

**Reason, Physicalism, and Islam**  
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**Table of Contents**

**INTRODUCTION .....3**  
**DEFORMIST THINKING.....5**  
**REASON AND RATIONALISM.....7**  
**MATERIALIST PHYSICALISM .....8**  
**FAITH-IN-REASON ..... 10**  
**ENDNOTES ..... 12**

## INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago it was common to meet the view expressed by Western intellectuals that: “*The oriental mind is quite different from ours. The oriental mind has no sense of critical rationalism, no sense of reality.*”<sup>1</sup> These are the words of E. F. Gautier, professor at the University of Algiers and a leading ideologue of colonialism who promoted historical untruths and racist arguments in order to justify and legitimate France’s empire in North Africa. Gautier went so far as to denigrate Ibn Khaldun, the founder of the science of history, by denying him any intellectual originality, since Arabs could not have any critical sense of history: “*This oriental had a sharp, critical mind. In other words, he had a western sense of history.*”<sup>2</sup>

At the present time such discredited untruths have been replaced by another false dichotomy intended to divide cultures and perpetuate the division between West and East: one that tells us that whereas the western world is disposed towards rational logical thought and materialism, the East is disposed towards intuitive forms of knowledge and spirituality. This misperception only recycles the 19th century dogma voiced by European historical criticism of religions that the Oriental or Semitic mind is incapable of the higher reaches of rational thinking exemplified by Hellenic and Western civilization. These views are rooted in the inversion of a deeper reality: that over the past several centuries the West cultivates the expansion of Knowledge-information severed from any encompassing metaphysical worldview, while the East cultivates Understanding and Being within the frame of permanent Values and transcendent truth.

But even this reality is changing beyond recognition in today’s globalizing era that universalizes Western cultural preferences and forces particular religious traditions to find legitimization from within the dominant Western framework of values and terms of reference. The fact that material and power exchanges in political and economic arenas are increasingly being displaced by symbolic exchanges—we mean **value-based relationships**—is of the utmost significance especially for religion. Consumerist globalizing forces seek to remove the ‘irrational’ influence of religion upon society by denying or marginalizing the relevance of the spiritual, by disrupting the solidarity of families and communities, and above all by eroding the hierarchical values of revealed knowledge systems. Certainly the supposed ‘rational / intuitive’ divide represents a significant element in this process of inverting values.

So the question of ***the actual role and place of reason and rationality within the religion of Islam*** becomes ever more pressing for our world today. This is true not merely because Muslim societies and governments are seeking to acquire the methodologies, technology and science of the West and its particular ‘culture-of-knowledge’, in a catch-up development race they can never win. Nor has this question simply become a ‘hot issue’ in the wake of the so-called “martyrdom operation” on September 11th 2001 sparking the ‘Global War on Terrorism’ and the projection of U.S. hegemony as the world’s rogue super-state, with Islam and Muslims portrayed as fanatic and irrational. But the urgency and seriousness of the question concerning ***the authentic Islamic understanding of reason*** now

assumes the critical mass of a vital central issue between Muslims themselves in the form of an internal dilemma or contradiction.

## DEFORMIST THINKING

The reason for this dilemma is that a strong trend rejecting critical methods of analysis, contextual thinking, and rational modes of discourse has spread within many Muslim societies today. This trend promotes an **anti-intellectual minimalism**, and is now often referred to by the label “Salafi” or “Salifist”—yet it may fairly be described as the ‘**Deformist**’ trend. [The venerable term *Salafi*><sup>3</sup> should properly be reserved to refer to Muslims advocating social and intellectual reform and renewal, not intellectual stagnation and reactionary imitation.] The Deformers’ response to the plight of modern Muslims is reactive and politicized, rather than rational and critical, and receives financial and ideological backing from several Muslim regimes. They privilege doctrinal conformity and uniformity of thought, for their worldview and way of speaking and thinking is rooted in a very narrowly defined traditionalist past. They are uncompromising in condemning the diversity of views, broad range of thinking and differing levels of rational discourse found in the wide variety of intellectual Islamic disciplines cultivated in the past.

The intent of the Deformists is to monopolize and control the thinking of Muslims through a dogmatic tyranny that is in reality a serious abuse of authority. The single most distinctive feature of this mindset is their ignorance of the essential Islamic insight taught by the Qur’a>n concerning the **hierarchical scale of knowledge** that varies in degree of certainty and grasp of truth. Corresponding with this vertical scale of knowledge is the **hierarchy of human knowers** differentiated by their increasing capacity of attainment and intensity of understanding.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the Deformists actively work to undermine the legitimate authority of Islam’s intellectual heritage and to trivialize its potential to provide guidance for thoughtful Muslims. They impoverish thinking Muslims by stripping them of a powerful weapon for combating the inverted values of secular materialism and pervasive effects of globalizing culture.

It is as if these intellectual minimalists were telling us: *The Muslim mind has no need of critical rationalism!* This internal deformation across a broad range of Muslim societies is the most important factor, coupled with the passivity and heedlessness of most Muslims, for forcing the issue of **the concept and the role of reason and rationality within Islam** onto the forefront of Muslim concerns. Indeed, the question of Islam and rationality has the greatest significance for re-constructing and reforming Islamic civilization in order to ensure its future relevance and viability as a world force for peace, stability and material and spiritual growth. But here we face a subtle and often overlooked point: Islamic teachings and thinkers conceived of ‘rationality’ in ways that vary from the present western conception, employing modes of conceptualization and discourse that at times depart radically from those now accepted by the West. The great irony is that almost all Muslims today have forgotten this and unconsciously adopt the prevailing western conception of ‘reason’ as their conceptual default or format, oblivious of their own legacy and teachings on this central feature of human existence.

There are many causes for this failure to cultivate and nourish the critical traditions of Islamic rationality among today's political and religious elites within Muslim societies, some internal and others external. One important factor involves the unthinking reception of types of Islamic discourse among a semi-educated constituency of Muslims heedless of the abuse of Islamic authority operated by religious or educational leaders uprooted from any recognizable historical intellectual tradition. More pervasive in Muslim popular culture is the manifestation and acceptance of the stifling authoritarian Deformist discourse that seeks to enforce a type of narrow 'intellectual despotism' and consciously attempts to strangle any recourse to the intellectual legacy of Islamic rationalist disciplines.

Furthermore, the fragile and still marginalized attempts among certain circles and isolated efforts by individuals to promote a critical understanding facilitating an authentic re-appropriation and transformation of Islam's legacy of faith-rationality and rational spirituality, still awaits the achievement of a critical mass with enough leverage to affect the popular culture of Muslim societies in all their varieties of social, educational, economic and political conditions. Nor can such attempts be said to enjoy truly effective financial and institutional support from the governments of leading Muslim states, the few existing exceptions only serving to prove the rule.<sup>5</sup> More often than not, nurturing these efforts institutionally falls prey to co-optation by state powers and cliques (the paymasters), while they also tend to suffer deflection towards the prevailing cultural limitations of specific social identities or parochial ethnic preferences having a tenuous connection with Islam. Nevertheless, there are some promising signs with the increasing appearance of intellectual projects among Muslim intellectuals in the western diaspora, including recent journals such as *Islam and Science* in Canada, and *Transcendent Philosophy* in the UK.

## REASON AND RATIONALISM

There are several views on how to understand or define ‘reason’ and ‘rationalism’. In the ancient and medieval worlds whether in Asia or Europe, ‘reason’ was often defined in practical terms as an innate trait or faculty of the person; or in a more theoretical vein as a non-spatial ‘substance’ belonging to the immaterial realm of existence, while at the same time forming part of the human **soul** with the capacity for perceiving knowledge and exercising cognition. As *an avenue for knowledge and a cognitive function*, reason involves the distinction between innate ideas or conceptions (either as ‘intuition’, or as inborn direct necessary knowledge), and that of acquired or demonstrative knowledge—including both sensory experience, revealed guidance, as well as formal rational procedures for ascertaining truth. Furthermore, reason was always intimately linked with the affective and intentional reality of ethical action at the level of conscience and will; and it was deemed central to self-awareness, personhood, and consciousness.

In contemporary understanding ‘reason’ is most often defined as a ‘**mental faculty**’, namely a faculty of the human ‘mind’ having a distinct **capacity for knowledge**—in contrast to sense experience. This ‘mental faculty’ conception of reason is at the root of the opposition between Rationalism and Empiricism, since the latter gives priority to sensory data. ‘Science’ proceeds from empirical observation and measurement, while its truth claims are generally seen to adhere to a canon of formal rational procedures yielding probability in most cases. Current notions of reason and mind almost always embrace a **physicalistic ‘brain’ conception**,<sup>6</sup> as in the science of cognitive psychology based on empirical bio-genetic and neurophysiological studies. One major trend in current cognitive psychology stresses the biological basis of cognition by studying the neurophysiology of meaning-perception in knowing beings.<sup>7</sup>

It needs to be emphasized that these current notions of reason derive from the period of the Enlightenment and from Continental Rationalism, and they reflect a confidence in the unbridled powers of the human intellect (viewed in terms of ‘brain-mind’) as a source of knowledge. Intellect was then conceived of in opposition to ‘faith’ and uncritical acceptance of traditional revealed authority, as well as to superstition and magic. The Eighteenth-century European thinkers of the Enlightenment opposed the traditional Christianity of the institutionalized Church by rejecting ‘non-rational’ factors of traditional spiritual authority and faith, and they viewed reason as contrasted with ‘feeling’ or ‘emotion’. Modern notions of reason and of rationalism arose out of this spirit of anti-supernaturalism, being an anti-religious and anti-clerical movement of utilitarian outlook stressing historical and scientific arguments against theism. Thus, the notion of ‘**soul**’ is now considered problematic due to its spiritualistic connotations, and the term ‘**mind**’ has replaced ‘\soul’ in current western discourse. Presently the term ‘rationalism’ appears on the way to being replaced by ‘humanism’; while the term ‘irrational’ conveys a (negative) connotation of ‘spiritual’ or ‘supernatural’ being linked to transcendent Values.

## MATERIALIST PHYSICALISM

The success of secular Western culture and worldview over the revealed or faith-based worldview was facilitated by the emphasis on individuality, personality, and the power of the self. The conventional wisdom still prevails that: “It is the moment of **secularity**, freedom from religious/ecclesiastical tutelage, that separates the Modern Period, especially its science and philosophy, from the Middle Ages.”<sup>8</sup> The preponderant sway of empirical science over modern thought results in neurobiology and psychophysiology studying intelligence at the level of neural chemistry, where mental and behavioral phenomena are understood merely as manifestations of *physical* processes. Contemporary discussions on consciousness and the philosophy of mind also reflect this conceptual drift toward a (monist) brain conception, where ‘mind’ substitutes for the ‘soul’ concept of the past. ‘Mind’ is frequently allied with brain functions and given a physical locus, or alternatively it is denied any spatial locale and simply reduced to “**mental events**”.<sup>9</sup>

However, this dominant biological-materialist or physicalistic paradigm is now increasingly being perceived as conceptually inadequate, with rational empirical methods proving to be unreliable and insufficient in providing a theoretically adequate conception of mind or intelligence. In reviewing the pitfalls of current thinking on the ‘mind-body problem’, Colin McGinn concludes: “But we have not explained how a physical organ of the body, namely the brain, could be the basis of consciousness—how a physical object can come to have an inner aspect.”<sup>10</sup> Sergio Moravia observes, “They have spoken of ‘mind’ and ‘mental’—and the unsettling, *real* question was whether one may admit a human dimension which is autonomous and irreducible in relation to the bodily.” And he goes on to ask: “Can one posit something which *exists*, and yet at the same time is *non-physical*? ... Do the rejection of the ‘soul’ and the achievements attained by the bio- and neurosciences oblige us to hold that man is *nothing but body*?”<sup>11</sup> Thinkers are thus being forced into the fields of epistemology, ontology and psychoanthropology in search of answers to such questions. Recently there have appeared a number of creative but tentative attempts to re-conceptualize notions of ‘reason’ and ‘intelligence’ along anti-mentalistic or ‘personological’ lines,<sup>12</sup> several drawing on the experience and practice of older non-Western traditions or even popular ‘folk’ conceptions.<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary materialism is in essence a program of reduction, assimilation, and annexation, which is being applied to meet the felt need to construct a *unitary* image of the world (ie. a *meta*-physics)—and to construct it under the cover of ‘Science’. For the ‘human’ is the “last frontier” of a physicalistically constituted knowledge, being the last part of reality which must be shown to be reducible to empirical observations and verifiable explanations of a materialist nature, resulting in the ‘scientific theory’ of man—identified with the neurophysiological interpretation of the human being. Having banished the transcendent metaphysic of the spiritual and reduced it to the ‘irrational’, science finds itself searching for a substitute to plug the hole in its knowledge, finding it in a naturalist or physicalistic materialism. As Hilary Putnam points out: “the appeal of



materialism lies precisely in this, in its claim to be *natural* metaphysics, metaphysics within the bounds of science.” In this manner, materialism “has replaced positivism and pragmatism as the dominant contemporary form of scientism”, which he portrays as being “one of the most dangerous contemporary intellectual tendencies.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, a chief element of pre-modern scientific thinking was the lack of clear distinction between the sciences and philosophy, thus making the sciences dependent upon philosophy. This is true at least of the physical sciences, cosmology, and of psychology, which were treated under the category of *t}abi>’iyya>t* ‘Physics’ in Islamic philosophy. Modern conceptions of scientific knowledge separate ‘science’ from any philosophical rationalist system, freeing the scientific method of empirical investigation and deduction from the worldview of a philosophic metaphysic. ‘Scientism’ attempts to fill this void by collapsing immaterial dimensions of human experience into the physical.

## FAITH-IN-REASON

In contrast, classical Islamic notions of ‘intelligence’ or ‘reason’ embraced the faith-induced dimension of knowledge yielding conviction and moral-volition in the operation of human intelligence, being intimately joined with its **cognitive** or perceiving-knowing dimension. This ‘**practical**’ ethico-religious dimension of reason has a close connection with ethical endeavor and moral-volition, namely the faculty of **conation**. Ethics is the domain of Practical Reason or ‘prudential-mind’ (*‘aql amali>* ), involving the faculty or power of **conation** (volition, will-power): the impulse or striving to change one’s behavior and act in accordance with the directives of both inner conscience and outer guidance or divinely revealed imperatives. The centrality of ‘intelligence-reason’ (*al-‘aql* ) for Islamic Ethics (*akhla>q*) unfolds out of the fundamental insight that the human volitional impulse arises within us prompted by our own understanding, and directed by the reception of divine guidance from without. As one of its most basic functions, ‘intelligence-reason’ energizes the efficacy of ‘**conscience**’, thereby possessing a **conative** or exertive force since without the native intelligence created in us by God no ethical response is possible. This crucial insight is ultimately responsible for the great emphasis placed on **reason** as the condition for ‘moral obligation’ (*takli>f* ) among the Mu‘tazili> and Ash‘ari> theologians.

Even more significantly, the human reception of divine guidance mediated by revelation depends ultimately upon the efficacy and integrity of our reasoning-principle or intelligence. Without their **divine provision of reason**, humans would be incapable of comprehending and properly responding to God’s guidance. And the **more abundant is an individual’s native endowment of reason**, then the greater is the possibility for the individual to attain a larger magnitude of understanding and thereby realize a **higher level of response**. The unfolding of the manifold dimensions of Islamic meditations on the role of reason in religious and spiritual thought and experience flow in one way or another from this master idea.

This practical ethico-religious dimension was harmoniously integrated in the Muslim mind with the ‘**theoretical**’ domain of reason, where the employment of a variety of cogitative processes of mentation and both informal and formal reasoning techniques were normatively accepted as valid and necessary methods of attaining true knowledge (whether certain or probable) as well as for ascertaining proper doctrinal conviction, upright conduct and authoritative binding practice. The prevailing normative view in Islamic civilization was always that of **faith-in-reason**, while also simultaneously recognizing the **limits-of-reason**. Significantly, the very term for ‘reason-intelligence’ in Arabic, *al-‘aql*, has at the core of its basic meaning the practical idea of ‘restraining’ and ‘binding’—of holding one’s self back from blameworthy conduct—being an interior self-imposed limit.

The widespread misconception that the conflict between ‘Reason and Revelation’ or between Science and Faith-based traditional authority experienced by Western-European and the subsequent contemporary Western civilization, must also have been experienced within the preceding Islamic civilization, should be laid to rest.<sup>15</sup> (We may add that the very same

misconception is behind Western puzzlement over why Muslims have not become more secularized.) This unwarranted assumption has in the past led to patently wrong assessments of Muslim thought and experience, and continues to foster genuine misunderstanding concerning the real nature of Islamic religious and intellectual traditions. This miscomprehension arose partly from the Euro-centric worldview of Western imperialism inherited by post-colonial globalizing culture, and partly out of entrenched ignorance and explicit hostility.

It is no exaggeration to assert that the most significant force today consciously opposing the all-pervading flow of secular values diffused by materialist global culture, now mediated in particular by the crescendo of United States' military and mercantile hegemony, is that of Islam. Three recent United States-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ongoing 'Global War on Terrorism' amply testify to this. However, this ignorance is not unique to Westerners, for the majority of Muslims today are woefully heedless of the depth and scope of authentic Islamic teachings on the hierarchical scale and authoritative validity of reason. It is imperative that thinking Muslims work to reclaim their precious legacy of rational and spiritual experience and teachings, and express it in conceptually adequate language capable of meeting the demands of their contemporary social realities.

## ENDNOTES

- 1- E. F. Gautier, *Le Passé de l'Afrique du Nord* (Paris, 1937) p.9.
- 2- Ibid, 24; and see 96: "He has a western conception of history. ... Ibn Khaldun's stay in Andalusia brought a breath of our Renaissance into his oriental mind." For an incisive critique of Gautier's agenda, see Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World*, trans. David Macey (London, Verso, 1984) p.76f.
- 3- *Salafi* generally designates Muslims who take the 'righteous forebears' (*al-salaf al-s}a>lih*)—the first-generations of the Prophet Muh}ammad S}, his Companions and their Successors—to be the best model for practice and guidance. Beginning in the late 19th century, a number of loosely related "*Salafi*" reformist movements arose in the Islamic world in response to the challenges of modernity. Many of their intellectual leaders (Muh}ammad Abduh, Rashi>d Rid}a>) urged Muslims to adopt a wider scope of rationality, particularly by reforming traditional religious education, encouraging them to close the technological and scientific gap with Western European powers.
- 4- For more details, see our article "Jihad Akal" in *Utusan Malaysia* for 27th July 2003.
- 5- These include institutions and organizations receiving government support in countries such as Malaysia, Jordan, and Iran. To the best of our knowledge, there is no informed assessment of current efforts of this kind among Muslim societies worldwide; this would have to include non-governmental religious and civic initiatives as well, where the situation is not as bleak.
- 6- Initiated in particular by the work of Herbert Feigl, "The 'Mental' and the 'Physical'", in Feigl, M. Scriven & G. Maxwell (eds.), 'Concepts, Theories, and the Mind-Body Problem', *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* II p.1–540, on 370–497; new ed. as *The 'Mental' and the 'Physical'* (Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 1967). See also Edgar Wilson, *The Mental as Physical* (London, Routledge, 1979).
- 7- As an instructive example of the materialist physicalistic approach, see Humberto R. Maturana & Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition, the Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht/Boston/London, D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1980). Although the authors state that "living systems are cognitive systems, and **Living** as a process is a process of cognition" (p.13), this living nervous-system based approach to 'knowing' does not take us much beyond Aristotle's entelechial view of the soul as merely an organic by-product of the living organism, which led him to deny the survival of soul after the decease of the body. Further, see our remarks below on the philosophy of 'mind'.
- 8- Heinz Heimsoeth, *The Six Great Themes of Western Metaphysics and the End of the Middle Ages*, translated R.J. Betanzos (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1994; German original published 1922) p.31. Heimsoeth's statement is merely part of his characterization of the conventional view concerning the transition to modernity that he intended to revise. His work sought to undermine the validity of trying to "distinguish modern philosophy, as purely secular and directed toward nature and natural existence, from medieval philosophy, which always inquired about ultimate supernatural things, about God, immortality, and the soul. Separating philosophy as autonomous science and secular wisdom from theology is absolutely not the same thing as separating their contents from the sources and the great questions of religious life" (ibid, 32).
- 9- See for example Mortimer J. Adler, *Intellect: Mind Over Matter* (New York, Macmillan, 1990); Gregory McCulloch, *The Mind and Its World* (London, Routledge, 1995); and the work of H. Feigl cited above.
- 10- Colin McGinn, *The Character of Mind*, (2nd ed., New York, Oxford University Press, 1997) 39.
- 11- Sergio Moravia, *The Enigma of the Mind: The Mind-Body Problem in Contemporary Thought*, trans. S. Staton (Cambridge University Press, 1995; 1st pub. Rome 1986) 4–5. We should recall that in (dualist) Cartesian terms the 'mind' is purely spiritual and radically non-spatial as a conscious immaterial substance; this was basically

the preferred definition of the intellect among Muslim philosophers and the later theologians after al-Ghazali (*al-‘aqlu jawharun basiṭun qa’im bi-naḥsihi*).

12- See the informative overview of the main historical-theoretical tendencies by S. Moravia, *The Enigma of the Mind*.

13- As a sampling, we should mention foremost the studies by Robert J. Sternberg rethinking the nature of intelligence from philosophical, folk, and psychodevelopmental perspectives; eg. Sternberg’s *Beyond IQ: a triarchic theory of human intelligence* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1985); & the volume edited by Sternberg, *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins and Development* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). Also of interest are current revisionist theories about ‘multiple intelligences’ as developed especially by Howard Gardner, along with Daniel Goleman and others, and now being applied in the educational and management fields; eg. H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind*, 10th ed. (New York, Basic Books, 1993); & his *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York, Basic Books, 1999).

14- Hilary Putnam, “Why There Isn’t a Ready-made World”, *Synthese* 51 (1982) 141–167, on 146–7.

15- See for example the brief study by a leading 20th century Occidental student of Islam, Arthur J. Arberry’s *Revelation and Reason in Islam* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1957; rpr. 1965).