

**The Closing of the Muslim Mind:
How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist
Crisis**

Robert R. Reilly

Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010. hbk. 244 pages.

This book looks like a serious academic study in Islamic theology. It is divided into nine chapters that build on an overall argument and has a great number of endnotes, quoting Muslim sources and literature produced in the field of Islamic studies. The book's author works with-in Washington's circle of government institutions and think tanks. His book comes with a foreword and no fewer than ten endorsements by colleagues of Reilly, which praise his erudition, insight, and ability to analyze and explain the Muslim mind. I wonder whether they

were all aware that the book they endorsed is, in fact, a Catholic refutation of Ash'arite Muslim theology, the leading branch of Sunni theology. However, Reilly exempts Shiite theology from his harsh criticism.

Reilly's main argument is that early on during its history, Islamic theology dismissed the authority of reason and relied overwhelmingly on revelation. This has led to an "intellectual suicide," to a "dysfunctional culture based on a deformed theology" (198), and to "the moral infantilization of many Muslims" (76). According to Reilly, the problem began in the tenth century. Until then, Islam was open to adopting Greek thought and philosophy. The most vivid expression of this reasonable mindset was the theological movement of the Mu'tazilites, which peaked in the ninth and tenth centuries. Yet during the eleventh century, the Mu'tazilites suffered intellectual defeat from the hands of the fideistic Ash'arites, who are, according to Reilly, the cause of "Sunni Islam's most profound woes." (4). Ash'arism has disconnected Sunni thinking from reality, first by denying that reason is a source of knowledge and secondly by maintaining that reality is unknowable (4). Thus it has made reality irrelevant for Sunni Islam.

In the early parts of his book, Reilly works with a simple dichotomy of "reason" and "philosophy" versus "religion" and "revelation," allowing him to muster as his forces a whole range of nineteenth and twentieth century works in Western Islamic studies. Reilly takes much from works by T. J. de Boer (published 1903), D. B. MacDonald (also 1903), or even Chateaubriand (1811). Further on in his book, it becomes clear, however, that Reilly's own position is that of the "reconciliation of reason with revelation" in Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). Because the Gospel of John describes Christ as *logos*, Christianity, says Reilly, has mostly achieved a balance between reason and revelation. Reilly defends Pope Benedict XVI's critical remarks on Muslim theology (56–58) and ends his book with the recommendation that Sunni Islam might do well and adopt Catholic Thomist theology (199). Reilly's book is an often well-written but still an ill-informed tour-de-force of theological refutation.

Reilly fundamentally misunderstands the role of reason in Islamic intellectual history. Here, he can be partly excused because his mistakes stem from earlier generations of Western scholars in Islamic studies. His analysis is wrong on three counts: first, Greek philosophy was not abandoned or pushed to the margins after the eleventh century, as Reilly and many others claim. Rather, it continued to be pursued within religious literature until the educational revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Secondly, Reilly makes much out of the Ash'arite's ontological theory of

occasionalism, which regards every event as being immediately created by God and seems to deny causality among God's creations. It is a key reason, says Reilly, for Sunni Islam's assumed distance from reality and its intellectual suicide. First of all, Reilly is unaware that the rival ontological theory of so-called secondary causality also had many followers among the Ash'arites. Secondly, even among those who were occasionalists, their occasionalism didn't affect their practical attitude towards causal relations and towards the natural sciences. Muslim scholars rejected "materialism" – that is, the idea that things are not God's creations at all. Reilly misunderstands this as opposition to natural laws (65). He points to al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) attacks on causal explanations, but they are made in a philosophical dispute on the nature of necessity and are quoted out of context. Al-Ghazālī, however, did teach that events have immediate as well as remote causes and that we must study them. While he might have subscribed to an occasionalist ontology, al-Ghazālī and many after him were convinced that God created this world according to certain laws of nature and that these laws do not change. Thirdly, idealizing the Mu'tazilites as champions of rationalism has a long tradition in the West, but already scholars of the early twentieth century understood that their insistence on human free will and God's inability to be unjust or do evil leads to a heavily moralistic attitude. Ash'arism does indeed teach that human actions are predestined by God and thus – on the level of metaphysics – robs humans of free will. But here again, one must distinguish between metaphysical explanation and practical attitude. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) taught that despite His predestination, God gives humans the impression of having a free will and makes them fully responsible for their actions, and al-Ghazālī—who is Reilly's main witness in his case against Sunni Islam—ceaselessly insists that God's predetermination must never lead to slackness or even fatalism.¹ Why does predetermination imply a disconnect from reality? Among today's cosmologists, one will probably find the majority on the side of a fully determined universe. Human free will is hard to maintain once we study closer and closer *why* our minds do what they do.

Reilly's clever combination of quotes and analysis creates often a quite entertaining read. He points to legitimate ills that affect today's Muslim societies – first of all Jihadism and anti-Semitism – but the way he constructs "a Muslim mind" from his quotes is Orientalist and borders on racism. There is a lot of erroneous information, claiming that the books of the Mu'tazilites were burnt (20), or that Mu'tazilism became punishable by death (41), wrongly suggesting that intellectual life under Islam was exuberantly violent and oppressive. There are also lots of failed connections. What does

anti-Semitism and Muslim terrorism have to do with an assumed failure to acknowledge causes? Don't they rather see too many causes? Reilly conceals from his readers that most Jihadists are not Ash'arites but rather Salafists, who reject Ash'arism. The intellectual ideal of people such as Usama bin Ladin is not al-Ghazālī but Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), and Ibn Taymiyya argued against occasionalism and fatalism and stressed moral responsibility. One could even make the point that Jihadism is much more a successor of Mu'tazilite moralism than it is of any element in Ash'arite thinking.

At the end, Reilly's book is war literature, telling us in eloquent and often learned words why the way we think is right and our enemy's way wrong. Whether the "we" are the Catholics of America, the Christians, or simply all Americans remains intentionally vague in this book. Reilly also misleads his readers about who the enemy is. In the title, he leaps from the word *Muslim* to *Islamist*. In polemics, such subtle distinctions often fall through the cracks, which is why a theological refutation of Sunni Islam can be easily confused with a propaganda tool in the War on Terror.

Endnote

1. Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, trans. D. B. Burrell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2001), 55–149.

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