

An excellent and unique work by Robert R. Reilly.

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Four Questions: Robert Reilly on the Closing of the Muslim Mind

Robert Reilly has written a book called *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*, recently published by **ISI Books** [[w.w.w.isibooks.org](http://www.isibooks.org)] In it, he traces the roots of modern Islamism to medieval intellectual debates within Islam over the relationship between God and reason. We asked Reilly, a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, four questions about his book.

InsiderOnline: *In your book, you argue that the antecedent to the Islamism we know today lies in the 11th century victory of the Ash'arites over the Mu'tazalites, which arrested efforts to assimilate Greek ideas about reason into Muslim thinking. How does understanding that intellectual wrong turn help us understand Islamism's violent hostility toward the West?*

Robert Reilly: The West is the bastion of reason—or, at least, it used to be. The West was thoroughly Hellenized, to the extent that Nietzsche could quip that Christianity was Plato for the masses. When Sunni Islam decisively rejected philosophy, it perforce rejected the West. This did not happen overnight, but by the time of the burning of Avicenna's books in the public square of Cordoba in 1196 AD it was a done deal. Where did this leave Islam? Benedict XVI said in Regensburg that not only is violence in spreading faith unreasonable and therefore against God, but that a conception of God without reason or above reason leads to that very violence. That which is unreasonable is against God only if God himself is reason or logos.

The majority Sunni theological school denied that God is reason or is any way limited by reason. God can therefore act unreasonably, as can his vice-regent on earth—the caliph or ruler—and this is perfectly consistent with this view. Reason is not an adjudicator or even a guide in life. Muslim man is thrown back exclusively upon revelation, which, thanks to the denigration of reason, he has few tools to interpret with. This deformed theology gave this form of Islam an ingrained propensity to violence. It also created an ingrained antipathy to political orders that are based upon reason. The widely shared principle of Islamic jurisprudence is that "reason is not a legislator." If this is so, why have legislatures? Legislatures, where people come together to reason about how they should be ruled, are a presumptuous affront to God's exclusive rule, according to this theology. Therefore, Islamists declare that the greatest danger to their faith is democracy.

Of course, there is also the divine mission that Islam understands itself to be on to bring the entire world into submission to Allah. Historically, force was the principal means for doing this. It was through armed conquest that Islam came close on several occasions to bringing all of Europe into subjugation. The hostility to Christianity and Judaism exists doctrinally, and the denigration of reason gives that hostility violent scope.

IO: *What are the most important consequences for Muslim societies themselves of this—as your title puts it—closing of the Muslim mind?*

RR: These societies are profoundly dysfunctional because their access to reality has been cut off. Fouad Ajami exclaimed, “Wherever I go in the Islamic world, it is the same problem: cause and effect, cause and effect.” He was witnessing the effects of the denial of causality in the natural world that this theology asserts to protect its notion of God as radically transcendent and omnipotent. In its terms, God can only be omnipotent if no one else is so much as potent. This means that there are no secondary causes, as in natural laws—like gravity or fire burning cotton—just the first and only cause, God. He does everything directly. (The explicit denial of causality helps to explain the demise of science in the Islamic world. If there are no natural laws to discover, why go searching for them?) This, of course, also leaves man without any power over his own actions. As ibn Taymiyya said, “Creatures have no impact on God since it is God Himself who creates their acts.” What kind of political order do you suppose emanates from that view of things? Where is man’s free will?

IO: *Do you see any parallels between Islamism and other totalitarian movements?*

RR: It is not a matter of whether I see any parallels; the Islamists themselves call attention to how close their conception of an Islamist state is to Western totalitarianism. As Maulana Maududi wrote, “In reality Islam is a revolutionary ideology and programme which seeks to alter the social order of the whole world and rebuild it in conformity with its own tenets and ideals.”

Sayyid Qutb described Islam as an “emancipatory movement” and “an active revolutionary creed.” Hassan al-Banna regarded the Soviet Union under Stalin as a model of a successful one-party system. In a line worthy of Robespierre, Qutb said that a “just dictatorship” would “grant political liberties to the virtuous alone.” Islamism is inevitably on the march, proclaims Sudan’s Hasan al-Turabi, because, much as communism used to be, “it’s a wave of history.” In fact, Qutb said all liberation movements were welcome to his revolution: “[t]he Islamic doctrine adopts all struggles of liberation in the world and supports them in every place.” This is familiar rhetoric.

Ineluctably, if will and power are the primary constituents of reality—as they are in this theology—one will, in a series of deductive steps, conclude to a totalitarian regime. There is no other way out of it. The curious thing is that it does not matter whether one’s view of reality as pure will has its origin in a deformed theology or in a totally secular ideology, such as Hegel’s or Hobbes’s; the political consequences are the same. As Fr. James Schall has shown, the notion of pure will as the basis of reality results in tyrannical rule.

IO: *Are there currently any reform movements that offer the hope that there may be a “Muslim Enlightenment” in the future?*

RR: There were and are such lights, but many have been extinguished or forced to shine outside of Islam in exile. Islam has a rich past in rational theology and philosophy.

However, this tradition has lost its traction within the Muslim world. There are those who are struggling to restore it. It is to these courageous people that my book is dedicated. They are, unfortunately, not a "movement." As one Islamist said, "liberal Islam has no cadres." And illiberal Islam has many.

The question is: Is there a constituency within the Muslim world that can elaborate a theology that allows for the restoration of reason, a *rehellenization* of Islam with Allah as logos? Can Islam answer the call from Samir Khalil Samir for "an Enlightenment, in other words, a revolution in thought that affirms the value of worldly reality in and of itself, detached from religion, though not in opposition to it"? It is idle to pretend that it would take less than a sea change for this to happen. If it does not, it is hard to envisage upon what basis Muslims could modernize or upon what grounds a dialogue with Islam could take place.

There are many Muslims who want to enter the modern world—with its modern science and modern political institutions—and also keep their faith. The past glories of Islamic civilization show that it was once able to progress. That progress was based upon a different set of ideas, antithetical to those of the Islamists. Unfortunately, the ideas gaining traction today are theirs—the Islamists'. That is the crisis. The answer that is sweeping the Islamic world today comes the al-Qaedaists, neo-Kharijites, and Hanbalites. This is basically a theological problem, and it requires a theological solution. What Islam desperately needs today is its own Thomas Aquinas.

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