

Al-Ma'mun and the Islamic Inquisition: Unravelling the Threads of His MotivesRehan Khan*¹

Original Article

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Abstract

The Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun imposed Islamic Inquisition, referred to as Mihna in Islamic historiography, in A.D. 833. During the course of the Islamic Inquisition, Muslim scholars, jurists, and leaders were vehemently interrogated. Those who did not subscribe to the edict officially promulgated by the Abbasid dynasty were prosecuted, persecuted and some were even put to death. However, the Islamic Inquisition abruptly ended during the reign of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil. This academic paper aims to explore the possible factors and determinants that led to the imposition of the Islamic Inquisition during the reign of al-Ma'mun. The study, having explored four different propositions, ultimately establishes that the enforcement of the Islamic Inquisition was driven by the conviction of al-Ma'mun to merge together the political and religious authority in the office of his caliphate.

Keywords: al-Ma'mun, Islamic Inquisition, Threads, Motives

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the death of the Prophet, the Islamic community elected Abu Bakr as the Caliph. Though disputes arose, the community at large settled down on his election.² However, the pressing questions pertaining to the succession of the caliph, his political and religious roles, and more significantly, his claims to legitimacy continued to perturb, if not haunt, the entire Islamic community even in the early Islamic Caliphate. By the time the Abbasid dynasty came into power, Muslims had already developed an expansionist imperial structure held together by the tribal alliances, political compromises and ideological fervour. Importantly, a class of religious scholars was also in the ascendancy.³ These religious scholars included experts on Hadith, Islamic Law and Islamic Theology. Though fully developed schools of systematic Theology and Islamic Law were in their embryonic stages, there were scholars spread across different regions contributing to the ferment and flowering of Islamic Sciences. The efflorescence of Islamic sciences attained its peak in the reigns of Caliph Harun al-Rashid and his son al-Ma'mun.⁴

After an intense battle resulting in regicide, al-Ma'mun defeated his brother al-Amin and ruled as the undisputed supreme leader and the caliph of the Abbasid dynasty for twenty long years. On an eventful day in A.D. 827, al-Ma'mun promulgated a decree stating that the Quran was created in time.⁵ Subsequently, in 833, he went a step further and pressed into service the coercive machine of his imperial regime to enforce his dogmatic edict on people and ushered in a

²Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (England: Pearson Longman Press, 1986), 52.

³Wael Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 57.

⁴Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society* (Routledge Press, 1998), 78.

⁵Michael Cooperson, *Al-Ma'mun* (One World Academic Press, 2005), 115.

period notoriously known as the *Mihna* or the Islamic Inquisition. The *Mihna*, in its classic definition, means the trial. Though Islamic history even prior to the reign of al-Ma'mun had precedents of political regimes and autocratic rulers adamantly and vehemently suppressing voices condemned to have echoed heretical views, the *Mihna* in its scope was considered the "first systematic" effort to smother dissent.⁶ Judges, jurists and religious scholars from varying regions were coerced into espousing the imperial dogmatic edict or face punishment, or even the death sentence. The entire saga of the Islamic Inquisition with all its viciousness and ferocity was ultimately brought to an end by the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil in 848.⁷

Quite understandably, scholars have been investigating the factors and determinants that led al-Ma'mun to persecute religious scholars to enforce his dogmatic edict. Some scholars have focused on the personal character of al-Ma'mun and ascribed the imposition of *Mihna* to his idiosyncratic disposition. Others have alluded to the growing clout of the proto-Sunni scholarly elite administering a threat to the rationalist-minded caliph.⁸ Some scholars have even argued that *Mihna* was not an exceptional episode or an unprecedented event in Islamic history and that the later historiography overstated its importance. John P. Turner contends in his book *Inquisition in Early Islam* that the traditionalists after having struck an alliance with the political elite "emphasized Ibn Hanbal's role" in order to assert their place within the range of normative orthodoxy.⁹ This study undertakes a scholarly enterprise to bring to the fore the most probable, plausible and logical set of catalysts, determinants or triggers that may have occasioned the prosecution of the Islamic Inquisition or the *Mihna*. The essay, while tapping into the rich repository of Islamic intellectual heritage, establishes that al-Ma'mun's insistence, adamancy and obduracy to impose the Islamic Inquisition was neither necessitated by his allegiance to the Shiite sect nor by his fidelity to the Mu'tazilite school, nor by his empathic overtures to the Alid family, rather it was dictated by his supreme conviction and resolution to weld together the religious and political authority in the office of his caliphate.

POSTULATE I: AFFINITY WITH SHIITE SECT

One of the often-reiterated reasons for the Islamic inquisition offered by the scholars is that al-Ma'mun had an affinity with or adhered to the Shiite sect.¹⁰ The argument follows from it delineates that Shiites or certain groups of emerging Shiite sects also considered the createdness or the atemporality of the Quran an integral part of their faith. Since al-Ma'mun, the thesis further continues, was a Shiite, he must have made up his mind in good conscience to enforce it as an official decree. This proposition is further buttressed by the fact that al-Ma'mun espoused certain other theological and religious views that were also peddled and propagated by the Shiites of his period. His willingness to consider *Mut'a* marriage a valid form of marriage is also counted, amongst others, as a testament to his Shiite adhesion.¹¹ *Mut'a* is a form of marriage in which the partners enter into a marital relationship for a specific period of time. Al-Ma'mun is reported, if Khatib al-Baghdadi is trusted, to have endorsed the marriage of *Mut'a*, at least in his earlier years. In the same vein, an additional piece of evidence proffered as a justification for his adhesion to

⁶ John Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority* (Lockwood Press, 2015), 1.

⁷ Amira Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the Abbasid Empire* (Yale University Press, 2010), 36.

⁸ Muhammad Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early Abbasids: The Emergence of Proto-Sunni Elite* (Brill Academic Publishing, 1997), 110.

⁹ John Turner, *Inquisition in Early Islam: The Competition for Religious and Political Authority in the Abbasid Empire* (I.B. Tauris Press, 2013), 150.

¹⁰ Miskaway, *Tajaribal-Imam* (HardPress Publishing, 2013), 529.

¹¹ John Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority*, 43.

Shiite sect is his eagerness to endorse additional *Takbirs* prayers. The sixth Shiite Imam Jafar al-Sadiq is reported to have recommended additional *Takbirs*. The great Muslim historian Jarir Tabari in his classic *Tarikh-i-Tabari* revealed that Al-Ma'mun on a certain occasion ordained his governors to lead the prayers with additional *Takbirs*.¹²

The set of arguments reproduced in the subsequent paragraph to establish al-Ma'mun's Shiite adherence as a justification for the enforcement of the Islamic Inquisition does not stand the test of historical scrutiny. A deeper and dispassionate perusal of historical annals lays bare the fact that the temporary marriage or the *Mut'a* marriage was not considered valid by all Shi'i orientations. The Zaydi Shiites did not consider it a legitimate form of marital contract.¹³ It is important to take cognizance of the fact that the Zaydi School of law remained committed to the central tenets of Shiite Islam.¹⁴ Quite evidently, the temporary marriage was not an undisputed legal provision in Shiite Islam even during the reign of al-Ma'mun. In fact, Shiite Islam itself was in the process of constant fragmentation and regeneration.¹⁵

Furthermore, it is also well-corroborated that there were some sections or emerging trends even within the Hanafite rite that sanctioned and validated the temporary marriage.¹⁶ The proverbial Zahirite savant of Islamic Spain Ali Ibn Hazm in his magnum opus *Al-Muhallas* spells out that there were some Zahirite scholars as well who considered temporary marriage a legitimate form of marital contract.¹⁷ Thus this, along with the preceding revelations about the temporary marriage, convincingly establishes that the temporary marriage was neither embraced as a legal provision by all the Shiite orientations nor was it rejected by all the non-Shiite denominations. As a result, the possibility of al-Ma'mun adopting it as part of his Shiite identity is nullified. In addition, al-Ma'mun, as already elucidated by Khatib al-Baghdadi, abandoned in later years his endorsement of temporary marriage. If al-Ma'mun had distanced himself from public or official endorsement of the temporary marriage and since it was disputed as a legal provision even amongst the Shiite scholars, how can it be invoked as a legitimate ground to consider al-Ma'mun an adherent of the Shiite rite? In conjunction with it, it is equally untenable to consider al-Ma'mun a Shiite adherent due to his preference for additional *Takbirs* after *Taslim* prayers because the Murjites of his period also considered additional *Takbirs* a part of their liturgical formula.¹⁸

The second component of the postulate held that al-Ma'mun promulgated his decree and enforced Islamic Inquisition since the Shiite sect considered the createdness or the atemporality of the Quran a cardinal tenet of their doctrinal formulation. If the createdness of the Quran, the thesis further asserts, is integral to the creedal edifice of the Shiite sect, al-Ma'mun by virtue of his allegiance to the Shiite sect, is dictated by his conscience to prosecute religious scholars not in consonance with it. But again, it is far from the truth that the entire scholarly community within the Shiite sect subscribed to the view that the Quran was created in time. The scholarly canon of the Shiite sect lacks any reference to the universal consensus on the createdness of the Qur'an. In fact, the notion that the Quran was created in time was the quintessential leitmotif of Mu'tazilite

¹² Jarir Tabari, *Tarikh-al-umam-wal-Muluk*, trans. Sadiq Hashmi (Karachi: Nafees Academy Press, 2004), Vol: III, 115.

¹³ John Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority*, 44.

¹⁴ Najam Haider, *Shii Islam: An Introduction* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 171.

¹⁵ Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Classic Age of Islam* (US: University of Chicago Press, 1977), Vol: I, 377.

¹⁶ John Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority*, 44.

¹⁷ Ibn Hazm, *Al-Muhalla*, trans. Ghulam Ahmad (Lahore: DarulDawahSalafiyah, 2005), Vol: 4, 188.

¹⁸ Abul Ala Mawdudi, *Khilafat O Mulukiyat* (Lahore: Idara Tarjuman ul Quran, 1998), 216.

creedal formulation.¹⁹ The Mu'tazilite scholars, having borrowed their intellectual toolkit from the repertoire of Greek philosophers, built a sophisticated system of dialectical reasoning.²⁰ In addition to a range of other theological views, they adamantly insisted that the Quran was created in time.

Similarly, a number of Hanafite scholars, including the famed jurist Abu Hanifa, also subscribed to the view that the Quran was created in time.²¹ John A Nawas in his groundbreaking work *al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority* has shed light on the standpoint espoused by Abu Hanifa. Nawas claims that Abu Hanifa, at least in principle, shared a common ground, though with nuanced considerations, with the emerging Mu'tazilite on the createdness of the Quran. Thus, in the light of assertions made in the prior paragraphs, it can be safely assumed that the belief surrounding the createdness of the Quran was neither undisputed in the Shiite scholarly community nor was it their exclusive leitmotif. Hence, the claim of al-Ma'mun promulgating and imposing the Islamic Inquisition as an exponent or adherent of the Shiite faith is untenable and unqualified.

Lastly, the third component of the postulate stakes the claim that al-Ma'mun held a deeply-cherished desire to cast the office of his caliphate in the image of Shiite Imamate. Put differently, the imposition of the Islamic Inquisition came about against the backdrop of al-Ma'mun's desire to emulate or embody the unique characteristics of the Twelver Shiite Imam. To better understand the broader contours and the deeper ramifications of this argument, it is pertinent to delve into the ways in which the institution of the Imamate within the Shiite sect evolved over the period of time.

After the death of the Prophet, Abu Bakr was elected to lead the Islamic community in his capacity as the caliph. Though consensus developed over his election to the office, a number of reputed companions of the Prophet did not agree either with the overall mode of the electoral process or with the decision of the larger community to elect Abu Bakr to the office of the caliphate.²² Some of the companions held that the son-in-law of the Prophet, Ali, was the most competent candidate for the leadership of the Islamic community in the pool of contenders. They held that the Prophet either directly or indirectly nominated Ali in his lifetime to lead the Islamic community both in the temporal and spiritual spheres.²³ They further contended that the Prophet of Islam with all his wisdom and sagacity could not leave his nascent religious community behind without any spiritual and temporal guide. Those who allied themselves with the vision that Ali was designated by the Prophet of Islam as the leader and the guide in the spiritual and the temporal spheres referred to themselves as the Partisans of Ali or the Shiites; whereas, those who subscribed to the view that Abu Bakr and the three successive caliphs after him were rightly-guided referred to themselves as the Sunnites. However, it took centuries for both of the denominations to crystallize into full-fledged doctrinal and legal systems.²⁴

Shiite Islam, in the course of history, fractured into three main branches. Amongst them, the Twelver Shi'i Islam commands the majority. The Twelver Shiites maintain that the Prophet of

¹⁹Richard Martin, Mark Woodward, and DwiAtjama, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (OneWorld Publications, 1997), 88.

²⁰Muhammad Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Lahore: Chagatai Publications, 1991), 65.

²¹John Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority*, 43.

²²Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 28.

²³Lesley Hazleton, *After the Prophet: The Epic Story of Shii-Sunni Split in Islam* (Anchor Publisher, 2010), 67.

²⁴Patricia Crone, *God's Rule – Government and Islam: Six centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (US: Columbia University Press, 2005), 117.

Islam nominated Ali as his successor in his lifetime. The caliphs, who came after the Prophet other than Ali, were not legitimate rulers. After the death of the Prophet, they further state, a succession of Twelve Imams appeared one after the other who were divinely vested with spiritual and temporal authority. Barring Ali, the other Shiite Imams were usurped of their rightful temporal authority. The Twelfth Imam went into hiding in order to escape his assassination.²⁵ The Twelvers Shiites contend that the Imam would eventually return with his religio-political vision and will usher in a period of perpetual religious harmony.

The second branch of Shiite Islam is referred to as the Zaydis. They subscribe to the view that Ali, owing to his fortitude, sagacity and genealogy, was more suited to claim the pedestal of the caliphate after the Prophet, but they concede that a less competent man could also spearhead the Islamic community. Unlike the Twelvers, the Zaydis maintain that the caliphs who ruled before Ali were, though less competent; however, they were legitimate in their claim to the office of the caliphate.²⁶ The Ismailis represent the third branch of Shiite Islam. They parted their ways with the Twelvers on the succession of Imams after Jafar al-Sadiq: the former endorsing the Imamate of Ismail Ibn Jafar and the latter adhering to the Imamate of Musa al-Kadhim. More significantly, while the Twelvers' Imam is in hiding out of concern for his life, the Ismaili Imam continues to assume his office and guide his community.

Against the backdrop of the evolution of Twelver Shi'i Islam and keeping in view the institution of Shiite Imamate, it is often held that al-Ma'mun desired to embody the traits and functions of the Twelver Shiite Imam. The preceding paragraphs demonstrated that the Twelver Shiite Imam was the repository of spiritual and temporal authority. Considering the vast and expansive functions of the Shiite Imam, al-Ma'mun, it is claimed, was at pains to remodel the office of his caliphate in the image of Twelver Shiite Imamate.²⁷ Did al-Ma'mun conceptualize a vision of the office of the caliphate that borrowed its functions from the institution of the Shiite Imamate?

In light of the body of evidence gleaned from the vast and rich sources of Islamic intellectual tradition, the claim made in the earlier paragraph does not stand the test of scrutiny. Firstly, al-Ma'mun did not claim to have represented a sect or a denomination. At best, his personal proclivity or propensity reflected itself in his endorsement of intellectual and rational sciences.²⁸ Secondly, the Shiite Imam was deemed to have been divinely appointed by God in succession to the earlier Imam brought about by the mode of testimonial designation.²⁹ Al-Ma'mun may have considered his appointment in office a part of a divine scheme, but did not claim to be the continuation of politico-religious Imams. Lastly, the Shiite Imam in his classic definition is considered to be endowed with supernatural powers: ranging from his ability to predict future, his capability to be cognizant about minutiae in the past, to his dispensation to be privy to divine disclosures.³⁰ Al-Ma'mun did not lay claim to any of these supernatural powers. As a consequence, the argument that al-Ma'mun imposed the Islamic Inquisition in his drive to remodel the office of the caliphate along the lines of the Shiite Imamate stands on flimsy ground.

²⁵Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism* (US: Yale University Press, 1987), 58.

²⁶Najam Haider, *Shi'i Islam: An Introduction* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 165.

²⁷John Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority*, 42.

²⁸Michael Cooperson, *Al-Ma'mun*, 86.

²⁹Mathew Pierce, *Twelve infallible Men: The Imams and the Making of Shiism* (US: Harvard University Press, 2016), 92.

³⁰Mathew Pierce, *Twelve infallible Men: The Imams and the Making of Shiism*, 86.

POSTULATE II: AFFINITY WITH THE ALID FAMILY

The line of reasoning peddled in the second postulate revolves around the family of Ali: the son-in-law of the Prophet. It is held that al-Ma'mun displayed emotive affinity or exhibited empathic overtures to the offspring of Ali commonly referred to as the Alids. The Abbasids and the Alids share a common ancestral pedigree.³¹ Importantly, all of the Alids did not necessarily adhere to the Shiite tenets of faith. It is further revealed that some of the non-Shiite Alids during the reign of al-Ma'mun believed in the createdness of the Quran. It is held by a number of scholars that al-Ma'mun might have made a series of attempts to redress the wrongs committed against the family of Ali.³² In his concern and empathy for the Alids, it is further argued, al-Ma'mun adopted the notion of the createdness of the Quran and persecuted those religious scholars who did not subscribe to his view.

In order to demonstrate and underscore the partiality of al-Ma'mun to the Alids, an array of proclamations is brought to the fore. For instance, in 827, it is stated that al-Ma'mun declared Ali 'the best of mankind.'³³ In addition to it being an acknowledgement of the superiority of Ali, it is often perceived as an attempt to undermine, if not ridicule and denigrate, the stature of other reputed companions of the Prophet. In an environment characterized by polemical sloganeering and sectarian ranting, a proclamation geared towards the glorification of Ali might suggest a deliberate attempt on the part of al-Ma'mun to ally his regime with the Alids.

If his sympathy was still not overtly manifested, al-Ma'mun on one occasion denigrated Muawiya I and threatened that the one who "spoke favorably of Muawiya I did so at his own peril."³⁴ The glorification of Ali together with the vilification of Muawiya I further embittered an environment already steeped in prejudices and sectarian predilections. Furthermore, it is held that al-Ma'mun nominated members from the family of the Alids to administer the services of Hajj.³⁵ It is reported further by the medieval historian Masudi that he uncharacteristically led funeral prayers over the dead bodies of the Alids.³⁶ Finally, it is claimed that al-Ma'mun appointed, in his reverence for the Alids, Ali al-Rida as his crown prince in 817. Subsequent to this declaration, coins were struck in the name of al-Rida and the black colour of the Abbasid flag was replaced with the Alid green.³⁷ In sum, the series of steps taken by al-Ma'mun, some scholars claim, reflects his reverence and deference to the cause of Alids resulting in his decision to impose the Islamic Inquisition.

However, the set of arguments proffered by scholars to establish a correlation between the reverence of al-Mamun for the Alids and the prosecution of the Islamic Inquisition predicate on flimsy, if not spurious, premises. Al-Mamun's deference to Ali over the clique of other companions merely represents his intent to situate and adulate the family of Ali in the larger hierarchy of Arab genealogy. It is neither the demonstration of his political bent nor the reflection of his ambitions to peddle a certain religious dogma. More importantly, the hierarchical gradation of the companions of the Prophet even in the proto-Sunni scholarly elite was still unsettled. Qasim Zaman in his work *Religion and Politics under the Early Abbasids* contends that Ahmad bin Hanbal in his earlier age

³¹Teresa Bernheimer, *The Alids: The First Family of Islam* (UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 65.

³²Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority*, 45.

³³Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition and the Quest for Caliphal Authority*, 41.

³⁴Jarir Tabari, *Tarikh-al-umam-wal-Muluk*, 298.

³⁵Masudi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, trans. Reza Hussain (Lahore: Zaidi Publishing, 1998), Vol: II, 375

³⁶Masudi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, 176.

³⁷Michael Cooperson, *Al-Ma'mun*, 73.

was uncertain about the legitimacy of the caliphate under the leadership of Ali, and hints at the possibility that the vision of four caliphs being rightly-guided might have been initially the leitmotif of the Mu'tazilites.³⁸ In the same vein, in his classic tome *Khilafat-o-Muluqiyat*, MawlanaMawdudi reveals that Abu Hanifa endorsed the superiority of Ali over Usman in his qualification for the office of the caliphate.³⁹ If Abu Hanifa can defer to the superiority of Ali, why can't al-Ma'mun tread the same path?

In the same breath, the decision of al-Ma'mun to offer funeral prayers over the bodies of Alids and his choice of the Alids for the services of pilgrimage is to be understood strictly within the frame of his personal intent to pay homage to the said family, and must not be construed as part of his political ambitions. Similarly, the radical step undertaken by al-Ma'mun to denigrate Muawiya I must also be studied in the context of tribal and military rivalry between the Abbasids and the Umayyads. The Abbasid dynasty claimed the levers of political power in 750 after an intense confrontation with the Umayyads.⁴⁰ It is self-explanatory that al-Ma'mun, compelled by political and historical reasons, might pour his scorn upon the founder of the Umayyad dynasty.

Finally, the appointment of al-Rida as heir-apparent by al-Ma'mun merits a scholarly analysis. Why did al-Ma'mun appoint an Alid Imam, almost fifteen years older than him, the crown prince of his imperial court? Firstly, the decision of al-Ma'mun might have been influenced by his vizier al-Fadl. B.Sahl.⁴¹ It is held that al-Fadl.B.Sahl championed the Shiite cause and displayed a sympathetic attitude towards al-Rida.⁴² Al-Ma'mun might have been swayed away by his vizier. Secondly, al-Ma'mun probably may have appointed al-Rida in order to assuage the rising tide of anger brewing in certain sections of the Khurasani Shiites.⁴³ Thirdly, it is also possible that al-Mamun, identifying al-Rida as his rival, wished to keep him under surveillance in his own imperial court. This last proposition is also lent credence by the fact that scholars, as erudite and well-versed as ShaykhMufid, held that al-Rida was poisoned to death at the behest of al-Ma'mun.⁴⁴ These claims along with the earlier ones firmly establish that the appointment of al-Rida as heir-apparent signifies the ulterior motives of al-Ma'mun and does not reflect, in any meaningful sense, his reverence for the stature and disposition of al-Rida.

POSTULATE III: AL-MA'MUN'S MU'TAZILITE PROCLIVITY

The third set of reasons peddled by scholars as the catalysts for the imposition of Islamic Inquisition revolves around the Mu'tazilite School of Theology. It is held that al-Ma'mun was either compelled by the proponents of Mu'tazilism to persecute the scholars of other religious strands or his own allegiance to the theological credos of Mu'tazilism resulted in his decision to initiate the Islamic Inquisition. It is pertinent here to note that the Mu'tazilite School of Theology, amongst all other schools, was at the forefront to defend and champion the createdness or the atemporality of the Quran.⁴⁵ Given the overt and explicit admission by the adherents of Mu'tazilism to espouse the principle of the createdness of the Quran, and the close association of al-Ma'mun with them, it is

³⁸Muhammad Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early Abbasids: The Emergence of Proto-Sunni Elite*, 108.

³⁹AbulAlaMawdudi, *Khilafat O Mulukiyat*, 198.

⁴⁰Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Classic Age of Islam*, 285.

⁴¹Wilferd Madelung, *New Documents Concerning al-Ma'mun, al-Fadl and Ali al-Rida*, 5.

⁴²Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kamil Fil Tarikh*, trans. D.S. Richards (Routledge Publishing, 2010), Vol: II, 133.

⁴³M. Buyukarra, "Al-Mamun's Choice of Ali al-Rida as His Heir," Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad 41, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 449.

⁴⁴ShaykhMufid, *Khitab al-Irshad*, trans. Idrees Ahmad (Lahore: Zaidi Publishing, 2001), Vol: 2, 443.

⁴⁵Martin, Woodward, and Atjama, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*, 43.

conveniently held that the prosecution of Islamic Inquisition owed itself to the nefarious designs of the Mu'tazilite scholars.

The first component of the thesis draws our attention to the close association of al-Ma'mun with the Mu'tazilite scholars.⁴⁶ It is true and quite evident in the historical annals that al-Ma'mun was fascinated by the rational sciences.⁴⁷ He developed a penchant for the cultivation of philosophical sciences. He insisted on the need to borrow systems of knowledge from eclectic sources and spent financial resources on extracting the pearls of wisdom from other civilizations. His court attracted scholars of all strands and orientations and fostered an environment conducive to the furtherance of inter-faith dialogue and exchange of ideas. To this end, he even solicited the scholarly services of the Mu'tazilite scholars.

One of the Mu'tazilite scholars held in high esteem by al-Ma'mun was Abu al-Hudhayl. He was noted for his outstanding ability to dissect the intricacies of dialectical theology.⁴⁸ His expertise in explicating the rational facets of the Islamic doctrinal system gravitated al-Ma'mun towards him. The imperial court of al-Ma'mun was situated in Baghdad: the melting pot of religious and philosophical schools. The Christian scholars, borrowing their skills of argumentation from Greek intellectual heritage, were challenging the traditional tenets of Islam. Probably al-Ma'mun discovered in al-Hudhayl a champion of rationalism and an advocate of Islam who mastered, honed, and sharpened the tools of reasoning and disputation against the onslaught of Christian theologians.

The second Mu'tazilite scholar respected and patronized by al-Ma'mun was Thamana Ibn Ashras. He was acclaimed for his literary sagacity and his broad vision.⁴⁹ Al-Ma'mun would solicit his scholarly offices even in his legal affairs. His erudition and scholarship impressed al-Ma'mun to the extent that the latter offered him to join his ministerial cabinet. But Ibn Ashras, given his scholarly bent of mind, refused to accept his offer. However, al-Ma'mun entrusted him with the responsibility to draft the document that appointed al-Rida as his heir-apparent. Finally, the last great Mu'tazilite scholar to have secured the admiration of al-Ma'mun was none other than Ahmad Ibn Abi Du'ad. He was an ardent exponent of the Mu'tazilite creed. Al-Ma'mun appointed him the chief judge during the course of the Islamic Inquisition and instructed him to initiate the proceedings. To many inquisitive minds, Ahmad Ibn Abi Du'ad was the chief architect behind the prosecution of the Islamic Inquisition. In fact, al-Ma'mun in his will suggested his successor al-Wathiq to solicit the counsels of Ibn Abi Du'ad in the affairs of the empire.⁵⁰

Given the intimate association between the Mu'tazilite scholars and al-Ma'mun, it is erroneously assumed that the prosecution of the Islamic Inquisition might also have been facilitated and engineered by the scholars of the same school. But does mere association with scholars of a certain sect or the patronage of a certain scholarly class offer any insight into factors that contributed to the prosecution of Islamic Inquisition? A perusal of historical annals brings it to the fore that al-Ma'mun was either in close association or had shared his company with scholars from orientations other than the school of Mu'tazilism as well. Yahya Ibn Akhtham, a fierce

⁴⁶ Martin, Woodward, and Atjama, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*, 28.

⁴⁷ Martin, Woodward, and Atjama, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*, 29.

⁴⁸ Martin, Woodward, and Atjama, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*, 187.

⁴⁹ Martin, Woodward, and Atjama, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*, 30.

⁵⁰ JarirTabari, *Tarikh-al-umam-wal-Muluk*, 243.

detractor and nemesis of the Mu'tazilite school, was appointed the chief judge by al-Ma'mun.⁵¹ His excellence at legal judgment often attracted the attention of al-Ma'mun. It is even claimed that Ibn Aktham displayed a bent of mind in consonance with the traditionalists, but al-Ma'mun continued to consult him.

Similarly, al-Ma'mun is reported to have attended the funeral prayers of Bishr al-Misiri who nursed grudges against the Mu'tazilite. If al-Ma'mun was a mindless follower of the Mu'tazilite School, why would he be an attendant at the funeral prayers of someone notoriously deemed to be its intellectual foe? Furthering this line of argument, the marital ceremony of al-Ma'mun was solemnized by none other than Abu Yusuf: the chief student of Abu Hanifa.⁵² Abu Hanifa along with Abu Yusuf commanded the leadership of the emerging proto-Sunni scholarly elite. Does the participation and the administration of marital services at the imperial court by Abu Yusuf, in any meaningful sense, reflect the conversion of al-Ma'mun into a Hanafite adherent?

The last component of the foregoing thesis offered by some scholars is that the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun did not only patronize the Mu'tazilite scholars, but he was himself an exponent and an adherent of the Mu'tazilite creed. The prosecution of the Islamic Inquisition, the thesis further states, can be ascribed to the determination of the Mu'tazilite al-Ma'mun to castigate and persecute the clique of traditionalist scholars. This thesis is lent credence also by the fact that most of the scholars, if not all, interrogated during the trial represented the traditionalist stock.⁵³ In addition, al-Ma'mun was already noted for his fascination with the Greek philosophical oeuvre: a common denominator shared by al-Ma'mun and the Mu'tazilite. His rationalist outlook and liberal intellectual bent, it is cogently opined, informed his decision to adhere in good conscience to the Mu'tazilite creed. Mu'tazilite scholars, having borrowed heavily and extensively from the rich repository of Greek intellectual tradition, provided al-Ma'mun with a unique opportunity to translate his vision into a political reality.

However, this line of argument does not lead us to conclusive evidence. Firstly, al-Ma'mun did not in any of his proclamations or promulgations explicitly or implicitly avowed his allegiance to the Mu'tazilite creed. If someone of al-Ma'mun's disposition and stature was convinced of the veracity of the Mu'tazilite creed, he would have publicly declared his fidelity to it. On the contrary, al-Ma'mun is reported, if Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur is trusted, to have explicitly expressed his allegiance to the Murjite creed at a certain juncture of his life.⁵⁴ Secondly, al-Ma'mun issued the edict promulgating the createdness of the Quran in 827. Why did he wait for six long years before enforcing the Islamic Inquisition in 833? What were the factors or the reasons that dissuaded him to initiate the Inquisition, especially if his sole purpose was geared towards shoving the Mu'tazilite creed down the throats of people? Lastly, why should it be conveniently assumed that a caliph adhering to the tenets of Mu'tazilism must, by the logic of his mere allegiance, prosecute an inquisition? Does fidelity to the creed of Mu'tazilism also entail a conviction to persecute and prosecute those in the opposition?

⁵¹ JarirTabari, *Tarikh-al-umam-wal-Muluk*, 154.

⁵² Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the World: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (US: Dacapo Press, 2006), 166.

⁵³ Ira Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6, no. 4 (Oct., 1975): 370.

⁵⁴ JarirTabari, *Tarikh-al-umam-wal-Muluk*, 265.

POSTULATE IV: UNIFIED POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

The last postulate is predicated on the premise that al-Ma'mun brought into use his imperial force and administrative machinery in order to merge together the temporal and the spiritual authority in the office of the caliphate. The prosecution of the Islamic Inquisition, resulting in the persecution of traditionalist scholars, was geared towards reclaiming the dispensation of religious authority lost to the burgeoning scholarly elite of the Islamic community. Put differently, the imposition of the Islamic Inquisition or the insistence on the createdness of the Quran was used as an excuse or an instrument to bludgeon the scholarly class into submission before the imperial court and to strip the latter of their growing authority to interpret, shape and define the contours of Islamic orthodoxy. In order to better appreciate the depth of the argument, it is pertinent here to situate the dynamic relationship between religion and politics in the formative Islamic period, prior to the reign of al-Ma'mun.

The Prophet of Islam did not only endow his community with religious guidance and tutelage, he also carved out a consolidated political order. He embodied in his divine dispensation a unique fusion of religious and political authority. After the death of the Prophet, the institution of the caliphate came into existence. Admittedly, the office of the caliphate inherited the sacred legacy of the Prophet; hence, religion and politics remained wedded and intertwined. The Indian savant Shah Wali-ullah in his classic work *Fiqh-e-Umer*, while referring to the second caliph Umer as *Mujtahid-e-Mutlaq (the Absolute Jurist)*, considered him an epitome of not only political statesmanship but also of religious erudition.⁵⁵ In another work *Izalat ul Khifa'an Khilafat ul Khulafa*, Shah Wali-ullah designated the caliphate as *Khilafat-e-Khassa* and that was guided by the divine hand of the Providence.⁵⁶ In other words, the office of the caliphate did not only chalk out a comprehensive political vision, but it also delineated the shape and the content of the Islamic tradition.

However, with the advent of the Umayyad dynasty, a rift emerged between the state and the community.⁵⁷ This chasm, coupled with authoritarian tendencies, further intensified an impression of Umayyad caliphs as "worldly rulers" conducting themselves as quasi-secular men.⁵⁸ In consequence of it, the Islamic community, marred by internal tribal jostling and political infighting, estranged itself from the interest of the state. This consternation in the masses, in tandem with the autocratic measures of the state, paved the way for the rise of the scholarly elite in the Islamic community that entrusted itself with the onus to define, shape and generate legal discourse. Though the state itself in its organization of empire and the management of resources was efficient, it was losing ground and constituency to a thriving and flourishing class of scholars to assert their socio-religious clout and sway. These religious scholars, appearing in the intellectually fecund regions of the Islamic world, built an intricate web of scholarly interaction and engagement by the early 8th century.⁵⁹ Their unrelenting commitment towards the attainment and in the process, the generation and production of religious knowledge resulted in the development

⁵⁵Shah Waliullah, *Fiqh-e-Umer*, trans. Aby Yahya(Lahore:Ilm O Irfan Publishers, 2005), 25.

⁵⁶Shah Waliullah, *IzalatulKhafa'anKhilafatulKhulafa*, trans. Abdul Shukur(Karachi: QadeemKutubKhana Press, 2007), 39.

⁵⁷Fazlur Rahman, *Reform and Revival in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism* (US: OneWorld Publications, 1999), 31.

⁵⁸Fazlur Rahman, *Reform and Revival in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, 32.

⁵⁹Harald Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools* (Brill Academic Publishing, 2001), 3.

of positive Islamic law or Islamic jurisprudence.⁶⁰ These scholars deeply felt that Islamic law, in the process of its formation, must be shielded from the machinations of the state.⁶¹

Though some scholars during the reign of the Umayyad caliphs allied their interests with that of the state, a vast majority of them empathetically refrained from partaking in the imperial political project. However, the Abbasid caliphs, having appreciated the clout and the stature of the growing scholarly clique, attempted to engage, if not incorporate, religious scholars in their imperial civil and judicial administration. The Islamic historical annals are awash with anecdotes and examples in which caliphs shared company with scholars, offered them financial largesse and solicited their scholarly services in the administration of their empire. The Abbasid dynasty, in all fairness, brought itself to the realization that the religious class, having gained recognition for their piety in the masses, had acquired the right and the authority to interpret and define the Islamic tradition.

As a consequence, the Abbasid caliphs reached out to scholars in order to buttress the religious legitimacy of their empire. The caliph al-Mansur, it is historically conveyed, beseeched the Medinan jurist al-Malik to compose his classic text on Hadith and law *al-Muwatta*.⁶² Al-Mansur used to frequently solicit the legal opinion of al-Malik on a wide range of administrative and personal issues. In fact, it is reported that caliph al-Harun sought permission from al-Malik to proclaim *Muwatta* as an official document. However, al-Malik refused to accede to his entreaty. In the same breath, Abu Yusuf was appointed the Chief Judge in the imperial judiciary of the Abbasid dynasty.⁶³ He was involved in the imperial project to develop an elaborate and sophisticated system of judicial administration across the Islamic empire. Quite evidently, the Abbasid caliphs, compelled by the need to bolster the religious bases of their empire, recognized the right of the scholarly elite to delineate and shape the contours of Islamic law.

If the Abbasid caliphs recognized the right of the scholarly elite to assert their religious authority, why did al-Ma'mun exercise the muscle of his imperial machinery in the course of the Islamic Inquisition to challenge the religious scholars? The answer to it lies in the re-conceptualization of the office of the caliphate in the mental workings of al-Ma'mun. In an attempt to reverse the tide of events, al-Ma'mun reinterpreted the institution of the caliphate as the locus of both political and religious authority. His vision of the caliphate was underpinned by the urge to fuse the temporal and the spiritual authority in one supreme institution.

In a bid to re-order the imperial institution on his own vision of the caliphate, al-Ma'mun in emulation of the Umayyad caliphs, declared himself the *Deputy of God* on earth.⁶⁴ In the document, issued in 817 for the appointment of the crown prince, al-Ma'mun referred to himself as the representative of God on earth. In the same vein, he reclaimed the title in one of his letters to Hassan.b.Salh in 818. In his edict for the prosecution of the Islamic Inquisition in 833, al-Ma'mun once again referred to himself as the *Deputy of God* on earth.⁶⁵ The choice of the title *Deputy of*

⁶⁰Noel Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law* (Routledge Publishing Press, 2011), 37.

⁶¹Steven Judd, *Religious Scholars and the Umayyads: Piety-minded Supporters of the Marwanid Caliphate* (Routledge Publishing Press, 2013), 64.

⁶²Muhammad Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early Abbasids: The Emergence of Proto-Sunni Elite*, 34.

⁶³WaelHallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*, 92.

⁶⁴Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25.

⁶⁵JarirTabari, *Tarikh-al-umam-wal-Muluk*, 455.

God as opposed to the title *Deputy of the Prophet of God* suggests not only a semantic distinction, but also the vision of the caliphate espoused by al-Ma'mun. The title judiciously and wisely adopted by al-Ma'mun did not allow for the need of a scholarly class to interpret or define the boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy. Understood in a different way, al-Ma'mun recast his imperial office as an institution directly guided by God to guide the Islamic community both in the political and religious spheres. In this reformulated vision of the caliphate, the scholarly class found itself deprived of the right to participate or engage in the formation of Islamic tradition.

Al-Ma'mun projected his office as the custodian of the religion of Islam.⁶⁶ The defense of Islam rested on the strength of his office. In his office as the caliph, he was directed by God to fight against the foes of Islam.⁶⁷ His conviction to forge ahead was driven by his commitment to establish the veracity of religion. He was charged with the duty to implement the injunctions of God and His Prophet in the Islamic empire.⁶⁸ The promulgation of Islamic law remained the prerogative of the state. The caliph was entrusted with the onus to administer justice in line with the dictates of Islamic injunctions. In reciprocity, the masses were duty-bound to follow the directives of the caliph. Al-Ma'mun, in his conceptualization of the office of the caliphate, considered himself an educator determined to guide people and enlighten people.⁶⁹ In his re-imagination of his office, al-Ma'mun cast himself as a caliph uniquely poised to assert not only his political authority, but also his religious authority. In his redefinition of the caliphate, he arrogated to himself the wide range of politico-religious authority once wielded by the scholarly elite.

Having re-modelled the imperial office on his vision of the caliphate, al-Ma'mun asserted his religious authority in the imposition of the Islamic Inquisition. Put in a different way, al-Ma'mun prosecuted the Islamic Inquisition, and in the process persecuted the religious scholars, in order to translate his vision of the caliphate into a comprehensive program of action. However in retrospect, some scholars contend that Al-Ma'mun's re-ordering of the caliphate already had its precedents, though isolated ones, in early Islamic history. The Umayyad caliphs, prior to the Abbasids, had claimed the title of the *Deputy of God*.⁷⁰ The caliph Abdul Malik, in his bid to suppress heresies, also persecuted scholars.⁷¹ Even the Abbasid Caliph Mahdi repressed scholars in his infamous hunt against the *Zanadiqa*.⁷² In what ways does al-Ma'mun Inquisition set itself apart from its earlier precedents?

The Islamic Inquisition, vehemently prosecuted by al-Ma'mun, treaded an uncharted territory for a number of reasons. Firstly, in the cases cited above prior to the reign of al-Ma'mun, the imperial regime or the caliphs, as eruditely elucidated by Qasim Zaman in his work *Religion and Politics under the Early Abbasids*, allied themselves with the traditionalist scholarly elite. Secondly, these trials were isolated in nature and were driven by an urge to assuage the rising religious discontent prevailing in the masses. Thirdly, these precedents did not entail or suggest the intent of the caliphs to assert their religious authority; in fact, they were carried out in service of

⁶⁶Masudi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, 243.

⁶⁷Masudi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, 345.

⁶⁸JarirTabari, *Tarikh-al-umam-wal-Muluk*, 544.

⁶⁹Safwat, *Risalat al-Khamis* (Lahore: Salman Publishing Press, 2004), Vol: II, 109.

⁷⁰Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25.

⁷¹John Turner, *Inquisition in Early Islam: The Competition for Religious and Political Authority in the Abbasid Empire* (I.B. Tauris Press, 2013), 27.

⁷²Muhammad Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early Abbasids: The Emergence of Proto-Sunni Elite*, 64.

the emerging traditionalist scholarly class. Contrary to all these prior precedents, the Islamic Inquisition prosecuted by al-Ma'mun was driven by the urge to stem the rising clout of scholarly elite, bludgeon them into servile submission and vest the office of the caliphate with the authority to define not only the political course of action, but also to shape the contours and the content of religion.

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