained permanent in most instances and was not simply confined to the realm of Prophetic traditions. The mutakallimun were tagged, in Sunni circles, as unreliable transmitters for nearly every branch of the sacred sciences of Islam: fiqh (jurisprudence), tafsir (explanation of the Qur'an), and tassawuf (Islamic spirituality). The broad network of scholars and adherents of the traditionists milieu were not only a threat to Caliphal authority, but they were equally menacing to the partisans of reason and speculative theology who sought refuge and favor at the court of al-Mamun and relished in the his persecution of the traditionists.

I believe that the mihna was very much about the power struggle between the Abbasid Caliphate and muhaddithun like ibn Hanbal, who had amassed huge social capitol amongst the masses by the time of the inquisition. Even Hurvitz admits that, “Prior to the mihna, the anthropomorphists (literalist/traditionist) forged alliances with varying segments of the society and built a large body of followers that opposed kalam. These networks of rabble and merchants led to the isolation of the mutakallimun.”⁷¹ Whether one labels them as “rabble”, or “scholars”, most historians I think would agree that the traditionists won the political battle with the ascension of al-Mutwwakil, an alledged Shafi adherent⁷², to the office of Caliph in 847AD and his subsequent abolition of the mihna. Further, with the release, public requital and emergence of Ahamd ibn Hanbal as the living martyr of the mihna, this nascent Sunni body politic had a champion whose persecution during the mihna accelerated the spread of Sunnism (traditionism) and in my opinion, anti-government/Abbasid sentiment as well.

The mihna, like many ideological struggles or academic duals, was a multifaceted conflict that was very much about the supremacy of ideas on one hand, and the solidification of state power on the other. The mutakallimun chose the path of government patronage assuming that with the apparatus of the state behind them, they

⁶⁷ Nawas 707

⁶⁸ Ibid 706

⁶⁹ Ibid 708

⁷⁰ Hurvitz 110

⁷¹ ibid 101

⁷² Patton 130

stood a better chance of having their ideas reign supreme throughout the Dar al-Islam. The letters of al-Mamun and the chronicle of events by al-Jahiz also reveal that mutakallimun saw themselves as the intellectually superior group and “that...” they were the most deserving “...to guide the community”⁷³. However, this posture proved to be a tactical error that only served to alienate them further from the masses.

This alienation from the masses may have led to a miscalculation in Caliph al-Mamun’s thinking. His first targeting the muhaddithun for his policy of forced ideological conversion, showed that he grossly underestimated the muhaddithun’s capacity to resist persecution. He also appeared to be ignorant of how entrenched traditionist ideas had become amongst the masses. His policies also wrongfully assumed that there was an intellectual void among the Islamic body politic that needed to be filled, and that this intellectual vacuum needed the sheer power of the Islamic state to fill it.

In light of the mihna, Ahmad ibn Hanbal and the muhaddithun represent the kind of public intellectuals who were able to resist state coercion by generating a profound base of public support for their ideas. The traditionist-Sunnis also demonstrated that, regardless of how powerful and repressive the policies of the state may be, “people power” may be harnessed as a type of protection for the public intellectual in times of academic, and even physical warfare.

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⁷³ Hurvitz The Mihna as Self-Defense 102

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