The History of the Struggle between Rationalism and Traditionalism in Islamic Thought: A Study of the Dialectics of Mu'tazilah and Ahl al-Sunnah

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Info Articles	Abstract
	The history of Islamic thought shows the existence of intellectual dynamics marked by the debate between rationalism and traditionalism in understanding religious teachings. One of the most significant forms of such struggle is the dialectic between Mu'tazilah, which emphasizes the role of reason in interpreting revelation, and Ahl al-Sunnah, which places the authority of the textual revelation as the primary foundation in Islamic theology. This study aims to analyze the historical background of the emergence of Mu'tazilah rationalism, its theological principles, and the Sunni theological response formulated by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi in the context of the development of Islamic thought. This research uses a qualitative method with a historical approach and analysis of the thought of figures through a literature study of classical and modern literature in the field of Islamic theology. The results of the study show that the emergence of Mu'tazilah was not only influenced by the internal theological debates of Muslims, but also by the political dynamics and intellectual developments during the Abbasid period which opened up space for interaction with philosophical traditions. The principle of Mu'tazilah rationalism formulated in *al-uṣūl al-khamsah* affirms the importance of reason in understanding the oneness and justice of God, while the Ahl al-Sunnah response seeks to balance rationality with the authority of revelation through a more moderate theological formulation. The dialectic between the two schools of thought ultimately made an important contribution to the development of kalam science and the formation of Islamic intellectual traditions. Therefore, the study of intellectual struggle can be a reflective foundation to understand the relationship between revelation and rationality in the development of Islamic thought, as well as open a space for dialogue for the development of Islamic theological studies in the contemporary era.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Islamic thought reveals a complex intellectual dynamic, which is built not only by doctrinal uniformity, but also by the struggle of ideas between various epistemological approaches to understanding religious teachings (Mr & Erliyanto, 2024). Since the early period of the development of Islamic civilization, the discourse on the relationship between revelation and reason has been one of the central themes in theological debate. This struggle gave birth to two major tendencies in the Islamic intellectual tradition, namely rationalism that gives wide space to the role of reason in understanding revelation, and traditionalism that emphasizes the authority of the text of revelation and prophetic tradition as the primary source of truth. The dialectic between these two tendencies not only shapes the development of Islamic theology, but also influences the direction of the development of kalam science, Islamic legal methodology, and the way Muslims understand the relationship between religion and rationality (R. Pratama, Yahya, & Haddade, 2025).

The Qur'an as the main source of Islamic teachings actually provides legitimacy for the use of reason in understanding religious reality. Various verses affirm the importance of thinking activities as a means of understanding the signs of God's power. In Q.S. Al-Baqarah [2]:164, for example, it is stated that in the creation of the heavens and the earth there were signs for those

who are intelligent (*ulul albab*). Similarly, in Q.S. Jonah [10]:100, Allah affirms that punishment is inflicted on those who do not use their intellect (*la ya'qilun*). These verses show that rationality is not something that is contrary to the teachings of Islam, but rather an important instrument in understanding revelation and the reality of life. In this perspective, the use of reason is seen as part of man's efforts to achieve a deeper understanding of divine truth.

However, at the same time the Qur'an also affirms the supremacy of revelation as an authoritative source in determining religious truth. This is reflected in Q.S. An-Nisa [4]:59, which commands Muslims to obey Allah and the Messenger and refer to both when there is a dispute. The verse shows that although reason has an important role in understanding religious teachings, the authority of revelation remains the main reference in determining normative truths in Islam. It was this epistemological tension between the use of reason and the authority of revelation that later developed into a more systematic theological debate in the history of Islamic thought (R. Pratama et al., 2025).

In the context of Islamic intellectual history, the debate on the relationship between revelation and reason reached its clearest form during the development of kalam science, especially since the 8th and 9th centuries AD (Kusharyati, Fauzi, & Yulianto, 2025). The interaction of Muslims with the Greek philosophical tradition through the movement of translations of philosophical works in intellectual centers such as Baghdad also enriched the method of rational thinking in religious discourse (Rahman & Nelson, 2025). It was in this situation that a school of theology known as Mu'tazilah emerged, which placed reason as the main instrument in understanding religious doctrines. For Mu'tazilah, the principles of monotheism and God's justice can not only be understood through revelation, but can also be explained through rational argumentation (Riduan, Hartati, & Nasir, 2025). Therefore, they consider that reason has an important authority in interpreting the text of revelation to be in harmony with the principles of rationality and divine justice.

In response to this tendency of rationalism, the mainstream of Islamic theology developed which came to be known as Ahl al-Sunnah. This tradition emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between the use of reason and the authority of revelation, while still placing the text of the Qur'an and the Sunnah as the primary sources in determining religious doctrine (Zahroh & Sukron, 2026). In the view of Sunni theology, human rationality has limitations and should not be used to subject revelation to excessive logical speculation. Therefore, the theological approach developed in the Ahl al-Sunnah tradition seeks to maintain the authority of the text while still using proportionate rational arguments in defending the doctrines of faith.

The struggle between Mu'tazilah's rationalism and the traditionalism of Ahl al-Sunnah ultimately not only reflects differences in theological views, but also reflects paradigm differences in understanding the relationship between revelation and reason in Islam. This dialectic played an important role in shaping the development of kalam science and influencing the direction of the development of Islamic thought in the classical period. Therefore, the study of the history of the struggle between rationalism and traditionalism in Islamic thought is important to understand how the Islamic intellectual tradition developed through a process of dialogue, criticism, and synthesis between various epistemological approaches in understanding religious teachings.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a historical approach and analysis of the thought of figures (Adlini, Dinda, Yulinda, Chotimah, & Merliyana, 2022). The historical approach is used to chronically trace the development of the intellectual struggle between rationalism and traditionalism in the history of Islamic thought, particularly in the context of the emergence and development of Mu'tazilah theology as well as the theological response of the Ahl al-Sunnah tradition. Through this approach, the research seeks to understand the socio-intellectual background behind the emergence of theological debates and dialectical dynamics that occurred in

the development of kalam science in the classical Islamic period.

Meanwhile, the analysis of the thought of figures is used to critically examine the main ideas of the thinkers who represent the two currents. This analysis is carried out by examining the theological concepts developed by the figures as well as the rational and textual arguments used in defending their views.

The data collection technique in this study is carried out through *library research*, namely by examining various relevant literature, both in the form of classical works of Islamic theology and modern academic studies that discuss the development of kalam science and the history of Islamic thought. The data obtained were then analyzed descriptive-analytically to identify the dialectical pattern of thought between the two schools and understand their contribution to the development of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Historical Background of the Emergence of Mu'tazilah

The emergence of the Mu'tazilah school cannot be separated from the political dynamics and intellectual development in Islamic society in the early Abbasid period (Shah, Khairani, Marpaung, & Lubis, 2024). During this period, the Islamic world underwent a major transformation marked by territorial expansion, encounters with various foreign intellectual traditions, and the emergence of the need to formulate theological doctrine in a systematic manner. In this context, theological discourse develops not only as a religious reflection, but also as a response to the social, political, and philosophical problems faced by Muslims.

Historically, the embryo of Mu'tazilah thought has emerged since the late period of the Umayyad Dynasty, especially in the debate over the status of the great sinner (al-manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn) (Firmansyah, Hasanah, & Akbar, 2026). This debate began with a discourse in the intellectual milieu of Basrah led by Hasan al-Basri. In one of his assemblies, his disciple Wasil ibn Ata expressed the view that a Muslim who commits a grave sin cannot be categorized as a perfect

believer, but also cannot be considered a kafir. He places the great sinner in a position between the two positions. When this view differed from that of his teacher, Wasil then separated from the assembly. This event became known as i'tzal (separation), which became the origin of the naming of Mu'tazilah (Rahman & Nelson, 2025).

The development of Mu'tazilah into an influential theological school occurred during the Abbasid Dynasty, especially when the center of Islamic intellectualism flourished in Baghdad. The Abbasid dynasty provided ample space for intellectual activity through support for the translation movement of Greek, Persian, and Indian philosophical works. One of the centers of this activity takes place in an intellectual institution known as Bayt al-Hikmah. Through the translation process, the works of philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato began to be known by Muslim scholars. This interaction with the philosophical tradition introduced logical methods and rational argumentation which then influenced the development of kalam science (Febriani, 2022).

In this increasingly open intellectual situation, Mu'tazilah developed a theological approach that placed reason as an important instrument in understanding religious doctrine. They argue that the principles of monotheism and God's justice must be understood rationally so as not to give birth to theological contradictions (Firdaus, Maulana, Hanifa, & Pusparani, 2025). For example, the concept of God's justice is explained through the idea that man has free will and is therefore responsible for his actions. This argument is often associated with various verses of the Qur'an that affirm the moral responsibility of man, such as in Q.S. Al-Kahfi [18]:29 which states: "Whoever wants to believe, let him believe, and whoever wants to disbelieve, let him be a disbeliever." This verse is understood by the theologians of Mu'tazilah as an indication that man has freedom in making his moral choices.

In addition to intellectual factors, the development of Mu'tazilah was also closely related to the political dynamics of the Abbasid period. Some Abbasid caliphs saw the rational approach of Mu'tazilah as a theological instrument

that could be used to strengthen the legitimacy of power (Nurhalimah, Herlambang, Thoziry, & Fauziyyah, 2025). This was especially evident during the reign of Al-Ma'mun, who openly supported the doctrine of Mu'tazilah. During his reign there was an event known as Mihna, which is a theological test that forced scholars to accept the doctrine that the Qur'an is a creature (khalq al-Qur'an) (Faiz, 2012). This policy shows how the theological discourse of the time was not only related to doctrinal issues, but also related to the relationship between religious authority and political power.

Nevertheless, the dominance of Mu'tazilah in theological discourse did not last long. Mihna's policy actually caused resistance from many scholars who rejected state interference in theological matters. Figures such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal became a symbol of resistance to the policy (Faiz, 2013). This resistance then contributed to the re-strengthening of a more textual theological tradition within the Ahl al-Sunnah milieu in the later period.

Thus, the emergence of Mu'tazilah cannot be understood solely as a theological phenomenon, but as the result of the interaction between intellectual dynamics, philosophical influences, and the political context during the Abbasid period. This struggle shows that the development of Islamic thought in classical times took place through a complex dialectical process between rationality, the authority of revelation, and the socio-political interests that surround it.

B. Principles of Mu'tazilah Rationalism

The theological rationalism developed by Mu'tazilah found its systematic form in a doctrine known as al-uṣūl al-khamsah (five basic principles) (MAY, 2025). These principles are not merely a formulation of theological doctrine, but also reflect the epistemological framework of Mu'tazilah which places reason as the main instrument in understanding revelation. In their view, religious teachings should not be understood literally, but must be analyzed through rational argumentation in order to be in harmony with the principle of God's oneness and justice. Therefore, the five principles are formulated as the theological foundation that explains the relationship between God, man, and moral responsibility in Islam.

The first principle is *Al-Tawḥīd* (oneness of God). For Mu'tazilah, the concept of monotheism must be understood strictly and rationally so as not to give the impression of anthropomorphism (tasybih), which is the equating of God's nature with creatures (Ali, 2026). Therefore, they reject a literal understanding of the verses of the Qur'an that describe God's physical attributes. For example, the verse Q.S. Ash-Shura [42]:11 affirms that "there is nothing like Him". This verse is used as the basis that God is transcendent and cannot be likened to creatures. Based on this rational principle, Mu'tazilah argues that God's attributes should not be understood as entities that stand alone outside of His substance, because doing so has the potential to give rise to plurality in God's oneness (Riduan et al., 2025). Thus, the whole nature of God is understood as identical with His substance.

The second principle is *Al-'ADL* (God's justice). This concept is one of the most important aspects of Mu'tazilah theology. They argue that God is the Most Just and impossible to do unjust deeds against humans (Soadikin & Santalia, 2025). Therefore, humans must have freedom to act so that they can be held accountable for their actions. This argument is based on a number of verses of the Qur'an that affirm God's justice, such as Q.S. An-Nisa [4]:40 which states that Allah does not oppress a person even if it is as large as a zarrah. In the rational framework of Mu'tazilah, the verse is understood as proof that human actions are not absolutely determined by God, but are the result of man's own will. Thus, the concept of free will becomes a logical consequence of the principle of divine justice.

The third principle is *Al-Wa'd wa al-wa'īd* (God's promises and threats). This principle emphasizes that the promise of reward for believers and the threat of punishment for sinners are God's provisions that are definitely applicable (Soadikin & Santalia, 2025). Mu'tazilah argues that God cannot renege on His promises because it is contrary to His justice and righteousness. Verses such as Q.S. Ali 'Imran [3]:9 which states that Allah

does not break His promises are the basis for this view. Therefore, in Mu'tazilah's perspective, the perpetrator of a great sinner who dies without repentance will receive punishment according to God's threat. This principle shows how they rationally and consistently understand the relationship between human morality and eschatological consequences.

The fourth principle is *Al-Manzilah Bayna Al-Manzilatayn* (position between two positions). This doctrine deals with the theological status of a Muslim who commits a grave sin. Mu'tazilah rejected two extreme views that developed in the early days of Islam, namely the view of Khawarij who disbelieved the perpetrator of great sinners and the view of Murji'ah who still considered him a perfect believer. Alternatively, they state that the perpetrator of great sinners is in the position between believers and infidels. In the life of the world he is still considered a Muslim, but morally in an imperfect status (Soadikin & Santalia, 2025). This view is based on a rational attempt to strike a balance between the principle of God's justice and the moral reality of human beings in Muslim society.

The fifth principle is *Al-Amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (the command to do good and prevent evil). This principle is understood by Mu'tazilah not only as an individual moral obligation, but also as a social responsibility to uphold justice in society (Soadikin & Santalia, 2025). Its normative basis can be found in Q.S. Ali 'Imran [3]:104, who commands Muslims to call for goodness and prevent evil. In the rational framework of Mu'tazilah, this principle affirms that human beings have an active obligation to maintain the moral order of society, even if they have to criticize rulers who are considered tyrannical. Thus, this doctrine is not only theological, but also has ethical and social implications in the political life of Muslims.

Through these five principles, Mu'tazilah's rationalism builds a theological system that emphasizes the logical consistency between the oneness of God, divine justice, and human moral responsibility (Firmansyah et al., 2026). This approach shows their attempt to explain religious doctrines through rational argumentation without abandoning the foundation of revelation. In the historical development of Islamic thought, al-uṣūl al-khamsah became one of the most systematic theological formulations that described how rationality was used as an instrument to understand Islamic teachings philosophically as well as normatively.

C. Ahl Al-Sunnah's Response to Mu'tazilah's Rationalism

The development of theological rationalism built by Mu'tazilah in the intellectual history of Islam has provoked a critical response from scholars who seek to maintain the authority of revelation as the main source of religious doctrine. The response then developed in the theological tradition of Ahl al-Sunnah which sought to strike a balance between the use of reason and fidelity to the text of the Qur'an and the sunnah. In this process, two great theologians played an important role in formulating the Sunni theological system more systematically, namely Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi. Both developed a theological approach that still used rational argumentation, but did not place reason as the authority that could correct revelation (Firmansyah et al., 2026).

Historically, the emergence of Sunni theology in its systematic form was part of an intellectual reaction to the dominance of Mu'tazilah thought during the Abbasid period. Mu'tazilah's rationalism is considered by some scholars to have exceeded the limit by interpreting the verses of the Qur'an speculatively in order to adapt them to rational logic (Shihab, 2006). In this context, al-Ash'ari, who was initially in the circle of Mu'tazilah thought, then took a critical position against this approach. He sought to formulate a theological method that was able to defend the basic teachings of Islam while answering the challenges of philosophical rationalism (Shihab, 2006).

The approach developed by al-Ash'ari departs from the belief that reason has an important function in defending religious teachings, but does not have absolute authority in determining theological truth (Muhyidin & Ishaq, 2023). In his view, revelation remains the supreme source of knowledge about God. This is in line with the

principle affirmed in the Qur'an, as in Q.S. Al-Ahzab [33]:36, which states that if Allah and His Messenger have decreed a matter, then there is no other choice for the believer than to accept it. This verse provides the theological basis for the view that revelation has a normative authority that cannot be subdued by rational human speculation.

Nevertheless, al-Ash'ari does not reject the use of reason in its entirety. Instead, he uses the method of rational argumentation to defend the doctrines of faith (Sulaeman & Almisri, 2023). In the debate about the attributes of God, for example, he rejects the Mu'tazilah's approach of interpreting these attributes metaphorically in order to maintain the purity of monotheism. On the contrary, al-Ash'ari affirms that the attributes of God must be accepted as stated in the Qur'an without resembling God with creatures (Muhyidin & Ishaq, 2023). Verses such as Q.S. Ash-Shura [42]:11, which affirms that there is nothing like Allah, are used as the basis that acknowledging the attributes of God does not mean claiming the likeness of creatures. Thus, al-Ash'ari's approach seeks to maintain a balance between textual affirmations of God's attributes and rejection of anthropomorphism.

Meanwhile, the theological approach developed by al-Maturidi has a relatively more rational character, although it remains within the framework of Sunni theology. Al-Maturidi argues that reason has the ability to recognize the existence of God and understand basic moral principles even without the aid of revelation (Zuhri & Wahyudi, 2021). This view is often associated with verses of the Qur'an that encourage man to meditate on the signs of God's power in the universe, such as in Q.S. Ali 'Imran [3]:190–191, which states that the creation of the heavens and the earth is a sign for thinking people. Nevertheless, al-Maturidi still insists that revelation is necessary to provide a more detailed explanation of religious laws and worship procedures.

The nuanced differences between al-Ash'ari and al-Maturidi's approaches suggest that the Sunni theological tradition does not completely reject rationality, but rather seeks to integrate it within an epistemological framework that still

places revelation as the primary source of truth (Restu, Munawaroh, Maulani, Amaliah, & Aziz, 2026). On the issue of the freedom of human will, for example, al-Ash'ari developed the concept of kasb (acquisition), which is that human actions are created by God but obtained by humans through his will. This concept is an attempt to strike a balance between God's absolute power and man's moral responsibility as affirmed in various verses of the Qur'an, including Q.S. Az-Zalzalah [99]:7–8, which states that every human being will see a reward for the slightest deed.

Thus, Ahl al-Sunnah's response to Mu'tazilah's rationalism is not a total rejection of the use of reason, but rather an attempt to place rationality within the limits defined by revelation. Through the thought of al-Ash'ari and al-Maturidi, Sunni theology developed as an intellectual synthesis that combined rational argumentation with fidelity to the text. This approach later became the main foundation for the development of kalam science in the Sunni tradition and played an important role in shaping the mainstream of Islamic theology into later times.

D. The Impact of Theological Dialectics on the Development of Islamic Thought

The theological dialectic between the rationalism represented by Mu'tazilah and the traditional approach later formulated in the theology of Ahl al-Sunnah had a very significant influence on the development of the Islamic intellectual tradition (A. Pratama & Santalia, 2025). The debate between the two schools of thought is not only related to the issue of faith doctrine, but also forms a methodological framework in various Islamic disciplines, including kalam, fiqh proposals, philosophy, and the methodology of interpretation of the Qur'an. From the perspective of intellectual history, this dialectic shows that the development of Islamic thought took place through a continuous process of argumentation, criticism, and synthesis.

One of the most important impacts of this dialectic is the development of kalam science as a discipline of rational theology in Islam. In the early days of Islam, discussions about the doctrine of faith were more normative and relied on the text

of revelation. However, when various theological debates arose regarding the nature of God, the freedom of human will, and the status of the Qur'an, scholars began to use rational argumentation methods to defend the doctrine of faith (Suwari & Pradesa, 2023). In this context, the rational thinking introduced by Mu'tazilah encouraged Sunni theologians to develop a more systematic theological approach. Figures such as Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi later formulated a theological method that combined rational argumentation with the authority of revelation, so that kalam developed as an intellectual discipline that had a clear methodological framework.

In addition, the dialectic between rationalism and traditionalism also contributed to the development of Islamic legal methodology. In the tradition of fiqh proposals, the use of reason in understanding the text of sharia is an important part of the ijtihad process. Principles such as qiyas (legal analogy) and istihsan (legal preference) show that rationality has a role to play in formulating Islamic law (Harimawan & Sopingi, 2024). The normative basis for the use of reason in the process of ijtihad can be found in various verses of the Qur'an that encourage thinking and reflection activities. For example, Q.S. Az-Zumar [39]:18 states that those who have understanding are those who listen to words and then follow the best among them. This verse is often understood as legitimacy for the use of reason in weighing various arguments before drawing legal conclusions.

Another impact that is no less important is the development of philosophical traditions in the Islamic world. The interaction between theology and rationality opens up space for the emergence of philosophical thinking that seeks to explain religious teachings through metaphysical and logical approaches. In this context, Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd developed a philosophical tradition that sought to synthesize Greek thought with Islamic teachings (Nailal, Sahrudin, Julianti, Siti, & Parhan, 2025). Although this philosophical approach is not always widely accepted by all scholars, its existence suggests that the dialectic between ratio

and revelation has opened up space for the development of broader thought in Islamic civilization.

On the other hand, the theological dialectic also strengthens the awareness of the importance of maintaining a balance between rationality and the authority of revelation in understanding religion. The Qur'an itself provides an epistemological framework that combines these two aspects. For example, in Q.S. Al-Hashr [59]:2, man is commanded to take lessons (*fa'tabiru ya ulil absar*), which shows the importance of rational reflection on reality. But at the same time, the Qur'an also affirms that human knowledge has limitations, as stated in Q.S. Al-Isra [17]:85, that man is not given knowledge except a little. These verses show that rationality and revelation in Islam are not in a mutually negating relationship, but rather complementary.

Thus, the theological dialectic between Mu'tazilah and Ahl al-Sunnah in classical Islamic times has contributed greatly to the formation of a dynamic Islamic intellectual tradition. The debate not only enriches theological discourse, but also encourages the birth of various disciplines that use a rational approach in understanding religious teachings. In the historical perspective of Islamic thought, this dialectic can be understood as an intellectual process that forms the epistemological framework of Muslims in balancing human rationality and the authority of revelation as the main source of truth.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS
A. Conclusion

The struggle between rationalism and traditionalism in the history of Islamic thought shows that the development of Islamic theology did not take place static, but through a dynamic process of intellectual dialectics. The debate between Mu'tazilah and Ahl al-Sunnah reflects the efforts of Muslims to formulate a proper relationship between the authority of revelation and the role of human rationality in understanding religious teachings. In this context, Mu'tazilah's rationalism seeks to explain the doctrine of faith through logical arguments that emphasize the principle of God's oneness and justice, while Ahl

al-Sunnah theology seeks to maintain the authority of the text of revelation while still utilizing rationality as an instrument of theological defense.

The dialectic between the two currents of thought ultimately gave birth to methodological developments in various Islamic disciplines, especially in kalam, jurisprudence, and the broader intellectual tradition. The debate also shows that rationality and revelation in the Islamic tradition are not always in contradictory positions, but can function as two complementary epistemological sources. Thus, the history of this intellectual conflict is not just a record of theological disputes, but is an important part of the process of forming an Islamic intellectual tradition that is open to dialogue, argumentation, and critical reflection in understanding religious teachings.

B. Suggestion

The study of the dialectic between rationalism and traditionalism in Islamic thought still has a wide scope for development, especially in examining its relevance to the challenges of contemporary Islamic thought. Further research can expand the analysis by linking the classical debate between Mu'tazilah and Ahl al-Sunnah with modern discourse on the relationship between religion, rationality, and science. In addition, a more in-depth study of the works of classical theologians is also important so that the understanding of the history of Islamic thought does not only rely on secondary interpretations, but also on primary sources that represent the intellectual tradition of Islam more authentically.

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