

BOOK REVIEW

The closing of the Muslim mind: How intellectual suicide created the modern Islamist crisis, by Robert R. Reilly, Wilmington, DE, ISI Books, 2010, 244pp., ISBN 1-933859-91-1, eISBN 978-1-933-85991-0

This is not a ‘new’ book. It has been around for five years. Usually this reviewer would not have considered reviewing a book that has been in bookshops or on the web after two years of its publication. However, its importance warrants the review, especially since it was published on the eve of popular upheaval against corrupt autocratic governments subordinate to the West. It is ‘a must’ read, not only because of its scholarly work, and not because it received much attention in the Arab media, but also because it reflects a frame of mind in the West viewing the Arab and Muslim world through the prism of its own value system. That, in itself, is the problem. It is an intellectual and moral problem because it reflects Eurocentrism (or a Westernized approach to other civilizations), on the one hand, and because it implies some sort of an unwarranted moral and intellectual superiority of the West.

This reviewer is not accusing the writer, Robert Reilly, of deliberate bias, but is merely making an observation. There is a tendency in the West to relate any development, or any event taking place in the Arab and Muslim world, to a single cause: its relation to Islam. Reilly makes the link even more between old ideas and modern crises, which is not only too simplistic but also even untrue. Intuitive reasoning and common sense do not necessarily clash with ‘reason’ as the author suggests, even though some doctrines would argue so. What such views seem to forget or ignore is that Islam is not a monolith, nor is the fact that Arabs and Muslims are no different from other peoples with regards to what affects them. They react to abuse and injustice as do any other people. Not everything relates to or is the result of ‘Islam’. For instance, in the book’s foreword, Roger Scruton asks, ‘Why does Islam today seem not merely to tolerate the violence of its fiercest advocates, but to condone and preach it?’ (p. i). Therefore, in one word, ‘Islam’ is responsible for the deeds of some of its followers and thus every Muslim becomes ‘tainted’. For those readers who do not know who Scruton is, he is an English writer and philosopher with several writings on aesthetics. He is also an activist as he was involved in the creation of several underground university and academic networks in Central Europe controlled by the Soviet Union (Day 1999, 281–282). He received several awards for such work.

Let us examine in detail the fallacy in such a statement. ‘First, Islam does not “tolerate”, or “condone”, or “preach” violence.’ Such reductionist statements do reek of racism and colonial nostalgia. It is regurgitation of Bernard Lewis’s remark on Islam in his seminal article on Muslim rage (Lewis 1990). There is a abundance of literature in the West, in general, and in the United States, that promotes such kind of generalizations (Hafez 2012, ch. 1).

It is not the purpose of this review to debate the issue of violence per se in Islam, or in the Quran, or in the Traditions or ‘Hadith’, or in any document usually referred to by scholars writing on Islam. In reality, violence in the Quran and other documents is subject to strict parameters and conditions and restricted to self-defence. If some Muslim groups chose to take it out of the context of the text itself, it does not mean that the whole religion is responsible for it. An analogy would be to claim that Christianity has led to the Inquisition in Europe, to slavery in the United States, to genocide in the Americas, to the horrors of two world wars in fewer than 25 years, to the colonial domination of non-whites by Christian whites (the Crusaders did gleefully massacre Arab Christians when they entered Jerusalem). When political power

has instrumentalized religion, the exactions committed by such power do not mean that religion condones it. This was true during the heyday of the Islamic empire, in Western Europe, in America, and even today. Indeed, the issue and use of political power should be the focus of attention and not religion. Politics need to be kept out of religion, and not the other way round!

Second, Islam is not a monolithic block. There is no central institution speaking in the name of Islam like the Church for Christians. There are no ‘intermediaries’ between the believer and God. Statements starting with the phrase ‘the position of Islam’ in any topic are fallacious and dangerous. Islam has various schools of jurisprudence, and not theology. Jurisprudence, as passed to generations of Muslims, regulates the daily life of Muslims in case of contention and debate. Divergences, polemics, hardly relate to theological issues but to interpretations of jurisprudence. Such jurisprudence addresses political, economic, social and cultural issues. The theological debates are defunct since the credo is rather simple: *There is but One God, and the Prophet Muhammad is His Messenger.*

This is not to say that there were no theological debates. Indeed, there were many and sometimes quite deadly. The first sedition caused by the Khawarij questioned the legitimacy of the fourth Caliph, Ali Ibn Abi Taleb, accepting arbitration in his dispute with the then governor of Damascus, Mu’awiya Ibn Abi Sufian. As the result of arbitration, the latter founded the Umayyad dynasty that ruled the Islamic empire for almost a century. The Khawarij, from the Arabic verb *kharaja*, mean literally those who broke rank and opposed the caliph. The issue then was that the caliph’s power was an expression of the will of God, and his chosen one was not at liberty to transgress it. The roots of contemporary extremism in the behaviour of some groups lie with the Khawarij and their understanding of the Quran. It is of particular importance that they never gained traction among the majority of the believers, then and now, because Islam and Muslims adhere to the notion of balance and moderation. Therefore, extremism, as we see it nowadays, is an offshoot of the extremism seen then. Curiously and wrongly, the author tries to link contemporary Jihadism and extremism to the Ash’arite doctrines, whereas in reality Jihadist are opposed to Ash’arism (Griffel 2011). We urge caution when reading Reilly’s thesis because of unwarranted conclusions that seem to fit a political agenda of sorts.

The reasons for extremism are multiple and not necessarily particular to Islam. Frustration with existing political systems, poverty, general weakness, corruption, are but few of the reasons that lead desperate people to desperate choices and actions. This is not to condone them but to understand why they commit horrors. Explanations suggested by orientalist or policy-makers serving particular agendas are not helpful. The current crisis in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq and Egypt are but vivid examples of failed policies by leading powers expecting to reengineer Arab societies.

One of the contentions of the book is the impact of Ash’arism, a theological school that has been prevalent in the Muslim world since the late 11th century. The theological contention is that God’s will supersedes reason. Reilly contends that this tenet has thwarted critical reasoning and, hence, is the main cause of stagnation and underdevelopment in Muslim countries. The implication is clear: Islam is ‘faith without reason’, a claim difficult to sustain despite the author’s efforts to the contrary.

The book extends over nine chapters plus notes. Though in form it is a scholarly work, it is, nonetheless, similar to Lewis’s pamphlet *What Went Wrong?* Reilly’s work is more a question of ‘why’ instead of ‘what’. The author provides a selected bibliography that does not include the required literature. His use of MEMRI as a source raises concerns about the impartiality of his thesis. MEMRI is the acronym of the Middle East Media Research Institute, created by Daniel Pipes who is a critic of Arabs and Islam and a staunch advocate of Zionism and Israel. The author apparently does not have a command of Arabic and, therefore, seems to have relied

on translations of major Arab texts. Nevertheless, it seems he is unaware of the vigorous debates that continue to take place among Arab and Muslim scholars. His area of expertise is not Islam but political science and foreign policy as his career and publications attest.

The book seems to have policy implications aiming at the need to reform Arab thinking in a way that is congruent with Western ideas. The author is a political scientist who has worked with the George W. Bush administration. Some critics have described his book as ‘war literature’ and a ‘catholic refutation of Ash‘arite Muslim theology’ (Griffel 2011). Strangely enough, his book reminds us of Rafael Patai’s *The Arab Mind* (1973), which was superbly refuted by Alexander Abdennur (Abdennur 2014). Along with Lewis’s book on Islam and Patai’s on Arab thinking patterns, Reilly’s is the third of a controversial trilogy even though it appeared during the first term of the Barack Obama administration. Hence, much caution is required while reading it.

There is a political and cultural theme defining Reilly’s approach. His contention is that the greatness of Arab and Islamic civilization lies in what he calls the ‘Hellenization’ process that occurred and especially in philosophy. Scruton, in his foreword, reminds the reader that Western civilization is based upon Hellenization, Roman law and a Judeo-Christian value system. One may wonder why authors like Scruton continuously ignore the contribution of Islam and Islamic authors to Western civilization. Thomas Aquinas’s contention that ‘in God, understanding is no different from his being’ is quite similar to the Mu‘tazilites doctrine, yet blissfully ignored. However, that is another debate! Reilly seems to forget that Judaism, Christianity, Persian and Hindu civilizations influenced Islamic civilization. Hellenistic influence is just one factor, albeit an important one.

The central thesis of the book is that the decline in Arab and Muslim society is due to the predominance of the Ash‘arite theological doctrines over those of the Mu‘tazilites – the rationalists par excellence. Indeed, the rivalry between the two factions that dominated the schools of theology (in Arabic, *firaq al kalam*) has significantly contributed to the vitality of the religious discourse. However, he could not make the case that the triumph of Ash‘arism was the cause of the decline even though some potent arguments were made. However, as in most simplistic and single-cause explanations, it fails to address the complexity of societies, their beliefs, or the political, economic and cultural environments.

Chapter 2 documents extensively the fall of the Mu‘tazilites who were theologians and rationalists. The Ash‘arites, followers of Al Ash‘ari (873–935), who himself was a Mu‘tazili, opposed the excesses of the Mu‘tazilites in the interpretation of the dogma. The tension between ‘reason’ and ‘revelation’ dominated the debate in those times. Among the issues disputed was the nature of the Quran, whether it was ‘created’ or an expression of God and, therefore, as anything related to God is uncreated. The Mu‘tazilites held that the Quran was created, hence part of ‘history’ in modern parlance. Hence, the critique of the existing order was permissible. A consequence of such an idea is the notion of free will. Is free will compatible with God’s justice and providence? This debate is as old as Islam itself and goes back to the time of the Prophet’s death. To date, this debate has wide political ramifications. The reader who may not be familiar with the intricacies of the debate may wonder why such arcane issues have created so much havoc.

The tension between ‘reason’ and ‘revelation’ has clear political implications. Reason questions everything. Revelation has, as its literal interpretations would suggest, cast the world in a mould that could not be changed. The ruler – in this case the caliph – is an expression of God’s will. (Would this not remind us of the ‘Divine Right of Rule’ claimed by absolute monarchs in Europe, at least up to the French Revolution?) Any attempt at dissent from the caliph’s rule would be a transgression of God’s will. It is clear that in times of great political crisis and turmoil caliphs would use religion to assert their legitimacy, their rule and rulings. Free will

is associated with reason and, hence, needs to be tamed to the benefit of the general order. Therefore, reason could not have the pre-eminence the Mu'tazilites held dear to their core belief system.

Al Ash'ari held that God's will was the prime factor. Man cannot comprehend God's reasons but must bend to His will. God's word is His will rather than an expression of His reason. This means that God is the primary cause of everything and, therefore, the concept of natural laws such as gravity, physics and science are nothing more than God's customs or habits. Some 150 years after the death of Al Ash'ari, Al Ghazali (1058–1111) held that nature is subject to God and incapable of acting by itself. The sun, Moon and stars, for instance, need the will of God to produce something of themselves. Al Ghazali has dominated for a long time the intellectual sphere in the Arab and Muslim world. However, few would remember that on his deathbed he recanted his ideas!

During the reign of the Abbasid caliph Al Mutwakkil, Mu'tazilites were disgraced, thrown out of courts and persecuted. Ash'arite doctrines gave the pre-eminence to revelation, hence dogma, over reason. Theologians, doing the bidding of the ruler, would resort to dogma to justify rulings. Discussion of the dogma became anathema with serious consequences for the culprit.

Arab and Muslim philosophers were an offshoot of rationalists. Their ideas were deemed dangerous to the established order. Philosophers translated the Greeks, at the beginning, hence the Hellenization of the intellectual sphere in the Arab and Muslim world. The downfall of the Mu'tazilites led to the eradication of Hellenistic authors and ideas in defence of the 'purity' of the dogma; the eradication of alien concepts. Reilly's contention is that this was the beginning of the closing of the mind.

There is some truth to that but not entirely. The Ash'arite opposed the Mu'tazilites. They also supported the Hanbalite doctrine that was a literal reading of the text and the Hadith. Little room was given for reason as humans would not be able to comprehend the vastness of God's knowledge and, therefore, should stick to the literal approach to his words. Reilly has not paid attention to the many verses in the Quran that would exhort the believer to make choices and assume responsibility for his choices. No belief can exist without free will, and no free will exists without reason!

Indeed, the ramifications of such a doctrine would nip in the bud any attempt at questioning the order of things, especially in the public sphere, and by extension to the sphere of knowledge as received and transmitted. What Reilly fails to mention is that Hanbalism is only one school of jurisprudence and does not comprise the majority of Muslims, nor is it the largest school. Muslims adhere to Hanafism (the largest if not the majority), to Malikism, to Shafeism, and to Jaafarism; the latter being the jurisprudence school of thought for Shiites. An offshoot of Hanbalism is Wahhabism mostly confined to parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Their importance is due to the Saudi Kingdom and the considerable money power it carries with the rise of the petrodollar. It is noteworthy that Wahhabism has been around for almost three centuries, yet it failed to gain traction in the Muslim world until lately as money poured into mosques and preaching. It is a pure expression of the instrumentalization of Islam for political purposes.

What is at stake in Arab or Muslim politics is neither theology nor even jurisprudence, and especially that related to the status of women. The latter seems to be at the root of the dispute about the succession of the Prophet and, hence, the issue of legitimacy in ruling (Madelung 1997). Reilly seems oblivious to the fact that there have been and still are many voices that ask for a re-reading of the text and jurisprudence (Hafez 2012; Mahmassani 2014). What is at stake is power politics, who rules and under what legitimacy. It is difficult to accept the proposition that one factor, no matter how important it is, caused the decline of Arabs and

Muslims. Ibn Khaldun, in the 13th and 14th centuries, mapped the factors causing the rise and decline of civilizations. It was true then and is still true today. Reilly's 'explanation' is not compelling.

Reilly's contention is that with such a frame of mind human action became a mere metaphor with no particular meaning or purpose. Quoting a 20th-century Muslim thinker, Fazlur Rahman, Ash'ari 'held its sway right up until the twentieth century and holds sway even now in the citadels of conservatism' (Rahman 2006, 60).

Indeed, the consequence of the triumph of Ash'arism is that, through its critique of rational sciences, it gave the 'ruler' an ideology of power. And to those who wonder why democracy did not develop indigenously in the Muslim world and ask whether it can still develop today, the answer is 'that so long as the Ash'arite (or Hanbalite) worldview is reigning, democratic development cannot succeed. The simple reason that this view posits the primacy of power over the primacy or reason' (ch. 2). This would be true if Hanbalism were reigning supreme, which is not the case. The failure of democracy to take hold and develop in the Arab world lies elsewhere. It has to do with the rent-based economy prevailing in Arab lands and the approach to generating wealth. However, this is beyond the scope of this review. He further adds that 'Those who might contend that Ash'ari is already irrelevant in the Middle East need to provide some other explanation for its dysfunctional character.' We believe we are doing that! His scathing conclusion is that 'It functions as an embedded dead weight that inhibits the reasonable search for solutions' (ch. 2). That is true in such societies that adhere to Wahhabi doctrines but not true in the vast majority of Arab and Muslim societies.

Chapter 6 is the most controversial. It offers a single-cause template for the decline in the Muslim world. It is Ash'arism and more devastating is the conclusion that 'if man cannot apprehend right and wrong through his reason, the moral foundation for man-made law is fatally subverted' (ch. 6). He argues that if reason is not a legislator, then why have legislation? Reilly seems to assume that all Muslims adopt that kind of thinking and reasoning, which is simply not true. He seems to believe that all Muslims are Hanbalites or Ash'arites, which is another generalization that does not reflect reality. Reilly's extensive account of Hanbalist ideas and doctrines may be commendable in debunking some of their most outlandish ideas, but Hanbalism cannot be construed as representative of all Muslims or even their majority.

Reilly's single-cause explanation of the decline of Arabs and/or Muslims is too simplistic to hold water, neither is it true. In addition, he fails to relate the development of such ideas to the era and environment in which they appeared and flourished. Ibn Hanbal, Al Ash'ari, Ibn Taymiyya and, later on in the 18th century, Mohammad Ibn Abdel Wahab, were witnesses to the decline of Arabs and Muslims. The decline of central authority was already in place well before the appearance of such controversial and divisive doctrines. Ibn Taymiyya grew up with the memory of the Crusades, the disintegration of the central state and saw Bagdad fall to the Mongols in 1258. The turmoil and upheaval in the Islamic world and especially in the Levant were favourable grounds for the development of what their authors thought to be ideas for self-preservation. Mohammad Ibn Abdel Wahab thought that the return to what he believed were the fundamentals and Arabness of Islamic thought and teachings would preserve the Umma from the undesirable intrusions of false ideas brought by populations who embraced Islam but were not of Arab origin, and, therefore, weakened the cohesion of Muslim society. It was indeed a racist approach against what is labelled '*shu'ubiyya*', a pejorative word for the influence of non-Arab Muslims.

The reasons for the decline lie elsewhere and are not due to Ash'arism or any other 'intellectual' or 'cultural' reason!

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