



Twilight of Reason

Anti-rationalism in Islam and Europe

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<https://doi.org/10.61353/ma.0050445>

تاريخ استلام البحث ٢٠٢١/٣/٢٧ تاريخ قبول النشر ٢٠٢١/٥/٢ تاريخ النشر ٢٠٢١/٦/٣٠

Islam has perennially been the subject of criticism by Western writers, journalists and commentators. Islam, according to one argument, has always advocated irrational views and opposes reason unlike Christianity and Judaism. No doubt, the revival of Islamic ideology on the global world stage as represented in the Salafi-Jihadi trend has reinforced this stereotype. Islam, as preached by Salafi view, stands against reason, prohibits philosophy and condemns logic. To validate this argument, Islamists and Salafists invoke Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Ghazali and their likes, as a pretext for the construction of a narrative opposing rationality. This view, however, appears in the mass media to be synonymous with Islam itself. "



Introdection

The Triumph of Anti-rationalism in Islamic thought

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Any researcher, thus, has to face the principal question: Why did anti-rationalism emerge and develop in Islamic intellectual milieu after two centuries of good reception for rational thought? Anti-rationalism in Islam has been under research in both Arabic and English. Both the late Muhsin Mahdi and Muhammad Arkon raised the importance of studying rationalist thought in Islam, highlighting the need for exploring the historical factors that caused its decline. However, there is still gap to explore the relationship between religion and philosophical reason and to understand social and intellectual motivations that stand behind the emergence of irrational thought within Islamic societies. While the study of anti-rationalism literature





in itself can help understanding its theological function, it is still far from achieving a persuasive interpretation for its societal dimensions.

Rationalism and anti-rationalism were not merely intellectual trends advocated by scholars of thought. Hence, the study of these movements should not be limited to the study of its literature. In fact, the emergence of these contested theological and philosophical trends should be dealt with as an historical process, religious phenomena and above all political phases conditioned by its current circumstances.

Through historical investigation and comparative research, I seek to provide an answer for this question. Rather than limiting my investigation to the intellectual innovation itself, I aim to provide an alternative reading and explanation of the intellectual history of Islam. This includes examining the historical, social and intellectual factors that led to the emerging of the anti-rationalist trend among certain segments of the Muslim world. In addition, it is important to scrutinize the links, if any, between the growing of the anti-rationalist trend and a variety of economic, political and religious causes that strengthened its position. I undertake here a comparative approach; namely to explore irrationalism as a phenomenon in both Islam and Europe.

Europe, Christianity and rationalism

Muslims, however, have not always been inimical to rational thought. In fact, Greek rational thought and philosophy received great attention from both caliphs and scholars early in the ninth century.



Muslims philosophers had translated Greek philosophical texts and made their own commentaries. Greek philosophy and logic were part and parcel of Islamic revived culture. This era, however, came to its tragic fate with the consolidation of the Hanbali School backed by al-Mutawakil, the Abbasid Caliphate. The emergence of the Ash'arite creed around the third century after Hijra gave further impetus for the anti-rationalist trend in Islam. The full circle accomplished at the hands of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111). Anti-rationalist trend, therefore, was to dominate the Islamic world as theological thinking, and later jurisprudence in both Sunni and Shia domains controlled the arena. The Greek philosophy, thus, retreated and eventually eclipsed in the land of Islam.

The story of Greek philosophy in the land of Islam was an echo of the Christianity's stand in Europe. The Greeks invented both philosophy and tragedy. Probably, they never thought that their philosophy was to meet a destiny similar to their tragedies. As Rome became the home of Christianity during the fourth and fifth centuries, the Empire was looking 'to reorganize itself to deal with the debilitating stresses of continual invasion'. (Freeman: XV). Political authority and Christian religious scholars co-operated together to suppress the Greek rational thought, establishing instead a unified religious dogma and creed that suited the Roman Empire. Charles Freeman concludes: 'this reversal of traditional values became embedded in the Christian tradition and was, among other things, used to sustain the authority of the church. Intellectual self-confidence and curiosity, which lay at the heart of the Greek achievement, were recast



as the dreaded sin of pride. Faith and obedience to the institutional authority of the church were more highly rated than the use of reasoned thought. The inevitable result was intellectual stagnation'. (ibid: 328)

It is true, then, to claim that rational and philosophical thinking faced some difficult times in both Europe and Islam. Surprisingly enough, anti-rationalist views were echoed at the apex of the 'Enlightenment' in the Western world. One can trace a hostile attitude towards philosophy and rational thinking among great figures of the Western intellectual culture such as the seventeenth century philosopher Blaise Pascal, the German theologian and philosopher of the 18th century Johann Georg Hamann, (Hamann is considered by Isiah Berlin to be 'the pioneer of anti-rationalism), and most significantly the great French thinker Jean Jacque Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau, in particular deserves a special attention as he played pivotal role in the development of European intellectual history.

Rousseau, in fact, was a stranger among his French intellectuals in his principled espousal of irrationality in the age of Enlightenment. Rejecting philosophical reason is one of the main themes that run through Rousseau's writings (both his early works [*Discourses*] and his later writings). In his first work, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, Rousseau displayed a very negative attitude towards philosophy, the sciences, arts and the employment of reason.



Rousseau sought to prove that advancement of knowledge and progress have corrupted the nature of human beings as 'they stifle in men's breasts that sense of original liberty for which they seem to have been born, cause them to love their own slavery, and so make of them what is called a civilized people'. (p.28) Rousseau cites Greek history as an instructive example of the domestication of individuals to the detriment of their freedom.

Greece, Rousseau argued, was 'peopled by heroes... but the progress of the arts, the debasement of morals and the imposition of the Macedonian yoke followed in quick succession; from which time Greece, always learned, always seeking after pleasure, and always a slave, has experienced amid all its revolutions no more than a change of masters'. (pp.32-3). Rousseau concludes that 'we have physicists, geometricians, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, and painters in plenty; but we no longer have citizens'. (p.53).

In *'The Creed of a Savoyard Priest'*, which is regarded one of his late works; Rousseau unequivocally attacks philosophy and reason for deceiving people and seeking material self-interest rather than the truth. Rousseau states that he found all philosophers 'to be proud, assertive, and dogmatic... If you weigh their arguments, they all prove to be destructive; if you examine their doctrines, you find that each man is limited to his own. Listening to them was not the way for me to cast off my uncertainty'. (p.235) Rousseau comments further: 'where is the philosopher who would not deceive the whole human



race, without hesitation, for the sake of his own glory?'...'It is futile to try to establish virtue by reason alone'. (p.265).

More surprisingly, Rousseau attributed to the Arabs the spread of this philosophical thought into Europe. Rousseau thus not only blames Arabs but also condemns them for passing into Europe this 'corrupted knowledge'. Rousseau's attitude reminds us of those Muslim theologians who had blamed before the Greek for passing into Muslims their 'corrupted knowledge'. According to Muslim theologians, the Greek philosophical and logical sciences instilled into Muslims bad morals, weakness and the causes of split. There is no better example of this anti-philosophical trend than Ibn Taymiyyah.

Islam and the story of anti-rationalism

The story of anti-rationalism in Islam took a different phase. Ibn Taymiyyah, the Damascene Hanbali medieval jurist, was responsible for constructing the lasting prints onto theoretical arguments of anti-rationalism in the classical Islamic thought. Obviously, Ibn Taymiyyah showed a great disdain for rationalism, reason and philosophy. In his books, *Kitab al-Radd ala al-Mantiqiyyin* (Refutation of the Logicians), *Kitab al-Aql wa al-Naql* (Reason and Tradition) and many other works, Ibn Taymayah attacked philosophy and the employment of reason in theology. While he accepted *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), Ibn Taymayah rejected any sort of rational inquiry in theology, as religion requires faithful submission rather than freethinking. He, thus, refuted the validity of the famous hadiths (reported sayings and actions) attributed



to the Prophet Muhammad that favour reason. For Ibn Taymiyyah, this hadith was fabricated by Muslim theologians and philosophers who endeavoured to reconcile Greek philosophy with the Shari'a (Islamic law). Although Ibn Taymayah criticized Greek philosophers, he was an ardent enemy of Muslim philosophers who were regarded more of a threat to Islam than Jews and Christians. Qadir maintains that Ibn Taymayah was preoccupied with the failure of Aristotelian logic and the limitation of reason to prove its claims. This is to say that 'since deductive reasoning is simply an intellectual activity and has no relationship with actual physical reality, it can furnish no useful knowledge. Knowledge, in order to be useful, should be empirical and factual; in other words, inductive rather than deductive'. (Qadir; p.136)

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