

From: [Robert Reilly, author of *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: interview*](#)

5) Central to the triumph of the anti-rationalist strain in Islam was the conflict over the nature of the Qur'an, its status as either an uncreated, perfect book co-eternal with Allah--or a human manifestation of a divine truth that can be interpreted in the light of cultural factors. Can you tell the story of how these conflicting interpretations were defended, and point to the reasons why the anti-rationalist faction won out? Were the texts more on their side?

Yes, part of the dispute about free will concerned the nature of the Qur'an. Was it created in time, or has it coexisted with Allah in eternity? The Qur'an does not say either way. If it had, the dispute could not have arisen in the first place. Doctrinally, the traditionalist school held that the Qur'an was not created in time; the Qur'an has forever co-existed with Allah on a tablet in heaven in Arabic, as it exists today. God, in other words, speaks Arabic. The Qur'an is outside the scope of history; it is ahistorical. The time at which it was revealed and the culture into which it was received are irrelevant. Although coeternal with God, the Qur'an is somehow, like his attributes, distinct from God's essence. The profound problem with this position, which the Mu'tazilites pointed out - that this made the Qur'an another God, and those who held this position were therefore polytheists - was dismissed by Hadith collector al-Bukhari (d. 933), who said, "The Qur'an is the speech of God uncreated, the acts of men are created, and inquiry into the matter is heresy."

Nevertheless, to the utter dismay of the traditionalists, the Mu'tazilites did inquire into the matter, and this difference between them became the most bitter and costly of their disputes. The Mu'tazilites held that the Qur'an had to have been created; otherwise, the historical events it relates would have to have been predetermined. The doctrine of Khalq al-Qur'an, the createdness of the Qur'an, means that room would be left for free human choice. And why, asked the Mu'tazilites, would commandments exist before the creation of the human beings to whom they apply?

The Mu'tazilite teaching was made state doctrine by Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833), a great supporter of free will and Greek thought. However, three caliphs later, al-Mutawalkil (847-861) reversed the teaching and made it obligatory to hold that the Qur'an is eternal. Since then, this has become the general orthodox view. Unless it changes, Islamic reform is not going to get very far.

6) You point to the period of Mu'tazilite domination in Islam as a kind of golden age of philosophical reason, intellectual innovation, and openness--followed by a very long dark age of irrationalism, mysticism, intellectual rigidity and intolerance that

culminated in the 19th century with the backwardness and subjugation of the Islamic world. You suggest that the Mu'talizite precedent can be used today by Muslims who wish to "re-open" the Islamic mind. Can you point to Islamic thinkers today who are trying to do this? How are they faring?

There are some extraordinarily intelligent Muslim scholars who would like to see something like a neo-Mu'tazilite movement within Islam, a restoration of the primacy of reason so that they can re-open the doors to ijtiḥād and develop some kind of natural law foundation for humane, political, constitutional rule. They know that the issue of the status of the Qur'an has to be reopened in order to create some latitude in interpreting the Qur'an. They point to this precedent to show that Islam was once open to this position. In fact, Indonesian scholar Harun Nasution (1919-1998) was willing to wear the neo-Mu'tazilite label openly, despite the imprecation of heresy that it carried. He explicitly called for the recognition of natural law and opposed Ash'arite occasionalism and determinism as inimical to social, economic, and political progress. He insisted on man's free will and accountability. Reformist Tunisian-born thinker Latif Lakhdar calls for a revival of "Mu'atazila and philosophical thought that subjected the holy writings on which the religion is based to interpretation by the human mind." He said "it is absurd to believe the text and deny reality." In Egypt, Nasr Abu Zaid tried this. Unfortunately, he was declared an apostate and had to flee the country with his wife, whom he would have been forced to divorce (or rather she would have been forced to divorce him). Safely in exile, he said, "One important school of Koranic scholarship, Mutazilism, held 1,000 years ago that the Koran need not be interpreted literally, and even today Iranian scholars are surprisingly open to critical scholarship and interpretations." Unfortunately, Zaid died last year. So, the model is there but it is a dangerous one to use.

How are they faring? Unfortunately, as Bassim Tibi has warned, "Those intellectually significant Muslims who . . . still hope to apply reason to Islamic reform, had better do so in their Western exile, be it Paris or London or Washington. Their ideas are discussed in Scandinavia, but not in the Islamic world." Even in Europe, such Muslims have problems and have to confront the dangers of being labeled apostates. For several years in Germany, Tibi himself required armed body guards provided by the German state to protect him from assassination. Taj Hargey, a British imam, laments that "iconoclastic thinkers, liberals, and non-conformists who dare to challenge this self-assumed religious authority in Islam by presenting a rational or alternative interpretations of their faith are invariably branded as apostates, heretics, and non-believers."