Reason (‘Heart-Mind’) in Islamic Thought

By

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Abstract: It is increasingly remarked that the predominant contemporary notion of ‘reason-mind’ strips rationality of its ethical, social and metaphysical relevance, dilutes the very intelligibility of knowledge, and promotes cultural and moral relativism. At the same time a variety of trends and disciplines in current thinking are gravitating toward the question of the meaning and scope of rationality for human experience. Thus, apprehending the nature & role of reason has become central both for relating the sacred to secular dimensions of life and for enabling communication and cooperation between cultures and civilizations. Now, with the spread of a trans-national network of jihadists intent on self-empowerment through mass casualty ‘martyrdom operations’ there is a reawakening of collective Western fears of Muslim ‘frenzy’ and ‘irrationality’ inherited from the medieval era.

Drawing upon in-depth studies into the heritage of Islamic scholarship and experiential teachings, Dr. Karim D. Crow gives a bird’s-eye view of the cognitive and ethical dimensions of reason or ‘heart-mind’ (al-‘aql), its role in the scheme of creation as well as anthropology,
and its relevance for faith-based disciplines. He focuses upon a controversial narrative assigned to the Prophet Muhammad: the famous account of God’s creation & testing of the human intelligence. Tracing its transformation into ‘the first thing God created is the Intellect...’ (mirroring neoplatonic ideas), he assesses why this remained for centuries the focus of intense disputes on the centrality of reason for Islamic religious life. Then he glances at the significance of rationality and cosmology within various schools of thought & practice: Mu’tazilah theologians, Sufis, Shi’ah, Isma’ilis, Philosophers and later theosophic-Sages such as Mir Damad. He concludes by drawing out implications for our contemporary understanding of the human inborn apprehending-faculty.

The Speaker: Dr. Karim Douglas Crow has taught Arabic & Islamic Studies in the U.S.A. at Columbia & Fordham & New York Universities, and the Universities of Virginia & Maryland; as well as in Kuala Lumpur at the International Institute of Islamic Thought & Civilization (ISTAC). He is currently Associate Professor (Contemporary Islam) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. He serves as an Advisor for several non-governmental projects on Islamic peace in the Caucasus, Middle East, & S.E.Asia. He has written ‘When God Created Wisdom: Islamic ‘Aql Creation Narratives; edited a volume on the Sunni–Shi’ah schism Facing One Qiblah; and is presently at work on an historical survey of Islamic rationalities, and a study of the life & teachings of imam Ja’far al-Sadiq (d.148 H/ 765).