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Were the Early *Firaq* Extremists? Rethinking the History of Muslim Disagreement(s)

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Abstract

Many writers have associated contemporary manifestations of extremism with early Islamic sects, which is argued against in this article. The study employs critical analysis of available sources and argues for additional scrutiny. Our position is supported by detailed scrutiny of early sectarian contributions to the development of Islamic thought. We discovered remarkable limitations in the tracing of the roots to the early *firaq* (sects) due to a strong reliance on secondary sources muddled in the complexities of dogmatic polemics. Nonetheless, relevant historiography improved our view of what actually happened when nascent Muslims confronted humorless political and social problems. Rather than producing extremist deviants, early Islamic thought was exceedingly dynamic and governed by a pressing need to defend sound Islamic principles. Early Muslims sought answers to perennial issues and did much to stimulate subsequent Muslim philosophy and thought. Indeed, any negative understanding of this early legacy undermines the dignity of that era and people.

Keywords: extremism, *Firaq*, history of disagreement, Islam, rethinking

Introduction

Since 9/11 Islam has been associated with radicals and terrorism. This represents a new era of the Atlantic crusade and is marked by the spread of Islamophobia. Boko Haram,[1] Daesh,[2] al-Qaeda[3] and Taliban are among those related to extremist violence against

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[1]Boko Haram is a militant Islamist group based in Nigeria.

[2]Daesh is a militant Islamist group based mainly in Iraq and Syria which launched rebellious attacks against US interference in these countries. November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and March 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels have been associated with the movement.

[3]Al-Qaeda initially emerged from the anti-Soviet *jihād* in Afghanistan in the 1980s and later became the great hub of Islamic transnational militancy and terrorism. It created a vanguard of highly skilled and operational fighters capable of leading the global jihadist project operating in more than 70 countries. Its most well known leader was Osama bin Laden. Change of direction was observed with the leadership of Zarqawi. See Daniel L. Byman, "Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets," https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/. Accessed on: 19th April 2020).

Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Other extremist schools of thought that exist in the contemporary world include fundamentalists and liberals, though these are not considered as dangerous as radical Islamists. However, these are equally counterproductive mindsets that negatively affect global Muslim solidarity.

Modern Islamic extremism has been traced to the early Muslim *firaq*[4] that directly or indirectly contributed to radical perspectives. In this regard, Kharijites[5] were considered radicals; Mu'tazilites[6] were rationalists and liberals; Murji'ites were permissive and lenient; Qadarites[7] believed man had total freedom; and Jabarites[8] were deterministic fatalists.[9] Some modern movements have been linked with the earliest sects and are held to be *Neo-Mu'tazilites* or *Neo-Kharijites*, depending on the direction of the movement. Metaphysically, they can generally be traced to a single but widely interpreted Prophetic tradition: "*My community will be divided into seventy three sects but only one of these will be saved, others will perish.*"[10] Consequently, our prevailing imagination of early Muslim sectarians is pejorative and is based on a wide variety of opinions rather than facts.

This negative perspective requires a scientific adjustment. Hence, the current authors examined the several positions of early Muslim schools of thought with regard to extremism. Consequently, we argue against the common assumption that the root of

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[4]*Firaq,* which means sects or schools, refers to early theological schools namely the Kharijites, Murji'ites, Qadarites, Jabrites, Mu'tazilites, and Shi'ites who are considered not to represent the mainstream teachings of Islam, especially according to the Sunnites.

[5]Kharijites were the followers of the earliest political oriented school of Islam and they withdrew from being the supporters of 'Ali. With the slogan of "No judgment but God's," they asserted that submitting to the decision of human judgement (arbitration) is sinful and even leads to the status of unbeliever. They are considered to be associated with several incidents of bloodshed. See al-Shahrastānī, *Muslim Sects and Division* (*al-Milal wa al-Nihal*), (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 98 and Abu al-Hasan al-Ash 'ari, *Maqālāt al-Islamiyyin wa Ikhtilaf al-Musallin* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Misriyyah, 1999), 152.

[6]Mu'tazilites are generally considered as the first school of *kalām* and the first to develop a proper systematic methodology of rational theology (*kalām*). By their hands, Islamic theology was philosophized. The school generally is said to begin with Wāsil bin ʿAṭā,' who withdrew from Hasan al-Basri's circle for not agreeing with him on the status of a grave sinner. Wasil insisted for the middle position (*manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*). The downfall of the school occurred mainly because of its involvement in political power struggle, especially while attempting to indoctrinate the view that the Qur'ān was "created."

[7]Qadarites held a belief that gave human beings autonomous power in their actions.

[8]Jabarites refer to those who expounded the doctrine which denied that a deed in reality is attributable to man and they ascribed it only to God.

[9]Thameem Ushama, "Historical Roots of Extremist and Radical Islamist Thinking," *Intellectual Discourse* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2017).

[10]Narrated by Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*. # 4596, 4597. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, nd, 4/197-198; Ibn Majah, # 3991, 3992, 3993, *Sunan Ibn Majah*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, nd; al-Tarmidhi, # 2640, 2641, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, nd, 5/ 25.

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extremism can be traced to early Muslim sects. Our revisit does not deny that long living breeds of extremism do exist; however, we cast doubt on any direct relationship of modern extremism with early Muslim sectarians. In the authors' opinion, extremism is a separate issue.

To support this contention, this paper explores three areas: i) the intricate historiography of these early groups; ii) elucidating early Islamic thought as intellectual development; iii) identifying how these early groups might have impacted modern extremism. A factor that prompted this fresh interpretation was the recovery of some primary sources pertaining to Qadarites, Mu'tazilites and Ibadites.[11] This study is, therefore, expected to shed new light on the contemporary theological discourse. It is also likely to alter the current understanding and affect future considerations of early Islamic thought and historicity.

2. A Brief Definition of Extremist Religious Movements

'Extreme' literally means "*very great in degree or intensity*, *going to great or exaggerated lengths*: *radical, exceeding the ordinary, usual, or expected*; *archaic (last)*; *situated at the farthest possible point from a centre*; *most advanced or thoroughgoing* (*maximum*)."[12] The term describes situations and behaviours that go far beyond the expected norms, especially if they are socially censured.

Extremism in Muslim tradition has been known to exist since its inception. It began with related words appearing in the sources of Islam, especially Prophetic traditions, such as *ghuluw* (*excessiveness*), *tanattu'* (*nit-picking religiosity*), and *tashdīd* (*strictness, austerity*).[13] Muslim scholars view that extremism generally means to go beyond a certain limit acknowledged by the mainstream of Islam, either in doing or avoiding. Ibn Hajar, for instance, defined extremism as, "Exaggeration in something and being stringent in that matter by going beyond the proper limit."[14] The same was expressed by Ibn Taimiyyah who stated, "Extremism is to go beyond the proper limits concerning a matter, beyond what it is deserving, either in praising it or disparaging it."[15]

Yusuf al-Qaradawi says that a general lack of understanding of Islam's prescribed middle path, that is, the path of moderation is due to unbalanced Islamic instruction. He further argues that extremism is complex and exists in all belief systems, forms of worship, and human transactions. Al-Qaradawi suggests that identifying any individual or

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[11]Sabine Schmidtke, "Introduction," in *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

[12]Merriam Webster Dictionary. http://www.Merriam-Webster.com/dictionary/extreme (15Aug19).

[13]Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening: Between Rejection and Extremism* (Washington: IIIT, 2006), 9.

[14]Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari,* vol. 13 (Cairo: Maktabah Salafiyyah, 1986), 278.

[15]Ibn Taimiyyah, *Iqtida' al-Sirat al-Mustaqim li Mukhalafati Ashab al-Jahim,* vol. 1 (Kuwayt: Jam'iyyat Ihya' al-Turath, 2011), 289.

movement as 'extreme' is not a straightforward issue and he proposes several contextual considerations before ascribing the term to any person or group.[16] Zakyi Ibrahim supports this approach and contends that the prevalent nature of extremism is characterized by zealots whose interpretations bear clear signs of intolerance and lead to violent actions. He, therefore, views Islamic extremism as a combination of psycho-religious ideologies and violent tendencies.[17] Abdul Rahman al-Mutairi explicates that extremism is a behavioural response that emerges as a reaction to an unstable environment. [18]

Extremism is, therefore, a complex issue involving psycho-social and spiritual dimensions on the one hand and is very much affected by the current discourse on the other. Principally, the original spirit of one's own purification of soul has been replaced with contemporary focus on extremism that is not a matter of disregarding moderation; rather, it is that of labelling 'others' as a crude approach to conflict resolution and problem solving, to include "surgical strikes" and bringing forth the spirit of extremism as a spirit of rebellion and endangering others.

The issue of extremism generated complex discourses and attracted the attention of the world with a series of terrorism related incidents associated with some Muslim groups. Western thinkers introduced different names related to the spirit of extremism and to some extent affected the original understanding of the term in Islam. Extremism, in their sense, has been associated with either too much political interest or the adherence to fundamentalism and rigidity which does not accurately represent Muslims. The conflict between the major schools of *Sunni* Islam and Shi'ite Islam is also ostensibly related to the extreme movements.[19]

3. Major Minutiae When Treating the History of the Early Development of Islamic Thought

Students of Islam's early history and community confront several problems. Limited access to primary sources is an initial challenge that obtains a gaping lacuna in the readily available knowledge. The problem is compounded when secondary sources comprise dogmatic and theological polemics that affect the reliability of data. The available literature mostly deals with fragmented and selective treatments focused on refuting the opposing school of thought. In most cases, original views and motivating factors of 'opponents' are

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[16]Ibid, 17–19.

[17]Zakyi Ibrahim, "The Stigma of Extremism on Muslims," *American Journal of Islamic Social Science (AJISS),* (Virginia: IIIT, 2012), 29 (1), iii. See also Mitterand M. Okorie, Eke Udochu and Oluwaseun Bamidele, Boko Haram Terrorism: The Intersection of Religious Extremism and Socio-Economic Privation, *Gandhara Journal of Research in Social Science* Volume 1, No. 3, Winter 2016. ISSN: 2415-2404

[18]Abdul Rahman ibn Mualaa al-Mulaihiq al-Mutairi, *Religious Extremism in the Lives of Contemporary Muslims*, Jamaal al-Din al-Zarabozo (tr.) (al-Basheer Publications and Translations, 2001), 124.

[19]Ibid., 89-94.

missing and thus the entire fragmented issue is uncomfortably removed from proper contextual consideration. These secondary reports are therefore potentially misleading, as observed by Frank, who says that they contain "*elementary and disconnected way and elements of various theses.*" As such, they represent complete theoretical systems for which fundamentals, principles and structures that support the theses and arguments are taken for granted and which modify any given representation of what actually occurred.[20]

Richard M. Frank again comments on the method of supposed observation when narrating any view of events which is absent in dogmatic reports:

> Often they can no longer rightly recall the meaning they once offered in their native habitat …What you have to do is to listen, to pay attention in the hope of hearing, of coming to understand what is said. The aim is, in a sense, to come to see things their way, not to "get inside the minds" of individuals but to participate in a way of seeing things, to see how, living in that suite of that house, things really do — or at least can, or might — appear that way and be thought about, talked about that way. Whatever we want to do with the texts … we have first to understand what they are saying, what they mean by what they say.[21]

What is worse is that the principal nature of theological discussion is apologetic and hostile, especially when Islamic sects under discussion, according to the author, were/are treated as heretical. Their positions are painstakingly tabulated and all too frequently carelessly refuted.[22] Thus, the fundamental apologetic nature of *kalām* literature contributes to the complexity of our study.

The word *kalām* does not only mean "*a noun for speaking,*" or more commonly "*speech* or *talk* or *discussion*", but also "*disputation.*" A *mutakallim* is not only one who masters the art of *kalām* but also the one "*who speaks*" in the 'first person' of the verb, the one whose speech '*the hearer listens to.*"[23] Van Ess elaborates on the debate between *mas'ūl* and *al-sa'il* in the following words: "*In both cases one is reacting against a contrary attitude: one does not develop a truth because of its internal evidence, but because of the untenability of the contrary.*"[24] In many cases, the study of sectarian views was done in the form of an imaginary trial. Obviously, debating an enemy who was not present and

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[20]Richard M. Frank, "Ya Kalam," in *Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism in Medieval Islam: Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam*, Dimitri Gutas (ed.,), vol. 1 (Hampshire, GB: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 2.

[21]Richard M. Frank, "Hearing and Saying what was Said," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1996): 3; republished in *Classical Islamic Theology: The Ash'arites Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalām*, Dimitri Gutas (ed), Vol. III (Hampshire, GB: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 3.

[22]D. Bennett, "The Mu'tazilite Movement (11) the Early Mu'tazilites," *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, 144.

[23]Richard M. Frank, "Hearing and Saying what was Said," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 3.

[24]Josef van Ess, "The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology," *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Ian Richard Netton (ed), vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2007), 42.

speculating on the victory of one's position did not result in an objective or balanced discussion.[25]

Van Ess examines the inaccuracies encountered by later day *mutakallimūn* while interpreting earlier writers and gives the following example:

> In the twelfth century, al-Razi misconstrued basic sentences of predecessors in the tenth and eleventh centuries. He failed to hear their formal propositions as enunciated. Records of earlier *mutakallimūn*—those retained—were almost all relegated to the attic while the "historical account" was consigned to a few handbooks. These handbooks were heavily influenced by the peripatetic tradition elaborated by Ibn Sina, which contributed in a major way to misleading presuppositions with which scholars approached the study of classical *kalām.*[26]

All such discussions apparently followed rules that relegated polemical discourse to rhetorical devices of either defence or attack.[27] A need to defend Islam seemed to dominate early theologians and full fledge development of Islamic thought was yet to occur. More often than not, negative language was used to characterize opponents. This is not surprising because the polemic / apologetic method is rooted in a Middle Eastern culture of religious debate that preceded Islam.[28] Hence, derogatory labels like *zindīq* (heretic) or unbeliever (*kafir*) often appear in these reports and should not be taken at face value by modern researchers who intend to produce a balanced discussion of the early development of Islamic thought.

Careful historians obtain as much untainted information as possible in attempts to obtain a more comprehensive view of events, which means wading through and synthesizing mountains of material. Any approach towards generalization is therefore challenging,[29] perhaps even impossible when it comes to the available foothills that take us through Islam's early thought and thinkers. Nonetheless, some researchers find this period interesting and claim that it held highly valuable intellectual discourse. Frank contends:

> What is offered in philosophical and theological discourse are thoughts, views, ideas, and theories; and meanings of propositions, perplexities and paradoxes about being and beings. Here the matter of seeing what is meant and getting the point is not simple.[30]

Gradually, change in the perception of earliest Islamic schools of thought occurred, especially after the recovery of previously unknown primary sources in the middle of the

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[25]In *mu'aradat*: certain *'illah* obtained different conclusions. According to Van Ess, this is merely a weapon of polemics and proves nothing.

[26]Josef van Ess, "The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology," 30.

[27]Ibid., 32–33.

[28]A Treiger, "Origins of Kalām," *The Oxford handbook of Islamic Theology*, 29.

[29]R. F. Atkinson *Knowledge and Explanation in History: An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 8.

[30]Richard M. Frank, "Hearing and Saying what was Said," 7.

20ᵗʰ century. This is why Montgomery Watt posits that oft-vilified Muʻtazilites are no longer understood as Islam's free thinkers but have come to be viewed as piously committed Muslims.[31] More and more early writings have been uncovered and this process still continues today. As a result, recent perspectives on early sects such as Ibadites and Kharijites have also been modified. These rather positive developments should be reverberating throughout the *ummah* since it concerns Islamic provenance. Indeed, core Islamic doctrine is that Muslims should honour history because it holds invaluable springs of knowledge and experience. The Qur'ān encourages Muslims to travel throughout the earth and study all traces of those who came before so they can better understand the present and prepare for the future.[32] This spirit should also be incorporated in the study of early *firaq*.

4. The Formation of Early Muslim Thought

Another angle of exploring the real nature of the early schools is by doing critical analysis of their formation. A contextualized explanation provides us with psychological and sociological justifications for their emergence and demonstrates that *mutakallimūn* of the day were responding to important issues, often during a crisis, such as the issue of looking for Prophet's (*SAW*) successor after his decease. Internal conflicts and issues of concern also surfaced during territorial expansions.[33] Newly conquered regions produced indigenous sectarians with diverse traditions who sought satisfaction and answers for their respective dilemmas.[34] The situation was extremely complex and involved different groups, backgrounds, religions, traditions, tribal cultures, worldviews and expectations. Settlers and nomads had disparate lifestyles steeped in ancient traditions and they came to be governed by a central Muslim authority.

Views and opinions expressed then were initial efforts to solve various problems while gaining a better "Islamic" understanding of life, rather than just theological constructs. Challenges included socio-political issues concerning leadership, the *imamah*, social identity, and conundrums regarding major sins.[35] The urgency of these issues were so pressing that conflicts led to bloodshed and civil unrest. The matter of legitimate leadership and authority was first debated during the early caliphate when the first four caliphs struggled to maintain communal unity with undivided trust. Conflicts immediately arose

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[31]William Montgomery Watt, "The Muʻtazilite*,*" in *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: Critical Concepts in Islamic Thought*, I. R. Netton (ed.,) (London: Routledge), 195; *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey*, 2ⁿᵈ Edition (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 46.

[32]Verses that encourage man to travel and seek lessons from the past are Al-e- Imrān 3:137; Al-Anʻām 06:11; Al-Nahl 16:36; Al-Naml 27:69; Al-Ankabūt 29:20; Al-Rūm 30:42; Saba'34:18.

[33]Mahmud Muhammad Mazruʻah, *Tarīkh al-Firaq al-Islamiyyah* (Cairo: Dar al-Manar, 1999), 44-45.

[34]Albert H. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard University Press, 1991), 11.

[35]Mahmud Muhammad Mazruʻah, *Tarīkh al-Firaq al-Islamiyyah*, 40-45.

during Abu Bakr's (d 634 CE) caliphate and were amplified during Umar's (*RA*) (d. 644 CE), Uthman's (*RA*) (d 656 CE) and Ali's (*RA*) (d. 661 C.E.) leadership.

Ideas surrounding political authority and power underwent partisan and social reconstructions that undoubtedly gave rise to marked differences in opinion. Muslims were newcomers on the geo-political scene and had swiftly risen from a persecuted minority to a dominant majority that wielded an inexperienced mace of political leadership. The *Umayyads* (661–750 C.E.) and *Abbasids* (750–1258 CE) discarded Islam's pristine meritocracy for hereditary tyranny. Moreover, external challenges demanded consideration of extant religions and cultural traditions. Newly conquered territories comprised Christians, Jews, Manicheans and Zoroastrians under a fledgling Muslim power.[36] Contentious issues surfaced with celerity including the ancient problem of evil, the status of God's *kalām*, divine attributions, etc. Manicheans and Zoroastrians alone commanded immense challenges to the Islamic concept of God. Another unsettling wave came through the introduction of Greek philosophy's established methods and approaches to understand life. All required distinct Muslim responses and an exacting discourse.

Considering these fundamental changes in political and socioeconomic landscapes, we observe that emerging sects did not so much comprise groups who instigated opposition or civil disorder; rather, they acted as ordinary concerned citizens of the day who naturally responded to problems with respective attempts to defend sound Islamic doctrine, each according to its capacity and perspective. Internally, their efforts can be thought of as the beginning of conceptualizing the Islamic belief system in relation to real politics and social experiences. In addition to intrinsic perceptions, there were discourses generated on the refutation of other religions, mainly Christianity, Judaism and Manichaeism, with the strengthening of the Muslim position as their primary goal. These groups made use of contemporary intellectual methods including Greek philosophy and syncretic arguments that supported Islamic teachings. Hence, the entire process was a kettle of indispensably necessary responses to the problems of the day. This attitude was especially obvious in Mu'tazilite figures and argumentation.

Rather than presenting unruly hindrances, most efforts were made in the defence of the faith. Hence, such early views cannot rightfully be considered as 'extreme', when the entire range of ideas and conceptualizations under consideration remained in flux. Indeed, the development of Islamic thought contributed to rational and scientific enquiry and is best understood as a natural occurrence that may have sprung from 'chaos' but it eventually obtained a definitive structure and a systematic order. Theological issues did not suddenly emerge out of the blue but had sound foundations in issues that addressed advocates of other religions who demanded satisfaction from Muslims of the new mace.

The formation of Islamic schools of thought was a slow and deliberate process that gradually endorsed universally accepted principles and doctrines. This progression began

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[36]Alexander Treiger, "Origins of Kalām," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, 27.

with individual responses to concrete issues that were first debated, then either adopted or rejected. To prove that the formation of early schools was not as concrete as it is assumed, we should remember that it was common at that time that a particular scholar who was named as leading a school would incline towards an opinion of one group on one issue and towards another on a separate issue. Ghaylan (723 CE), for example, was both Jahamite and Qadarite.[37] Hasan al-Basri (642 C.E.) was once associated with the Qadarite School's position on free will, although later accounts deny this.[38] The important conclusion is that the association with a particular school was not as straightforward as is commonly assumed. Even today, an individual's association with a school or sect, especially minor entities, is debated with scant data. Indeed, membership rolls are unknown. For example, Mu'tazilites produced a vast array of different opinions on numerous issues, even though the definitive characteristics of a Mu'tazilite is adherence to five doctrines called *al-usul al-khamsah*.

There are many shared views that blur the lines of demarcation from one school to another. Jahamites, for example, are said to have denied the attributes of God yet upheld a belief in predestination. Hence, they sided with Mu'tazilites on the matter of godly attributions, although they agreed with Jabarites about the nature of human action.[39] So, the idea that some sects varied slightly and only on minor issues challenges the notion that they represented the prophesied seventy-one deviant sects per tradition.

Views within a school could also change or evolve with the passage of time. An example is the Mu'tazilite Abu Hashim (d 933 CE), who's position on *hal* slowly moved closer to the Ash'arite's view. Internally, different views emerged within the same school, so that individual adherents were happily diverse while maintaining a certain uniformity on major issues. For example, Mu'tazilite theologians held diverse views on many subjects.[40] Their views on Allah's attributions were adopted from Abu al-Hudhayl's (d 841 CE) concept of *ma'na,* as received from Nazzam (d 846 CE), and later from Abu Hashim's *hal.* Abu Hudhayl irreconcilably differed in terms of his imagination of reality's basic structure.[41]

Politics also played a major part in the acceptance or rejection of a school. A rejected school was inevitably subjected to marked negativity. Ahmed El Shamsy, for example, took the position that political authorities promoted certain schools and vilified others for

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[37]Steven C. Judd, "The Early Qadariyya," *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, 49.

[38]Ibid., 51.

[39]Cornelia Schock, "Jahm b. Safwan (d 128/745-6) and the Jahmiyya"; and "Dirar b.'Amr (d 200/815)" in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, 55ff.

[40]Richard M. Frank, "The Metaphysics of Created Being According to Abu l-Hudhayl al-'Allaf: a Philosophical Study of the Earliest Kalām," in *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu'tazilites and al-Ash'ari*, D Gutas (ed), (Hampshire, GB: Ashgate, 2007), 4.

[41]Richard M. Frank, "Remarks on the Early Development of the Kalām," in *Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism in Medieval Islam: Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalām*, D. Gutas (ed). vol 1 (Hampshire, GB: Ashgate, 2005), 316.

their temporal gains.[42] Specific views and standpoints defended by authorities fluctuated widely. Hence, remarks about authoritarian bias in favour of a deviant or corrupt doctrine requires exceedingly skilful criticism.

We, therefore, conclude that labelling early schools' 'deviant' propagators with dangerous extremism is a misleading and gross generalization that does not aid our attempt to understand the history of early Islamic sects. This is illustrated by the following diagram:
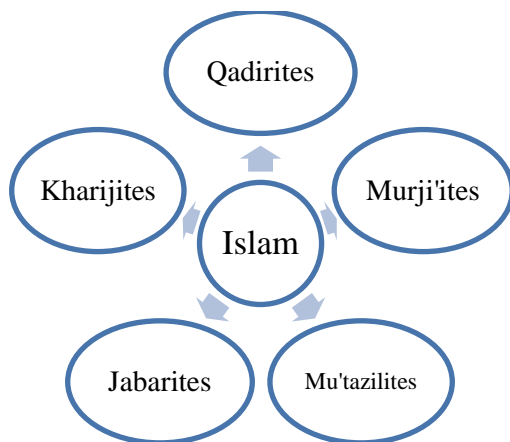
Diagram 1

Per initial analysis, **Diagram 1** depicts the relationship of these sects as they emerged from core Islamic views. Each school appeared distinctly different and without common features. Each school also contradicted extant counterparts. However, as we progressed with this study, later relations between them proved this diagram inaccurate.
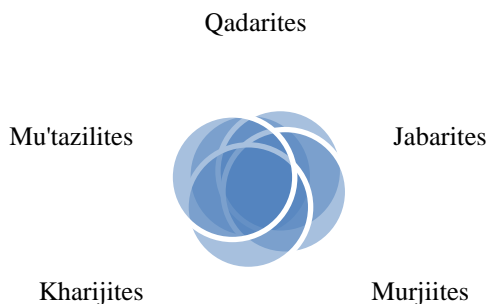
Diagram 2

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[42]Ahmed El Shamsy, "The Social Construction of Orthodoxy," *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 97.

Diagram 2 is more representative of the reality we discovered. The sects apparently shared a common ground of core teachings based on shared references to the Qur'ān and *Sunnah.* Divergence was present as nuances not necessarily central to the core Islamic doctrine. Importantly, we noted that the middle position generally taken by later mainstream schools of Islam was shared by Ash'arites and Maturidites.

5. Early Schools Cannot Be Labelled 'Extremist": Their Contributions

We assessed the respective goals and impact of early Muslim sects on Muslim society and attempted to determine the relevance of their several positions regarding later developments in Islamic thought. Our contention was that if they had indeed pioneered extremist movements, results would have been negative and therefore rejected without showing any influence on later schools.

To begin with, these sects were active during a very productive phase of Islam's successful civilizational development. Acikgenc considered this period exceptional, one without an equal in human history and therefore a miraculous phenomenon in numerous appreciable ways.[43] Muhammad Asad agreed and stressed that it took the Muslim Empire only 80 years to reach maturity, while Rome required a century.[44] Early Islamic schools of thought mostly developed in tandem with essential theological issues that contributed to a growing body of knowledge. Discourses intended to respond to contemporary problems soon formulated scientific enquiries that conceptualized Islam in terms of global and cosmological worldviews.

Early discourses on *kalām* did much for the development of human civilization and were certainly not limited to a purely Muslim context. In fact, it is acknowledged for imparting and transferring Greek thought and civilization to Europe.[45] As such, *kalām* was highly intellectual and included vast libraries devoted to the translation of non-Islamic knowledge, especially during the Abbasid Caliphate; an achievement that commands global recognition among informed academics. *Kalām* also impacted discourses within other religions. For example, Mu'tazilites are considered pioneers of modern ethics and they influenced Karaite Jews.[46]

Some scholars acknowledge the need for a more sophisticated framework when approaching any study of Islam's early philosophy and epistemology. For example, Acikgenc offers a step-by-step staging process: 1) the initial formation of an Islamic worldview; 2) problem statements and the emergence of 'Islamic Knowledge'; 3) a disciplinary stage; 4) a terminology or naming stage; 5) a departure stage; and finally, 6)

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[43]Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History* (Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 2014), 95.

[44]Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroad* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 1999), 23.

[45]Tim Winter, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

[46]George F. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 3.

the emergence of a tradition.[47] Frank considers *kalām* a genuinely original attempt to understand the ultimate structure of being. This is to say, the founding of a theological system specifically conceived and designed to provide a reflective yet analytical account of the creation's universal order as well as that of the Creator, as a direct result of a formal theoretical framework based on the Qur'ān.[48] If such meaningful contributions are associated with sects characterized as 'extremist,' the result lamentably misses the mark only to offer far less appreciation to latter day Muslims for the provenance of early Islam.

We, therefore, anticipate that additional studies will soon be highlighting early contributions to *kalām* that strove to establish a sound understanding of Islam as a universal faith. Frank addresses present shortcomings in the study of *kalām*, for example, with respect to the theological meaning of *qudra*:

> We fail to analyse carefully the content of terms and consequently feel we are always dealing with a single problem similarly posed. Quite the contrary, however: there was no common agreement among early *mutakallimūn* on the exact focus and detailed structure of the problem.[49]

An overly simplistic approach has obtained negative impressions of some of these early schools which implies that they upheld and defended extremist viewpoints. There is little to no concern or effort made to establish a balanced synthesis that more appropriately grasps different sectarian qualities and contextual attributions. Investigators would do better to account for the times in which these people lived and formed their views. Kharijites, for example, are usually associated with the murder of 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan and many scholars have carelessly imposed judgment as 'unbelievers' upon all Kharijites who did not join or support the cause of the murderers. The overlooked positive side is that their doctrine stressed individual religious commitment rather than any state imposed mandate for keeping minimal religious obligations. Acikgenc contends that Khariji doctrines contributed to the emergence of a more speculative school of thought.[50] Thus, sufficient cause exists to apply extremism to a certain group of radicals but certainly not to the entire group.

Murji'ites are considered to have been exceptionally lenient and may have viewed sinfulness as more of a personal affliction that can only be objectively judged by God. However, this does not mean they tolerated sinful behaviour. Although they did think it wiser to be more reserved rather than prematurely condemn people, especially during times of confusion and social chaos (*fitnah*). Qadarites and Jabarites are generally characterized as defenders of absolute freedom and fatalism, respectively; two polar views in outright opposition, albeit both issues were far more nuanced and subtle. Freedom versus fatalism

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[47]Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History*, 24-30.

[48]Richard M. Frank, "The Metaphysics of Created Being According to Abu l-Hudhayl al-'Allaf," 7-9.

[49]Richard M. Frank, "Remarks on the Early Development of the Kalām," 109.

[50]Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History,* 271.

is still debated and some scholars that relate with the real experience acknowledge that both positions to some extent have sound basis[51]. There appears to be no simple line of distinction between these perspectives and several scholars report that both views are reflected in the Qur'ān.[52] Perhaps Jabarites thought human beings needed to be more accepting and grateful for what has been decreed by God, while Qadarites urged us to take more responsibility for our actions. Allah alone knows.

Mu'tazilites are generally associated with liberalism and rationalism. They have been generally perceived as disagreeing with revelation, which consequently removes them from sound Islamic teachings. However, their primary goal appears to have been to preserve the concept of Allah's unity or oneness by defending the belief in His transcendence in every conceivable sense, including the denial of God's existence in space or time. Mu'tazilites wished to ensure that Islam may not fall prey to errors made by prior religions, especially Christianity and Judaism. So then, rather than being liberals or rationalists—terms reserved for people who shake religious doctrines by following the dictates of reason—Mu'tazilites are proven defenders of Islam who stood against external and internal challenges by considering revelation as Islam's only source. As the first major school of *kalām*, they called themselves *Ahl al-tawhīd wa-l-'adl*, that is, *Adherents of Monotheism and Justice*, and established several doctrines that upheld the goal of achieving the true understanding of the faith. Their bedrock principle for all doctrines was the 'Oneness of God'. On this foundation they established doctrinal standpoints such as 1) the denial of God's attributes; 2) the denial of a beatific vision of God; and 3) the Created Qur'ān. Their justifications did/do not deviate from sound Islamic doctrine. Nonetheless, if one follows interpretations made by their opponents alone, these positions qualify as deviant, even considered manipulative, and are assumed to be based purely on free thought.

Mu'tazilites did base their several perspectives on the Qur'ān with a view to prove that human beings create their own actions. Al-Hamadhani highlighted several such themes to support the idea. Among others are verses that mention 'there is no deficiency in God's action';[53] verses on human responsibility where reward and punishment are based on actions[54]; and verses on choice and free will.[55]

In terms of contribution to early Islamic thought, their discourse on human actions is now recognized as foundational to modern ethics. Hourani describes 'Abd al-Jabbar's work

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[51]John Martin Fischer, *Four Views on Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2007). Groups of views though seen to be opposed to each other but have some overlapping grounds. There are among others Libertarianism and Compatibilism.

[52]Irfan Abd al-Hamid Fattah, *Dirasāt fī al-firaq wa al-'Aqa'id al-Islamiyyah* (Amman: Dar al-Bashir, 1997), 261.

[53]Al-Qur'ān: Al-Mulk 67:3; Al-Sajdah 32:7; Al-Naml 27:88; al-Isra'17:94.

[54]al-Ahqāf 46:14; al-Furqān 25:15; al-Waqi'ah 56:24; al-Sajdah 32:32; al-Taubah 09:82, 95.

[55]al-Hadīd 57:8; al-Muddaththir 74:10; al-Kahf 18:29; al-Taghabun 64:2; 'Abd al-Jabbar Ahmad, *Sharh al-Usul al-Khamsah* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1996), 357-362.

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as "*a precursor of the modern British intuitionists.*"[56] Any ostensible clash involving human action and the Mu'tazilte position is now attributed by modern writers to immature analysis. While Mu'tazilites emphasized potential's capacity, Ash'arites posited the actuality of potential's fulfilment.[57] Similar issues related to politics and society set the initial Islamic platforms for sociology and political science. Mu'tazilite's denial of a beatific vision of God in the Hereafter is based on the revelation: "*No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision.*"[58] They are also criticized for imposing allegorical interpretations on anthropomorphic verses in the Qur'an; the implication being that this distanced them from the text. This position did become an official Mu'tazilite view in later years among those who thought it necessary to remove God from any and all human attributions. In this respect, Watt wrote:

> The idea of most nineteenth-century Orientalists that their dislike for anthropomorphism sprang from a desire to Hellenise and rationalize Islamic theology is unsound. It is now realized that they devoted much time and energy to Islamic apologetics in opposition to Manichaeanism and various Indian religions. They were not primarily Hellenisers and rationalists but Muslims who funded the armoury of Hellenistic thought useful as weapons against their opponents. It seems likely, therefore, that their hostility to anthropomorphism was on account of the apologetic difficulties to which it led.[59]

Fighting the idea of anthropomorphism eventually became the official Mu'tazilite position to maintain the pristine concept of God.

Mu'tazilites strictly adhered to Islamic teachings, especially that of *al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (promoting good and renouncing/denouncing evil). Ironically, moral rigidity soon became a position of *al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn* (intermediate position). This held that a person with radical views had to be punished as though they had committed a grave sin. This position has been, however, highlighted as inconsistent with generic Mu'tazilite thought by some and has led to an overall negative perception of the sect. In sum, Mu'tazilites were subject to gross generalizations because they tended to interpret Islamic texts and concepts with a persistently strict rational approach. Nonetheless, it seems that this method was justified in their day.

We surprisingly find that many prominent Mu'tazilites failed to consider analogical analysis (*qiyas*) an acceptable methodology for Islamic law. Nazzam did not support *qiyās* in general, which not only contradicts the Mu'tazilte position on logic and rationale (since *qiyas* is based on logical comparisons), but rejected it even if it were the sole means

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[56]George F. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 2.

[57]Richard M. Frank, "The Structure of Created Causality According to *al-Ash'ari*: An Analysis of *Kitab al-Luma,*" *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu'tazilites and al-Ash'ari*, Dimitri Gutas (ed), vol. 11 (London, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 20-22.

[58]Al-Qur'ān: al-An'ām 06:103.

[59]William Montgomery Watt, "Some Muslim Discussions on Anthropomorphism," *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Ian Richard Netton (ed), vol 2. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 63.

available to solve a legal issue. As for denying God's attributes, they reasoned thus: "*If He had attributes, man could not have the same ones. Those of His attributes which are common to mankind cannot be more than mere words (aqwāl) that do not attain His essence.*" The irony is that this view converges with the Hanbalite view of *bila kayf,* although the Mu'tazilite position has a different premise. While Mu'tazilites maintained the concept as impossible, Hanbalites viewed it unnecessary.[60] The Mu'tazilite Ibn al-Murtada (a later figure) deemed Aristotelian syllogism unnecessary and took an austere position when reasoning as compared to several Ash'arite theologians, such as al-Ghazali.

> A human factor that links early Islamic sects to extremism is intolerance. They did tend to rigidly apply dogmatic principles and refuse to respect the views of anyone who disagreed. This severity did lead to hostilities and bloodshed when prompting a school to impose its views by force, as in the case of the Mu'tazilite oppression of Ibn Hanbal (d 855 CE). Rigid intolerance was and remains an important lesson in human error and is not just a problem emblematic of early Muslim sectarians but of all narrow minded societies across time and space. As for radicalism, that led to politically motivated violence such as the riots that obtained the murder of 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan and 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib. Although the perpetrators have been associated with Kharijites, the entirety of the affair remains unclear. Even if they were Kharijite members they were not representative of the sect. In fact, every sect may have had extremist followers, even infiltrators, and yet remained free of an extremist identity.

If we compare the earliest classical schools with modern trends, they fundamentally differ. The *mutakallimūn* were the earliest of scholars and researchers to apply reason for understanding revelation and the meaning of life, while proving man's need for religion. Modern extremism, on the other hand, is clearly a product of modern thought and materialistic lifeways. Numerous studies on terrorism and extremist ideology show that political and socioeconomic pressures are directly responsible.[61] There is much evidence that radicals exist due to actual or apparent political and economic oppression by those in positions of power.[62]

Contextual issues are thus key to understanding different motivating factors that separate early from today's unIslamic movements. Modern liberalism or Neo-Mu'tazilism is, for example, not the least bit comparable to classical Mu'tazilism, which represents an interpretation of Islam in support of the flourishing Muslim political power. Contemporary liberals alter the reading of Islam in an attempt to harmonize it with modern secularism.

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[60]Josef van Ess. "The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology," 43.

[61]WC Banks et. al., *Combating Terrorism: Strategies and Approaches* (Washington: CQ Press, 2008), 31.

[62]Monte and Princess Palmer, *Islamic Extremism: Causes, Diversity and Challenges* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2008), 13-18.

6. The Way Forward

A nation's history qualifies its dignity, so that later generations are better motivated to emulate earlier efforts. A new approach to Muslim history is therefore needed, so we may discern positive contributions from everyone who contributed instead of simplistically drawing inaccurate conclusions regarding worth or deviance. This calls for a more mature reading of Islam's history for the benefit of present and future generations. Negative perceptions can lead to a collapse of esteem that causes failure to learn as well as an aversion to religion. Our youth should appreciate a legacy that fosters gratitude and respect towards their Muslim forebears and this in the absence of premature judgments imposing shame and guilt. Labelling early sects 'deviant' or 'extremist' has negative consequences. Discrediting or neglecting the strengths of their contributions removes the very roots of classical Islamic schools of thought. Moreover, associating 'extremism' with early Islamic history is an unripe assertion that lacks a sound basis in fact. The latter is highlighted by al-Qaradawi who marks it as an incorrect approach to the study of history that contributes fuel to modern extremist fires.[63] We must not allow extremists to support any claim to an early Islamic patrimony, an idea they are only too happy to welcome as an endorsement.

A more appreciative approach to early Muslim scholars and thinkers sees them as sincere defenders of sound Islamic doctrine. It also obtains a deeper scientific relation to historicity that promotes a healthy discourse while highlighting important roles played by major schools, especially the Ash'arite and Maturidi sects who refined and consolidated their positions. A positive attitude towards early Islamic sectarians also respectfully welcomes Islamic theology as a discipline that withstands any tendency to demean *kalām*. Theoretical development and disciplines based on the philosophical sophistication of Islamic theology always include differences of opinion. Hasan al-Shafi'i stressed that the distinct objective of *kalām* was the search for new arguments and evidence that strengthen the faith (*usūl*) by establishing a truthful study and refuting incorrect analysis by means of a lucid discourse that often involves disparate views.[64]

7. Conclusion

Modern society is riddled with novel conflicts and numerous problems that give rise to extremist views and actions that find no mirror in early sects, so much so that contemporary extremism cannot be reliably traced to the development of early Islamic thought. Any association with the emergence of early Muslim sectarians is therefore overly simplistic, counterproductive, and especially evokes a negative image of early Muslims as founders of modern extremism. Some of these sects are merely victims of polemical exaggeration, even distortion, and thus need more objective rediscovery.

Hence, revisiting Islam's sectarian (*firaq*) history should involve more concerted efforts to overcome bias and discover the positive contributions of early Muslims, instead

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[63]Yusuf Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism*, 29.

[64]Hasan Mahmud al-Shafii, *al-Madkhal ila Dirasāt 'Ilm al-Kalam*, 16.

of accentuating their weaknesses or exaggerating their differences. Their responses may have, on occasion, included departures from a central credo and even obsession or radicalism, but what we know of these matters does not reflect the entirety of circumstances or even generic sectarian positions. Moreover, their efforts constitute the earliest known attempts to defend Islam's sound doctrines in response to a very different set of problems, where the meaning of balance and central position was yet to come into existence. Even if they were inaccurate in solving theological problems, a study on them still requires scientific objectivity and should not be taken as an opportunity to discredit, malign or vilify in the fullest sense without looking into their original intention.

A harmonious and positive picture of Islam that stimulates critical inquiry and dialogue is of paramount importance. Any reductionist approach inherently creates unbalanced perspectives that frustrate our genuine understanding of what actually happened; in turn, this can and does cause defiance and disenfranchisement, which no way constitute a constructive effort. Instead of encouraging critical inquiry or an environment of cooperative problem solving, bias generates fearful souls who avoid genuine explorations of subject matters that avail truly informed judgments.

Muslims should, therefore, have the intellectual capability and freedom to explore, understand and acknowledge different opinions in a mature, non-defensive manner. This approach obtains profitable discourses that optimize contributions to modern Islamic forums. All science, not just religious disciplines, enhance Islam's role as the universal religion *par excellence* that accommodates holistic treatments which meet the needs of the modern society.

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