

Ahl al-Ray vs. Ahl al-Hadith: Destructive Consequences of the Conflict Between Rationalist and Traditionist Schools in the Muslim World*

Prof. Dr. Mustafa Acar

Economist, Rector of Aksaray University

Abstract:

It is a generally observed phenomenon that the liberal values such as freedom, plurality, multiculturalism, openness, limited government, and free market economy are not so welcomed in the Muslim world today. To put it differently, many Muslim intellectuals as well as political authorities and the laymen are either indifferent or skeptical, or even hostile towards the liberal democratic values. One would wonder why? Why is the Muslim world hesitant or skeptical about these values? What would be the historical, social and intellectual causes of this observation, if any? In light of this, this paper argues that the answer is closely related with the fact that the School of Tradition won the fight against the School of Reason back in the Medieval Ages. This intellectual-philosophical conflict between these two major schools combined with certain geo-political reasons had important, destructive consequences in the Muslim world. In this regard, intellectual, cultural, economic and political consequences of the conflict between Rationalist and Traditionist schools cannot be underestimated.

In essence, the fight was between two mindsets, two different perspectives, or mentalities which could be named as *Ahl al-Ray* and *Ahl al-Hadith*, or in modern day terminology, between Rationalists and Traditionists.

Major themes of the conflict included: whether Qur'an is "created" or not, whether Sunnah (Tradition, sayings of the Prophet) is an alternative source of Shariah (Islamic law), whether human beings create their actions, whether we have "free will" or not, whether our actions are subject to predestination, whether reason should dominate the text, or whether analogical reasoning should precede in making judgments or not. In many cases these disputes were not pure intellectual-philosophical or religious disputes: they had social-political roots as well as implications. Major figures in this dispute are Mutazilites, Murcia, Wahhabis, Abu Hanifa, Al-Shafi, Ahmad b. Hanbal, Al-Ash'ari, Al-Maturidi, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd to name just a few.

With regard to consequences, just to cut it short, traditionist school won the dispute, their arguments were adopted or supported by the then political authorities. Philosophy and reason, the idea of plurality lost their reputation in the society. Weak or unsound hadith were taken to be guides in the social life rather than *reasoned opinion*, logic and analogy. Even the followers of rationalist Hanefi school became adherents or passive followers of traditionists. This explains why the Muslim world is hesitant or skeptical about such liberal values as freedom, plurality, openness, democracy, and free market economy.

Why is this discussion important? It is important because the Muslim world is at the cross-roads in the aftermath of the post Cold War era and global economic crisis of 2008-09. Many Muslim countries are looking for new political and economic systems to follow. At this point it is extremely important to discuss whether Islam is inherently in conflict with freedom and plurality. We have to understand first why the Muslim world distanced itself with the liberal values and then we can discuss developing a whole new path or system based on freedom, openness and democracy. Once we explore the historical roots of the liberal values in the Muslim world, then we can offer alternative economic and political systems to the policy-makers and authorities. The key to open this path is to understand that freedom and other liberal values are not peculiar to, or invented solely by the West. These are universal values: supporters of these values are not only the Western scholars; many Muslim scholars back in the history have defended these values as well. A revival of Mutazilite or school of reason would change the whole outlook in the Muslim world.

Key words:

Islam, Mutazilites, Ahl al-Ray, Ahl al-Hadith, school of reason, school of tradition, Muslim world, freedom.

1. Introduction

It is a generally observed phenomenon that the liberal values such as freedom, plurality, multiculturalism, openness, limited government, and free market economy are not so welcomed in the Muslim world today. To put it differently, many Muslim intellectuals as well as political authorities and the laymen are either indifferent or skeptical or even hostile towards the liberal democratic values. One would wonder why? Why is the Muslim world hesitant or skeptical about these values? What would be the historical, social and intellectual causes of this observation, if any?

In light of this vital question, this paper argues that the answer is closely related with the fact that the school of Tradition won the fight against the school of Reason back in the Medieval Ages. This intellectual-philosophical conflict between these two major schools combined with certain geo-political reasons had important, destructive consequences in the Muslim world. In this regard, intellectual, cultural, economic and political consequences of the conflict between Rationalist and Traditionist schools cannot be underestimated.

In essence, the fight was between two mindsets, two different perspectives, or mentalities which could be named as *Ahl al-Rey* and *Ahl al-Hadith*, or in modern day terminology, between Rationalists and Traditionists. An alternative naming would be Innovationists and Conservatives.

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The key to open this path is to understand that freedom and other liberal values are not peculiar to, or invented solely by the West. These are universal values: supporters of these values are not only the Western scholars; many Muslim scholars back in the history have defended these values as well. A revival of Mutazilite or school of reason would change the whole outlook in the Muslim world.

2. Main Schools of Thought in the Muslim World

"There is nothing new under the sky" the saying goes. The variety of the schools of thought in the Muslim world is quite similar to what we observe in the Western thought. What comes first? Text or reason? Narrated information or reasoned opinion? Can human reasoning be a base for our judgments? Can we interpret the Holy Scripture, or should we take it literally? How should we understand the religion and religious texts? What are the reliable sources of knowledge? How do we know the truth? Who is a good Muslim? Along the lines based on the answers to these questions, the four major Islamic schools of thought can be categorized as follows (Uludağ, 2012):

a. Salafiyyah (Dogmatism)

According to Salafi school, naql (narration) precedes aql (reason). Narrated knowledge or text takes priority over the knowledge based on logic and reason. If there is a contradiction between reason and text, reason should always be subject to the text. Literal meaning of the word should be taken as base; no te'vil (interpretation) is allowed. Qur'anic expressions such as "God sat on Arsh (Divine Throne) (Qur'an, 10/3), "God's hand is above their hands" (Qur'an 48/10) should be taken literally, as is, no interpretation whatsoever. Any kind of innovative attitude is rejected and every new thing (innovation) is regarded as "bid'ah" (some sort of heresy) and cursed. Major figures of Salafi school include Ibn Kuteybe (d. 884), Imam Shafi, Imam Malik, Ahmed b. Hanbel, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), Ibn Kayyim Cevziye (d. 1350), Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), Muhammad b. Abdul Vahhab (d. 1792), Mawdudi (d. 1979), Seyyid Kutb (d. 1966).

b. Kelamiyyah (Rationalism)

According to Kelam, the rationalist school, reason precedes text when it comes to choose between aql vs. naql, or reason vs. narration. Any sound argument should be based on logic and reason. If there is a contradiction between what reason and text say, reason should take priority. Te'vil (interpretation) of the religious text is allowed and encouraged. Reasoned opinion (ray) should be used as a source of generating knowledge and judgment when there is not an open Qur'anic verse to resolve a problem. If one says "I have 1001 proof for the existence of God," it is found exciting and worth listening. Qur'anic expressions such as "God sat on Arsh (Divine Throne) (Qur'an, 10/3), "God's hand is above their hands" (Qur'an 48/10) should not be taken literally, interpretation is necessary. They can be interpreted as God's hegemony, divine power, etc. Major figures include el-Esh'ari (d. 941), Maturidi¹ (d. 944), Vasil b. Ata (d. 748), Cuveyni (d. 1085), Allâf (d. 850), Nâzzam (d. 845), Câhız (869), Zemahsheri (d. 1144), Taftazâni (d. 1390), Cürcâni (d. 1413).

c. Sufiyyah (Mysticism)

Intuition, inspiration, discovery or spiritual journey are key words for the Sûfi school. Reason and text should be subject to intuition. What is important is the intuitive knowledge, what your heart says, the rest are details in a sense. Literalism is rejected. Moral purification is regarded as important. Abstract, subjective, spiritual journey one can take through music, memorization, dreams and intuition is more important than intellectual, philosophical or rational discussion. If one says "I have 1001 proof for the existence of God," it is found ridiculous and reacted as "Oh yeah, you must have 1001 doubts then." Major figures include Cuneyd-i Bagdadi (d. 911), M. Ibn Arabi (d. 1239), A. Geylani (d. 1166), J. Rûmi (d. 1273), Naqshibendi (d. 1389), Imam-ı Rabbani (d. 1624).

d. Felasifah (Philosophy)

Pure reason. Inspired by the Greek Philosophy and great ancient philosophers such as Aritotle, Socrates, and Plato. Pure reason can discover the truth even if there is no revelation or prophets. Reason, intellect, syllogism and intellectual endeavor is at the center of understanding the reality and knowledge generation. Major figures include el-Kindi (d. 873), Farabi (d. 950), Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037), Ibn Rushd (Averros, d. 1198), Ibn Khaldun (d. 1374).

3. Reason versus Tradition, Ray versus Hadith

The emergence of those four major schools of thought was not of course instant; it took hundreds of years along the history of the Muslim societies. On the road, political disputes and the power struggle played a major role in shaping these theoretical-intellectual discussions.

¹ See Düzgün (2011) for a detailed discussion on Maturidi and his contribution to Islamic thought.

In this regard, the first major fight and internal division in the Muslim society erupted during the 4th Caliph Ali, a cousin and the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).² The seeming source of the conflict was to punish the assassins of the 3rd Caliph Othman. But the real reason was power struggle, who was going to be the next ruler. Eventually a war was erupted between the supporters of Ali and Muawiyah (Governor of Damascus then). During the long-lasting fight a 3rd group called “Kharijiyyah” (outers, outsiders) emerged, arguing that both sides were wrong in this fight, so neither of them should be recognized as the Caliph, both sides should repent, otherwise be killed.³

In the following years a number of ideological-religious disputes had emerged out of this originally political conflict. In other words, many of the intellectual, theoretical, philosophical, ideological or religious disputes have some sort of political roots. For the sake of our discussion, as far as freedom, free will, predestination and interpretation of the Holy Scripture are concerned, one can talk about four major schools, which can be consolidated into two in a broad sense. These schools are summarized below in terms of the main figures and arguments (Eliacıık, 2001: 125-365).

- a. School of Free Will
 - i. Main Figures: Muhammad b. Hanefiyye (son of Ali, the 4th Caliph), Amr el-Maksus, Mabad el-Cuheni, Gaylan ed-Dimeshki, Ca’d b. Dirhem, Hasan el-Basri, Cehm b. Saffan
 - ii. Main Arguments : Human will is free. There is no pre-ordained destiny. Human beings prepare their own destiny as they are in charge of their own actions.

- b. School of Tawheed and Justice: Mutezila⁴
 - i. Main Figures: Vasil b. Ata, Amr b. Ubeyd, Ebu’l Huzeyl Allaf, Nazzam, Abbad, Mu’temir, Cahız, Cübbai, Kadı Abdülcebbar, Zemaşeri, Maturidi.
 - ii. Main Arguments: Man creates his own actions. There is no pre-determined destiny. Qur’an is created. Only God’s being is eternal, all other attributes are created later.

- c. School of Reason: Ahl-el Ray
 - i. Main Figures: Alkame b. Kays, Mesruk b. el-Ecda, Kadı Shureyh, Ibrahim en-Nehai, Hammad b. Ebu Suleyman, Ebu Hanifah, Ebu Yusuf, Ebu Zahra.
 - ii. Main Arguments: Reason, or reasoned opinion is an important source of judgment. Weak hadith should not be used as a base for judgment. After Qur’an and Sunnah, the following can also be used for generating judgment: qiyas (syllogism), istishan, istishab.

- d. School of Tradition: Ahl-el Hadith
 - i. Main Figures: Ahmad b. Hanbal, Imam Malik, Imam el-Shafi
 - ii. Main Arguments: Hadith is as important and authoritative as the Qur’an, reason and individual opinion should not be taken as a source of judgment. “Of all things, the worst is innovation. Every new thing in religion is an innovation (bid’ah); every innovation is a deviation; every deviation leads to Hellfire.”⁵

² Pbih: Peace be upon him, a greeting Muslims use when the Prophet is mentioned.

³ As a matter of fact, Kharijiyyah which erupted as a result of a political conflict became the pioneer of the radical-Salafi movements of the later periods characterized by intolerance, narrow-mindedness and violence.

⁴ A thorough discussion on Mutezila school can be found in Ammara (1998). Cabiri (1997a) is also a good source about the Muslim-Arab thinking in the formation period.

⁵ A good account and fruitful discussion on “Sunna vs. Reason” or “Ray vs. Hadith” can be found in Akyol (2011), especially chapters 3 and 4, the Medieval War of Ideas (pp. 80-116). See also Koçyiğit (1988), for a detailed discussion on the debates between Scholars of Hadith and Kalam.

4. Intellectual Conflicts, Political Implications

There were many areas of debates or line of discussions among the scholars. Almost of these debates were either originated from or had political implications. We are going to refer to three of these debates below: qadar vs. free will, can faith be subject to increase or decrease, whether Qur'an is created or not.

4.1. Qadar vs. Free Will:

Justification of oppressive policies of Umayyad Dynasty

One line of debate was Qadar (fate) vs. free will. One group called Jabriyyah (Fatalists) argued that what we do is imposed upon us by God. In other words, our fate is pre-ordained, pre-written, so that there is no way to escape from it. The other group called Qadariyyah (supporters of the Free Will) there is no pre-ordained, inescapable fate; human beings can determine their actions by their own free will. In some extreme versions of this line of thought (Mu'tazilah) argued that "men create his own actions." As Mabad el-Cuheni put it, there is no pre-ordained destiny; events can be known as they happen (Eliacik, 2001: 125).

There are two important implications of this debate. The first one is about the responsibility. Who is responsible for what is happening? Men or God? If God determines everything before they happen, then we cannot be responsible for our deeds since "it is our fate, written on our forehead." On the other hand, if men can create his own actions, then he is responsible for them.

The second implication is a political one: The Umayyad Dynasty loved this argument, using it as a justification of their ruling. They argued that what was happening then was "our qadar," ordained by God. If God had not wanted all what has happened, they would not have happened at all. So, people were expected to take it as a preordained fate and simply obey!

4.2. Can Faith Be Subject to Increase and Decrease?

Whether new Muslim tribes should be taxed or not?

One line of thought argued that there is no increase or decrease in faith (iman: believe in God and the Hereafter). Faith either exists or does not exist; it does not increase or decrease. A man can be either Believer (Mu'min) or Unbeliever (Kafir); one cannot talk about something as "half-believer." The other line, on the other hand, thought the opposite way: faith can increase or decrease, hence somebody may be "full believer" or "half believer."

An interesting political implication of the second line of argument was related with the taxation of newly converted Muslim tribes. In Islamic jurisprudence then, Muslims did not have to pay taxes (they paid Zakat, religious charity); but non-Muslim minorities living in the society did have to pay taxes in exchange for the security provided by the Muslim authority. When the political authority accepted the line of thought where faith can increase or decrease, then it became possible to tax the new converts because their faith was not strong enough yet! This is another example where a seemingly intellectual-ideological-religious debate is closely related with political disputes.

4.3. Is Qur'an "created"?

Can we interpret Qur'an?

One line of thought argued that "Qur'an is not created," it was eternal, existed with God since the beginning. The other line, on the other hand, argued that Qur'an was created; it was not eternal, created by God at a certain point in time. This debate has also very important implications.

Once you adopt the idea of "uncreated, eternal Qur'an," it immediately became "untouchable," not open to interpretation (ta'vil) by the human beings. It was eternal, existed with God since the eternal

beginning, every single word of it should also be eternal, not open to debate, dispute, re-read or re-interpretation in a particular historical-social context. As would be expected, a strong literalism, word-by-word-translation and accepting the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an "as is" (bila keyf; without asking how?) followed from this way of thinking.

On the other hand, if you adopt the second line of thought, the idea of a "created Qur'an," then it became permissible to re-read and re-interpret it in a particular context. This way of thinking was open to pluralism, a variety of different meaning, understanding and interpretation.

Ebu Hanifah and his followers (ahl-el Ray) believed that Qur'an was created, whereas Ibn Hanbal and his followers (ahl-el Hadith) were strongly against this idea, believing that Qur'an was uncreated, hence not open to interpretation.

4.4. Social-Cultural Base of the confrontation: Arabs vs. non-Arabs

It is interesting to note that vast majority of the **Traditionists** had the following characteristics: were Arab, aristocrat, rural, agrarian, nomad, agriculture. On the contrary, majority of the **Reasonists** or **Innovationists** had the following social and cultural base: non-Arab, Mawali (immigrants, captives, slaves, Persian, Central Asian, urban, trader, artisan).

The great Muslim philosopher Ibn Khaldun (2013) argued that the geography, climatic conditions and way of subsistence has a determining power on one's living style and way of thinking. Obviously these conditions are not the same in rural and urban areas. The rural areas are characterized by harsh natural conditions, simple life, nomadic or agrarian way of life. The life in rural areas are relatively simple, living conditions are more difficult with no or little public services and less variety of livelihood possibilities. On the other hand, urban areas are characterized by a settled life with more possibilities of trade, artisanship, services, higher possibilities of earning money, etc.

Ibn Khaldun seems to be right when we link the followers of the line of thought and the environmental-cultural conditions. People of Tradition (ahl-el Hadith) were primarily Arabs from Hijaz, rural areas, simple nomadic and agrarian life surrounded with harsh natural conditions.⁶ On the contrary, People of Reason (ahl-el Ray) were primarily non-Arabs, children of slaves, converts, immigrant Muslims, lived in more developed, urban areas (Iraq, Syria, Basra, Kufe, Damascus), cities with more possibilities on professions, artisanship, and commercial activities.

As a matter of fact, unfortunately, the school of Reason lost this fight, school of Hadith won. There are various reasons proposed as an explanation to the decline of the Rationalist school and the triumph of the Traditionist school. To some, the Rationalist school was alien import from ancient Greece that was "incompatible with a Qur'anic worldview" (Robinson, 1996: 92). For some others, influential Muslim figures such as Gazali were responsible for this decline. In my opinion, Akyol is right when he says "it was not the Qur'anic worldview but the post-Qur'qanic tradition that overshadowed Islamic reason. The political authorities (Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphs) of the time played a major role in the course of this confrontation by supporting the Traditionists most of the time (Akyol, 2011: 117-118).

⁶ Cabiri (1997b) states that Arab-Umayyad state was based on tribe (as social class), booty (ganimet, as the source of rent) and faith (aqeedah, as forced official ideology).

5. Conclusion: Destructive Consequences of the Conflict Between Reason and Tradition

The fact that the conflict between the school of reason and the school of tradition ended in favor of the latter had destructive consequences. The most important negative consequence is reflected by the skeptic, hesitant or even hostile attitude of the Muslim societies to the liberal values as freedom, plurality, civil society, democracy, free market, and innovation. But, the hostility or skepticism against these values are not intrinsic in Islam. In other words, it is a matter of mentality and perspective through which one reads, understands, and interprets the main sources of Islam, specifically the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In fact, as discussed in this paper, there has been an alternative line of thinking since the early ages of Islam which is pro-freedom, plurality and free market.

With regard to consequences, just to cut it short, traditionist school won the dispute, their arguments were adopted or supported by the then political authorities. Philosophy and reason, the idea of plurality lost their reputation in the society. Weak or unsound hadith were taken to be guides in the social life rather than *reasoned opinion*, logic and analogy. Even the followers of rationalist Hanefi school became adherents or passive followers of traditionists. This explains why the Muslim world is hesitant or skeptical about such liberal values as freedom, plurality, openness, democracy, and free market economy.

Obviously it is not possible to reverse the course of history, hence it would not be realistic to say if the history had flown the other way, i.e. School of Reason had won the struggle then today's Muslim world would most probably have been more open and hospital to the liberal values of freedom, openness, free markets and individual liberties. We cannot go back to history or we cannot bring the past to the present. But we can do something, as the sensitive and responsible intellectuals to shape the future so as to see a more open, free, productive and prosperous Muslim world.

What we need to do, as the Muslim intellectuals, go back the history of Islamic thought, re-read and think about the debates and discussions on free will, freedom of thought, plurality and free markets,⁷ and translate it to today's language. Fortunately, there are now good efforts in this direction. Muslim intellectuals started to argue that anti-capitalist, reactionary, rejectionist attitude is not consistent with Islam's historical experience and its theological attitude towards economic activity and pursuit of profit. In fact Islam, which was conveyed by a businessman (Prophet Muhammad was a successful trader in most of his life) and held commercial activities high since the beginning is quite in harmony with a capitalist system strengthened by moral values with regard to helping the poor and needy (Çizakça and Akyol, 2012: 14).

A revival of the innovationist, pro-freedom, rationalist school at intellectual and philosophical levels will help opening the way to an open, civil and free society. A rationalist, liberal, pro-free market road map at hand, political authorities and decision-makers in the Muslim world will be able to play more constructive role in the social and political transformation the Muslim societies going through.

⁷ More can be found on Islam and free market economy in Acar and Akin (2013).

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