

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY MUSLIM PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Early Islamic Philosophy or classical Islamic philosophy is a period of intense philosophical development beginning in the 2nd century AH of the Islamic calendar (early 9th century CE) and lasting until the 6th century AH (late 12th century CE). The period is known as the Age. At the outset, let us make it clear that the Muslim philosophy is not synonymous with the philosophy of the Arabs, also it is not synonymous with Islam either though the term "Islamic Philosophy" advocated by the Muslim regardless of their geographical affiliations. According to M.M Sharif passed through the following phases in the course of its development: a) Theological-philosophical, b) Mystical e) philosophical and scientific d) Middle Roaders e.g Al-Ghazali and Razi. In this paper we will be concerned the first phase of development of Islamic Philosophy. However, it is to be asserted that Muslim Philosophy grew and developed as a result of its own inherent compulsions. Muslim Philosophy took a positive and empirical view of the universe by exhorting its followers to reflect over the nature of things and employ their faculty of understanding and reasons. The important contributions of Muslim philosophy is the beginnings of the scientific method in philosophy, the development of the philosophical novel and the concepts of empiricism and tabula rasa; and distinguishing between essence and existence.

At the very outset, let us make it clear that the Muslim Philosophy is not synonymous with the philosophy of the Arabs. Also it is not synonymous with Islam either though the term 'Islamic philosophy' is now increasingly coming into vogue, it is a philosophy advocated by the Muslims regardless of their geographical affiliations. However, in this short essay, we are concerned with the first beginnings of Muslim Philosophy about two hundred hence from the date of the advent of Islam. According to M.M. Sharif; Muslim Philosophy passed through the following phase the course of its development : (a) Theologico-philosophical, (b) Mystical, (c) philosophical and scientific, (d) Middle (loaders, Al-Ghazali and Razi.¹ Evidently we will be concerned here with the first phase of the development of Muslim Philosophy.

To begin with, let us see in brief the then philosophical climate in which the first phase of Muslim Philosophy took its shape. Greek philosophy, specially the Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle was held in great esteem by both the Christian and Muslim thinkers of those days. However, pure Greek philosophy could not reach them. In fact, what they got in its place was the philosophy as interpreted by Plotinus (205-270 AD.) and his disciples.

Thus, during 3rd century A.D., Alexandria became the seat of the philosophy which was coloured by foreign influences chiefly Neo-Platonic. O'Leary thinks these foreign influences might have included Indian influences as well.² During fourth century A.D., Nisibis in Syria also became a centre of Neo-Platonic philosophy. Here all work was done in Syriac for the benefit of the local inhabitants. During fifth century, the Nestorians and his followers gave a new impetus to this school at Nisibis by putting forward their own version of Christianity which was influenced a lot by Neo-Platonism. Much of the work of translating Neo-Platonic works into Syriac was done by these Nestorians and

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later on it were they who produced prolific Arabic translations from the Syriac. During the period, the main subjects of interest were philosophy, logic, theology, medicine, chemistry and astronomy.³ Throughout these developments, an urge to harmonize religious doctrines with the demands of philosophy had been a marked feature of the day. It is on this point that O'Leary contends that there are hay-day of religion for some time and after that philosophy inevitably reasserts its power and the religious doctrines have to be re-cast to conform to it.⁴ This was, in brief, the prevailing climate in which first Muslim conquests of Alexandria, Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia were made in quick succession and by 661, the Ummayyad dynasty of Arab rulers was established in Damascus, Basra, Kufa and Baghdad became the active centres of learning and Baghdad was made also the capital of the Abbasides' govt, in 762. It is in this way that the Muslims came in contact with the Greek philosophy. This contact and the first beginnings of the Muslim philosophy can best be described in R.A. Nicholson's words thus "Muslim Theology, philosophy and science put forth their first luxuriant shoots on a soil" which was saturated with Hellenistic culture."⁵ However, it is to be asserted that Muslim Philosophy grew and developed as a result of its own inherent compulsions. Firstly, Islam always took a positive and empirical view of the universe by exhorting its followers to reflect over the nature of things and employ their faculty of understanding and reason. It was in consonant with this teaching of Islam that Muslims were first to develop inductive method and thus were-the forerunners of modern sciences. Secondly, the people of diverse faiths and cultures came to the fold of Islam. It was natural that after the initial fervour, they started to entertain doubts on various problems and the need arose to provide a rational base to fact, the first philosophy in Islam came into being as a re endeavour on the part of the Muslim divines and philosophy was called, 'Kalam' or science of reason through these reconciliations between the demands of the reason and the Islamic doctrines were sought.

Having come across Greek sciences and philosophy began to see problems in their own religion. As Shahristani,⁶ there were four fundamental problems different solution; of which gave rise to different schools of Muslim thought a) The problem of freedom of the will, (b) The problem of the a God, (c) The problem of demarcation between belief and action d) The dispute between Reason and Revelation, schools which we have named above are the result of different outlooks on these problems. Some thinkers tended to rationalize their religious doctrines and attached primary status to Reason as against Revelation or word of God. Yet others gave primary importance to Revelation as against Reason in their attempt to harmonise the two. These schools, as already said, are Mu'tazilism and Ash'arism respectively.

As regards the problem of freedom of the will, two mutually opposed schools—Jabrites and Qadrites—came into existence, one believing in the total pre-determinism and the other upholding complete freedom of the will.⁷ Imam Hasan (d110A.H) was a great scholar of Islam at Basra. He avoided extremes in the question of the will and had rationalistic tendencies. One day, while lecturing in the mosque at Basra, he was asked his opinion on the flues whether those who commit

great sin are to be regarded as Muslims or Non-Muslims. Before he could say anything, one of his pupils Wasil bin Ata (d. 131 A.H.) said that such persons were neither believers nor unbelievers. Thus, he came to differ from his teacher and began to expound his own views separately. Since he seceded from his teacher's class, he was called a Mu'tazilite (one who secedes) and his school was called Mu'tazilism.

Mu'tazilism

As we have indicated before, this school in Muslim Philosophy is a rationalistic school. It stands for two main doctrines: (a) Divine Unity, and (b) Divine Justice.

In order to maintain unity of God, they believed that divine attributes are not apart from God's essence and are thus co-existing with God. He possesses no attributes existing eternally side by side with Him. They are included in his essence. God is omnipotent, omniscient or wise by virtue of His essence. He does not have these attributes apart from His essence. In being consistent with this doctrine, they denied the eternity of the Qur'an also in the present form *i.e.*, in Arabic words. According to them. "An eternal Qur'an was a second person of the Godhead and God was not absolutely one." It was under this spirit that Wasil bin Ata declared, "He who affirms an eternal quality beside God, affirms two Gods,"⁸

From their second doctrine—Divine Justice—they drew the corollary that God cannot punish man without endowing him with the freedom of the will. Since God holds human beings responsible for their actions, His justice proves that he has made man free. Man can make or mar his fortune. It is within the power of the human beings to follow the path of virtue or vice. The Mutazilites find support for their doctrine of freedom of the will in the following verses of the Qur'an :

"Whoever acts virtuously does so for himself," (XLI, 46)

"Nothing belongs to man save what he strives for," (XLI, 40).

There is yet another doctrine of this school. According to it Reason is the true criterion of good and evil. This problem has been a cause of much difference amongst Muslim thinkers. The meaning of good and evil has been regarded synonymous with merit and defect, profit and loss and reward and punishment. Thinkers disagree as to the fact that Reason can be the criterion pi rewards punishable acts. However, Mu'tazilites hold that Reason can justify said to be the criterion of reward able and punishable acts. Revelation' only confirms what Reason dictates.⁹

Mu'tazilites also believe that God cannot entrust in tasks which are beyond his powers. This is because God is just and wise. God cannot also act irrationally. Similarly, they hold that it is impossible for God to reward the evil-doers or punish the righteous. So far as Ash'arism is concerned, it takes just the stand on the problems just stated.

Ash'arism

Ash'arism developed as a result of reaction against the rationalism of the Mu'tazilites. There were mainly three factors in the development of this school : First, Muslim divines were afraid that Islam may lose its binding force in the face of rationalism. Secondly, the non-rationalists were persecuted during the reign of Manun and his immediate successors. Thirdly, the efforts of Ikhwan-us-Safa (Brethren of Purity) at reconciliation between Reason and Revelation were also responsible for the development of Ash'arism. The stage for a reaction to rationalism was set. Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari (b. 260 A.H.) who was a disciple of Al-Jabbai, the last Mu'tazilite teacher, renounced Mu'tazilism and started to toe the orthodox lines. This development followed an episode between Al-Jabbai and Al-Ash'ari which runs thus :

"Ash'ari proposed to Jabbai the case of three brothers, one of whom was a true believer, virtuous and pious; the second an infidel a debauchee and a reprobate; and the third an infant; they all died, and Ash'ari wished to know what had become of them. To this Jabbai answered : The virtuous brother holds a high station in Paradise, the infidel is in the depths of hell and the child is among those who have obtained 'salvation,' 'Suppose now', said Ash'ari, 'That the child wishes to ascend to the place occupied by his virtuous brother, would he be allowed to do so ? 'No', replied Jabbai, 'it would be said to him : Thy brother arrived at this place through his numerous works of obedience towards God, and thou hast no such works to set forward,' 'Suppose then' said Ash'ari, that the child says : 'That is not my fault, you did not let me live long enough, neither did you give me the means of proving my obedience,' 'In that case,' answered Jabbai, 'the Almighty would say : I knew that if I had allowed thee to live, thou wouldst have been disobedient and incurred the severe punishment (of Hell). I, therefore, acted for thy advantage,' 'Well,' said Ash'ari and suppose the infidel brother were to say : O God of the universe, since you knew what awaited him, you must have known what awaited me, why then did you act for his advantage and not for mine ? Jabbai had not a word to offer in reply.¹⁰ The strain of the episode is that religious matters cannot be decided by reason or intellect alone. In this way a new orthodox school came into existence [his school was called Ash'arism after the name of its founder, Al-Ash'ari]. According to him, the attributes of God are neither include excluded from God's essence, they are co-eternal with God. So far as their conception is concerned; the attributes are outside of God and so far as their application is concerned; they are included in God's essence. Thus to them, there is no contradiction in their doctrine of attributes.

So far as the question of freedom of the will is concerned, this school believes in the theory of acquisition (Kasb) which implies that although God has pre-destined human actions, yet man has been given some power of actualizing those actions. In this way, the origination of an act depends on God whereas its completion depends partially on man. Thus, this school denies absolute freedom of the will to man. Man has got simply a power of appropriation or acquisition. Every action is pre-arranged by God to be performed by a particular person. Man's intention to complete any action holds him responsible for his deeds.

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The question of the freedom of will has always defied solution. In Qur'an, we find both kinds of verses—one affirming freedom of the will and the other denying any freedom to human beings. We quote the following verses of the Qur'an which famous predestination:

"No misfortune happens either on earth or in yourselves but we made it,—it was in the book". (57 : 22).

"Everything have we set down in the clear hook of our decrees," (36 : 1).

Some of the other main doctrines of Ash'arism may be mentioned here: The Qur'an is uncreated and eternal; good and evil come into being by the will of God; God will revive the dead on the Day of Judgment; the virtuous will have a vision of God in the heaven. Since the teachings of this school were in harmony with the orthodox theologians' views, many divines welcomed this school. It was successful in winning the patronage of Sultan Alal Arsalan and his minister, Nizam-al-Mulk. The majority of Sunni Muslims all over the world became the followers of this school.

Ash'arism gives priority, as we have said before, to Revelation over Reason. Not only this, it invented a science of Reason (Ilm-ul-Kalam) to defend the revelation. Imam Al-Ghazali was a well-known exponent of this school.

The Ash'arites holds that although Reason can be arbiter so far as merit and defect and profit and loss are concerned but in determining the reward or punishment of an action in the world hereafter, only Revelation can be of help. According to the Ash'arites, the Mu'tazilites limit the power of God in believing that God cannot impose upon human beings tasks which are beyond their power. They believe that God can do anything but in practice, God does not impose any such tasks upon human beings. Similarly they believe that God can act irrationally also but in practice he does not do so. In the same veins, they hold that it is not obligatory on God to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked. He can punish whom He wills. He can reward whom He wills. But the Mu'tazilites hold that in all such matters, God cannot act contrary to reason. We come to the end of the discussion of this school with a remark of De Boer regarding Al-Ash'ari : "This was Al-Ash'ari (873-935) who understood how to render to God the things that are God's and to man the things that are Man's."

The Ash'arites proved the existence of God through the fact of change of the substances. Since they change, they cannot be permanent and eternal. This leads to the conception of an eternal and unchanging creator. The argument was later on based on the inference of necessary existence of God from the contingent character of the world.

This brings us to the end of a brief survey of the two schools of the theological-philosophical phase of the Muslim Philosophy. Evidently the two schools differed mainly with regard to the primacy given to reason or to revelation in comparison with each other. Though the scholastic school emphasized the inadequacy of reason in religious matters, man's fall-back on reason for a reasoned guidance in his life will always be inevitable and, as remarked earlier in the words of O'Leary, philosophy will reassert its power to re cast religious doctrines in the rational moulds

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The third phase of the development of Muslim Philosophy marked by the philosophy proper or systematic philosophy. Under it, we have a galaxy of great eastern philosophers such as Al-K (873 A.D.) Al-Farabi (339 A.H.), Ibn Sina (Avicenna) 1027 A Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), Ibn Tofail (1185) Ibn Khaldoon (1332 and others. As remarked earlier, M.M. Sharif has placed ii Ghazali (b-1059) and Imam Razi under the head of the middle roaders, synthesizing both philosophy and mysticism.

The above account of the development of Muslim Philosophy has' been mostly sketchy and can at best be termed just introduction. It is not easy to do full justice to the subject considering the brief nature of the essay in limited pages. However, it is *hoped* that it will succeed in generating readers' interest for further read

References:

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2. De Lacy O'Leary : Arabic Thought and its place in History, London, 1922, p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
5. R.A. Nicholson : Mystics of Islam, London, 1914, p. 9.
6. A.K.Shahristani ;Kitab-al-Milal Wan-Nihal
7. Mabad alYuhani may be regarded as the first adherent of Qadr.
8. De Lacy O Leary :Arabic Thought and its Place in History ,London ,1939 ,p84
9. Ibid p 124 .
10. R.A .Nicholson ; Literary History of the Arabs p377.