The Religion of Unreason

REVIEWED BY MARTIN WITKERK

In the absence of knowledge about others, our working assumption is usually that they must be more or less like ourselves. This sort of thinking is nowhere better illustrated than in the prating of neoconservative policy makers about bringing "freedom and democracy" to the Middle East. In fact, such ideas are utterly alien to the Muslim mind: policies based upon them are incapable of striking root in Islamic soil, and can be enforced only temporarily and at the point of a gun.

To understand why this is so, one must know something about the history of Muslim thought. But the relevant material is found in obscure theological controversies which took place within Islam largely between the ninth and eleventh centuries. It is hardly surprising that the average neoconservative op-ed writer finds himself out of his depth here. The great service Robert R. Reilly performs with this short, lucid book is to make intelligible to the Western non-specialist reader the nature of the mental abyss which separates the Muslim world from us.

The Closing of the Muslim Mind
How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis
By Robert R. Reilly
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The Koran contains a number of passages supporting predestination, i.e., the idea that all events, including people's actions and beliefs, are determined in advance by God: "When you shot it was not you who shot but God" (8:17); "[God] leaves straying whom He pleases, and He guides whom He pleases" (16:93). The *hadith*, or attested sayings of Mohammed, are even more explicit in this regard. One explains that two angels visit every child in the womb and ask God for His instructions concerning it: whether it shall be male or female, righteous or unrighteous, along with its "deeds, wealth and means of livelihood, and death." These things are all recorded on a parchment role, and nothing is ever added or struck out afterwards.

On the other hand, Islam, like all religions, enjoins certain types of behavior and prohibits others, offering corresponding rewards and punishments. This in itself seems to imply a human power to choose. "Say, 'The Truth is from your Lord.' Let him who will, believe; and let him who will reject [it]." (18:29) "You shall certainly be called to account for all your actions." (16:93) Each human soul will be "recompensed according to what it has earned, with no one wronged." (45:22)

This ambiguity gave rise to the first theological debate within Islam. The Jabrites (from *jabr*, meaning compulsion) were strict determinists, while the Qadarites (from *qadar*, meaning power) asserted that man has power over his own actions.

The Jabrites held that if man had power over his actions, God would *not* have that power, and would therefore be less than omnipotent. One Jabrite explained that man's actions are ascribed to him only in the same sense one imputes "the bearing of the fruit to the tree, flowing to the stream, motion to the stone, rising or setting the sun—blooming and vegetating to the earth." The Umayyad Caliphs found Jabrism a convenient teaching, since it allowed them to plead God's foreordination as excuse for their frequent acts of theft, adultery, and murder.

The Qadarites responded that foreordination of human acts would make God a partner to man's wrongdoing, which was blasphemous. Furthermore, it would eliminate the justice of divine punishment, which would be like "someone commanding his slave to do something, then punishing him for it." One Qadarite was asked his opinion of "those kings [the Umayyad Caliphs] who spill the blood of Muslims, appropriate their posses-

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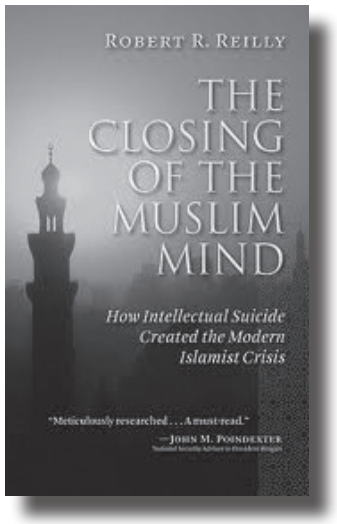
sions, do what they please and say 'Our actions are part of God's foreordination." He responded: "The enemies of God lie." Unsurprisingly, such teachings annoyed the Umayyads, and they ordered at least two Qadarites put to death.

But the Qadarite sect continued its work, eventually evolving into the broader Mu'tazalite school of thought. The Mu'tazalites taught that God commands what is intrinsically right and forbids what is intrinsically wrong (as opposed to actions being right or wrong according to God's arbitrary command); that God can be known through reason, independently of and logically prior to any revelation; and that the Koran was not coeternal with God but created by Him in time, and hence was subject to interpretation in the light of reason. Many Mu'tazalites were fascinated by Greek science and philosophy, and tried to reconcile them with Islam.



In 750 AD, the Umayyad Caliphs were overthrown by the Abbasids. Partly from a desire to curb the power of the *umela*, or scholars of Islamic law, the new rulers endorsed the Mu'tazalite doctrine that Koranic law was subject to rational interpretation.

In 830 AD, the Abbasid Caliph founded a "House of Wisdom" in Baghdad as a library and translation center. There, the first Islamic philosopher, al-Kindi, tried to assimilate as much of Aristotle's teachings as he found compatible with Islam. He believed that the true content of philosophy coincided perfectly with the truths of revelation.

Christian scholars were even invited to Baghdad to debate the merits of their religion with Muslim scholars, and some of these debates were recorded and published. (Reilly notes that in later years an Egyptian law required that any house in which these books were discovered must be "razed to the ground, along with forty houses around it.")

In 849 AD, all this activity suddenly came to an end. The House of Wisdom was closed, al-Kindi was flogged and driven out of Baghdad, and all discussion of whether the Koran was created or eternal was forbidden. Some years thereafter, professional copyists were made to swear an oath not to copy works of philosophy and booksellers were sworn not to sell them.

The light kindled by the Mu'tazilites was not extinguished at once, however, and the great Islamic philosophers of subsequent ages—al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroës—were all intellectual descendants of those early rationalists. But free intellectual inquiry was henceforth on the defensive, rejected by the majority of Muslims. The last of the great Moorish philosophers, Averroës, lived to see his works burned in the town square of Cordoba in 1195. Most of his writings have only survived in Latin and Hebrew translation.

Multiculturalists have recently taken to trumpeting the glories of Islamic philosophy. They know nothing about it, of course, but imagine that its very existence proves our intellectual indebtedness to the Muslim world. This is at best a great exaggeration. A Saudi authority recently put the matter in proper perspective: the achievements of the medieval Islamic philosophers, he wrote,

> are not of our own making, and those exceptional individuals were not the product of Arab culture, but rather Greek culture. They are outside our cultural mainstream and we treated them as though they were foreign elements. Therefore we don't deserve to take pride in them since we rejected them and fought their ideas. Conversely, when Europe learned from them it benefited from a body of knowledge which was originally its own.

Arabs actually refer to logic, philosophy, natural science, medicine, mathematics, and engineering as "intruding sciences."

The doctrine which eventually supplanted Mu'tazalite rationalism is known as Ash'arism, after Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari. Al-Ash'ari had been a Mu'tazalite himself until the age of forty. He then declared: "I used to maintain that the Koran is created...and that creatures create their actions. Lo! I repent that I have been a Mu'tazalite. I renounce these opinions and engage to refute the Mu'tazalites and expose their infamy and turpitude."

Al-Ash'ari begins from the Koranic emphasis on God's omnipotence: "Allah does what He wills" (14:27); He is "the great Doer of what He wills" and "Effecter of what He intends" (85:15). From such passages, al-Ash'ari developed a radical concept of God as pure will. A Muslim scholar explains the fundamental idea:

> God, being absolutely free in His action, is not bound to act on rational purpose. He does not act teleologically for, otherwise, His actions

> would be determined by something external to and other than Himself and He would not remain absolutely free. There is no purpose in the mind of God which would determine His activity. From this anti-teleological view it follows that He is not bound to do what is best for His creatures. He does whatever He wills.

A consequence of this view is that everything Westerners would describe as "natural laws"—gravity, the laws of chemistry, biology, etc.—are really just God's customs or habits, which He is absolutely free to break off at any moment, and into which it would be presumptuous for men to inquire. The universe is a continuing miracle, and each event is the direct result of God's will, unmediated and unaffected by any secondary natural causes. Pakistani media actually suspended *weather forecasts* for a time on this basis of this doctrine. Says Reilly:

> The consequences of the voluntaristic view are momentous. If creation exists simply as a succession of miraculous moments, it cannot be apprehended by reason. Other religions, including Christianity, recognize miracles. But they recognize them precisely as temporary and extraordinary suspensions of the natural law. In fact, that is what defines them as miracles. One admits to the possibility of a miracle only after discounting every possible explanation of its occurrence by natural causes. In voluntaristic Islamic thought, however, there are no natural causes to discount. As a result, reality becomes incomprehensible and the purpose of things in themselves indiscernible because they have no inner logic. If unlimited will is the exclusive constituent of reality, there is really nothing left to reason about.

Christianity also teaches divine omnipotence, of course. But, as the Gospel of John put it, God created the world through *Logos*. Creation reflects the divine rationality. "Nature bespeaks an intelligibility that derives from a transcendent source.... The laws of nature are not a challenge to God's authority but an expression of it." The Christian God is not simply "free" to do evil, for that would contradict His own nature.

The Ash'arite teaching of the absolute primacy of the divine will has had interesting consequences for the teaching of science in the Muslim world. Reilly quotes some recent guidelines for the composition of textbooks in Pakistan:

> In writing a science textbook for Class 3 children, one should *not* ask 'What will happen if an animal does not take any food?' but 'What will happen if Allah does not give the animal food?' Effect must not be related to physical cause. To do so leads toward atheism.... There is latent poison in the subheading *Energy Causes Change* because it gives the impression that energy is the true cause rather than Allah.

On similar grounds, some Muslims regard it as a sin to use a seatbelt or take out an insurance policy. The Taliban outlawed polio vaccinations. When God wants you to die, you will die, and that is all there is to it.

Some Muslim authorities deny that man has walked on the moon—not because they are ill informed, but because they regard the chain of causes and events needed to put him there as theologically unacceptable. A recent grand *mufti* of Saudi Arabia specifically declared all who say that the earth is round and orbits the sun to be apostates.

The same kind of thinking is reflected in much journalism in the Muslim world. The news tends to be presented as a succession of isolated events, explains Reilly; in-depth, explanatory coverage putting events in context would imply the existence of causes other than God. Natural disasters in particular are invariably ascribed to divine wrath. A highly placed Saudi functionary explained to television viewers that God sent the 2004 tsunami "at Christmas, when fornicators and corrupt people from all over the world come to commit fornication and sexual perversion."

It seems that nothing is too improbable to be reported as news in the Arabic media, and Reilly cites some stunning examples. A certain Dr. Muhammad al-'Arifi assured Saudi television viewers that "women in the West marry dogs and donkeys." According to Egyptian press reports, Saddam Hussein was never executed; a dead ringer was substituted for him.

Jewish conspiracy theories are also big. One Egyptian cleric announced on television that, according to his calculations, "eighty-two percent of all attempts to corrupt humanity originate from the Jews"; another explained that Jews "infect food with cancer and ship it to Muslim countries"; yet another identifies the girl in the Starbucks logo as the Jewish Queen Esther and calls for the eradication of Starbucks from the Muslim world. Sunni sources in Saudi Arabia explain the rival Shi'ite sect as a Jewish plot to subvert Islam. The Shi'ites, in turn, are said to have created the Freemasons.

"What is notable is not so much the outlandishness of the accusations or stories," says the author, "as the lack of any concern over evidence as to whether they are true or false, or of any procedure to reach such a conclusion." In an unintelligible universe, anything is as likely as anything else.

The moral world is just as irrational and dependent upon the arbitrary will of God as the physical world. God does not prohibit murder because it is wrong; murder is wrong because God has prohibited it. He is at perfect liberty to change his mind tomorrow. One eleventh century Ash'arite declared: "If God had informed us that He would punish us for the acts of others or for our own obedience, that would have been right and just, and we should have been obliged to accept it." Reilly summarizes:

> God is not subject to justice or injustice. There is no standard by which He can be questioned. If Allah is pure will, one act of His pure will cannot be differentiated from another. There are no standards outside Him; in fact, there are no standards within Him. He is beyond good and evil. Ash'arism is the theology of "might makes right."

Accordingly, there is no distinction within Islam between law and morality: *shari'a*, or revealed law, *is* the only morality. This has led to what Reilly calls the "moral infantilization" of Muslims: the Arabic language does not even possess a word for conscience. Instead, if you are unsure whether a certain act is permitted or not, you must consult a legal authority. The city of Cairo currently offers a dial-a-*fatwa* service where, for a fee, a *mufti* stands by on the telephone lines to answer people's practical quandaries.

Muslims have no concept of a plurality of religious traditions. Islam, they hold, is "natural" to man. "It was Adam's religion and would be everyone's religion were they not converted as children to apostasy in their upbringing by Christians, Jews, Hindus," etc. Thus, the children of Muslim immigrants have been known to ridicule their European classmates for eating pork. Muslims assume everyone must "know" that pork is unspeakably filthy; if Europeans persist in eating it, it can only be because we are so morally depraved that we are indifferent to our own defilement.

Muslim religious instruction reflects the same authoritarian mindset. Any Sunday School teacher knows how even young children can stump their elders with difficult questions ("why does God let the bad guys win?"). When I was a child, the teachers' customary escape route was an invitation to ask God after we died. In Muslim religious instruction, such pupils are told, in effect, "shut up." Religious teachings are to be accepted *bila kayfa*: "without inquiring how." The inquisitive spirit which Westerners would see as a healthy sign of an active mind is feared by Muslims as a dangerous tendency to heresy, and teachers are at pains to stifle it. As a result, Muslim learning consists principally of rote memorization. Discussion is frowned upon, and in some contexts altogether forbidden.

Such is the general pattern of the Muslim mind. It is aptly summed up by a slogan the Taliban once had inscribed all over Afghanistan: "Throw reason to the dogs!"

Only after we have grasped the above-described manner of thought can we begin to make sense of the Muslim response to Western slogans like "freedom and democracy." The fundamental point is that Islam knows no standard of legitimacy apart from divine will as supposedly expressed in the Koran. "It is not up to the will of the people to decide what is right and how to live," declares an Indonesian cleric; "Rather the will of the people must be bent to suit the will of God. It is not democracy we want but Allah-cracy!" Another authority proclaims: "Whoever says that legislation is the right of the people is not a Muslim."

It is a religious duty incumbent upon Muslims to gain power over other nations and impose their law, *shari'a*. The Koran itself promises them success in this endeavor: "You shall be uppermost if you are believers" (3:139); "Our soldiers will be those who overcome" (37:173). Muslims saw the breathtaking expansion of their empire in its early days as a vindication of these divine prophecies.

Conversely, Islam offers little comfort to the faithful in times of defeat. And, during the last century especially, they have experienced a lot of defeat. The greatest psychological shock, in Reilly's view, came after the First World War, with "the collapse of the caliphate in 1924, the secularization of Turkey, and the almost complete colonization of the Levant and the Maghreb." Believers interpreted their defeat as a divine judgment upon them: God was punishing them for deviating from the true path.

This was the inspiration behind the Muslim Brotherhood, the first modern "Islamist" organization, founded in 1928. Its purpose, and that of its innumerable descendents and imitators, is to wage holy war against both "the apostate domestic enemy and the Jewish-Crusader external enemy" and to restore Islam to "a pristine condition, as defined by them."

Of course, these goals are nothing more than the timeless goals of Islam itself. So is there anything distinctive about today's "Islamism?" Reilly believes there is: "Islamist authors cannot be accurately understood in the terms of Islam simply, but only within the perspective of the twentieth-century Western ideologies that they have assimilated." These include Leninist Marxism, Italian Fascism, and German National Socialism. The common denominator of all such ideologies, says Reilly, is voluntarism: the primacy of will over reason. This tendency is represented by modern Western thinkers such as Hobbes, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche.

"Like twentieth-century Western ideologies, Islamism places the burden of salvation upon politics, a total politics that, only through its control of every aspect of life, can bring about their version of God's kingdom on earth." As the intellectual Godfather of al-Qaeda, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, phrased it: "Islam chose to unite earth and heaven in a single system." To this end, he espoused the Leninist notion of a "vanguard" of the faithful with the mission of establishing a "just dictatorship" which "grant[s] political liberties to the virtuous alone."

Its ambition is limitless, both externally ("Islam wants the whole earth.") and internally ("a radical transformation with the complete destruction of old systems."). "In such a state," warns another Islamist, "no one can regard any field of his affairs as personal or private. Considered from this aspect the Islamic state bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states."

The total character of Islamist ambition makes it unappeasable. "We are not fighting so that you will offer us something," warned a Hesbollah leader; "We are fighting to eliminate you."

The principal enemy is, of course, the United States. According to Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman,

> Muslims everywhere [should] dismember [the American] nation, tear them apart, ruin their economy, provoke their corporations, destroy their embassies, attack their interests, sink their ships, shoot down their planes [and] kill them on land, at sea, and in the air. Kill them wherever you find them.

We are often reminded that most Muslims reject terrorism. But, as the author rightly notes, "their numbers may not matter, any more than they did for the hapless peoples of the Russian empire who suddenly found themselves ruled by a tiny, violent clique of Leninists in 1917."

There are, indeed, Muslim scholars and political leaders today working to restore sanity to the Islamic world. Some even espouse a revival of the Mu'tazalite rationalist tradition. Reilly dedicates his book to these courageous people, but he refrains from naming any of them "for reasons of their own security." At present, the course of events is not running in their direction, and it would be folly to count on their eventual victory.

Reilly does not recommend much in the way of policy, but clearly the prudent course begins with the strict control of our own borders. ■