

## SAYYID AHMAD KHAN ON PROPHECY

Ever since muslim thinkers introduced free use of reason in religious matters and brought it at par with revelation, they have de-spiritualized the verities of religion one after the other. These have gradually been brought down from the heavens to the earth, as it were, and explained in a terrestrial frame of reference. Philosophical theology of Sayyid Ahmad, a religio-philosophical thinker of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, is representative of a significant stage in this 'downward' process. He propounded, as is well-known, a systematic world-view couched in naturalistic terminology. The one fundamental doctrine on which he built his entire thesis is that "Islam is nature and nature is Islam"<sup>1</sup>. This point has, no doubt, been brought out with equal force by many other writers, both ancient and modern. Even Jamal-al-Din Afghani, who thoroughly exposed the naturalism of Sayyid Ahmad and wrote a book<sup>2</sup> in its refutation, declared that the laws which the Prophet (peace be on him) received from God are the same as the laws of nature which man can discover by a dispassionate study of the universe. The views of Sayyid Ahmad are, however, characterized by the extremely liberal dimensions that he provides for this equation. His naturalism is all-inclusive. It has its reverbrations felt in all departments of his religious thought. Presently, we shall confine ourselves to his point of view regarding the nature of 'prophecy' which concept is, in a way, of central importance for any philosophy evolved in the context of a revealed religion.

### I

Avoiding all anthropomorphic references, Sayyid Ahmad explained the significance of prophethood on the analogy of ordinary possibilities of human nature. Every person, as we know, is born with certain tendencies and inclinations. These constitute the warp and woof of what that person later on grows to be provided the puts in the required amount of effort to actualize them. We talk of born-poets, born-musicians, born-artists and so on. If these persons realize the possibilities of their nature, they can become experts

in their respective fields. Without the appropriate talent no degree of industry on the part of an individual would make him a real poet or a real artist and so on. Thus to explain the inspirations which a poet, for instance, claims for himself, it would be sufficient to refer to his initial in-born capacity for this kind of inspirations, adding to it the constant practice in his field which saved his talents from atrophy through disuse.

Same, according to Sayyid Ahmad, is the case with prophets. A prophet is a person who possesses natural proficiency in curing spiritual ailments and in bringing about a revolutionary improvement in the morality of people. He is a person of exceptional intellectual endowments by means of which he is capable of knowing all things by himself without the help of instruction by any external worldly source. A prophet's heart "is the mirror which reflects the divine illumination. It is his heart which carries the message of God and then returns with the divine message. He is the being from whom the words of God's speech emanate ; he is the ear which hears the wordless and noiseless speech of God. From his heart gushes forth, like a fountain, the revelation and then it descends on him. His spiritual experiences are all the result of human nature. He hears his spiritual message by his physical ears as if somebody else is saying something to him ; he sees himself with his physical eyes as if another person is standing before him"<sup>3</sup>. Iqbal, who adequately represents the spirit infused into modern times by Sayyid Ahmad declares in the same strain that a prophet is "a type of mystic consciousness in which unitary experience tends to overflow its boundaries and seeks opportunities of redirecting or re-fashioning the forces of collective life. In his personality the finite centre of life sinks into his own infinite depth only to spring up again, with fresh vigour to destroy the old and to disclose the new directions of life."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to point out that in fact revelations of a prophet are a sort of contact with the root of his own being.<sup>5</sup>

In religious literature, inspiration has, in fact, been recognized to have various possible levels of authenticity. It may come to a person in an external form and consist of the very words which God desires him to proclaim as the divine message. This is called *Wahy zahir* (the express revela-

tion) and is the highest kind of inspiration. According to the orthodox belief it is this kind that was used for the production of the Quran. The mind of the Prophet was passive all the time to be furnished entirely by the message transmitted to him by God directly or through the angel Gabriel. Prophetic experience thus conceived, is a dialogue, a communion, a conversation. Secondly there is the inspiration which is known as *isharat al-malak* (the sign of the angel). The message comes from God, though not orally. The prophet (p.b.o.h.) referred to this when he said that the holy ghost had entered into his heart. For the lowest form of revelation, the term *ilham* (inspiration) is reserved. *ilham* implies that the saint or the prophet under divine guidance, but by dint of his own mental powers and using his own language, gives forth the message of God.

Sayyid Ahmad, as is evident from what has been said above, reduces the nature of prophetic experience to the last mentioned of these kinds. Revelation, according to him, is simply divine mind working through human consciousness. As to the prophet's vision of Gabriel allegedly conveying the actual words of God, Sayyid Ahmad refers to the intensity of feeling and a strong power of imagination that made the prophet think "as if somebody else is saying something to him. . . . as if another person is standing before him",

Revelation or *Wahy*, Sayyid Ahmad holds, is really nature's technique for the welfare of creatures and is thus the usual and universal property of life. Its quality and its achievements, however, vary with various grades of being. Sayyid Ahmad quotes Quranic evidence<sup>7</sup> to affirm that even instincts in insects, animals and men are to be understood as *Wahy*<sup>8</sup>. Reason which is the characteristic possession of human beings is *Wahy* of a superior quality. It is due to this faculty that man understands himself and the environments and is gradually led to the fulfilment of his natural aptitude for the realization of the ultimate truth. Those in whom this natural aptitude reaches its highest level of development are, according to Sayyid Ahmad, the prophets, the celebrated spiritual guides of mankind. Among human beings themselves, he says, revelation is received in different spheres of life in which they happen

to be working. A poet, a philosopher, a scientist are all the recipients of divine inspiration.

Now if revelations of a prophet are thus to be understood in naturalistic terms and shown to be dependent on his exceptionally superior intellect, the necessary implication is that Quran is the creation of the Prophet (p.b. o.h.) himself and reveals the mind that was furnished by various ideas, beliefs and superstitions that floated around him like any other author who is necessarily influenced by his climate of opinion. This implication was not adequately recognized by Sayyid Ahmad himself but was clearly stated by some of his disciples like Sayyid Ameer Ali who on these premises came to the conclusion that the holy Quran being merely the result of purely human meditation is not infallible and universal.<sup>9</sup> The contents of its various chapters, according to him, correspond to the various levels of development of the religious consciousness of the Prophet (p.b.o.h.).

Such a humanistic interpretation of the nature of revelation put forth by Sayyid Ahmad and further elucidated by his followers has been responsible for a varied criticism that has been levelled against the genuineness of the Prophet (p.b.o.h) and his inspirations. All special sanctity and supernatural character having been denied to the visions and experiences of the Prophet, (p.b.o.h.) his behaviour has been evaluated in accordance with the so-called, and hitherto recognized, standards of judgement. Weil takes pains to prove that he suffered from epilepsy. Sprengler ascribes to him fits of hysteria. Margoliouth accuses him of dishonesty in having deliberately mystified people. Noeldeke refers to the strong fits of emotion to which he was subject and which led him to believe that he was in the presence of God receiving verbal messages from Him. All these critics, of course, failed to recognize, or deliberately overlooked, the simple fact that a mentally diseased person cannot create revolutions in the morality of people and cannot produce the type of manhood that Prophet Mohammad (p.b.o.h) actually did produce.

The severest objections that have been raised against the genuineness of prophetic experience and virtually against the independent status of religion

itself have come from the upholders of psycho-analysis. Freud, the chief among them, is reputed to be a naturalistic, deterministic atheist. For him religion is a kind of regression to the infantile ways of behaviour and a sort of repetition of the hopes and aspirations cherished by the young child. When in trouble, a child resorts to the superior wisdom and power of his father and cries out for his help and sympathy. Later on, God is substituted for the earthly father and He is now accepted as a symbol of supremacy, Love Wisdom and so on. Thus belief in God and the entire mechanism of revelations from Him is supposed to be a sort of wish-fulfilment, a bare psychological necessity without implying any ontological objectivity.

Theological naturalism enunciated by Sayyid Ahmad goes along with his unswerving faith in the competency of reason to grasp all facts of existence. This faith he had imbibed from the rationalistic temperament of the 19th century philosophy which saturated the atmosphere around him and from the achievements of contemporary physical sciences. It was thought to be against the dignity of human reason to suppose that the revelations received by a prophet are the actual words of God because that would mean that revelation is autonomous and that the function of rational theology is simply to rationalize the pre-ordained conclusions. Sayyid Ahmad consequently explained away the mechanism described by the Quran and Hadith for the transmission of divine messages and tried to depict the discoveries of a prophet in terms of his penetrating vision, superior intellect and the strong power of imagination.

Sense-experience and reason, on the one hand, and revelation on the other, lead according to Sayyid Ahmad, towards the same truth. Consequently, verdicts of the prophet are not against reason. They are indeed perfectly rational. It is, to begin with, reason that differentiates man from animal and gives to the former the ethical consciousness. Now that which lies at the very basis of morality cannot be absent when a particular action is actually declared moral or otherwise by the prophet. There are, however, according to him, some differences as well between the two modes of knowledge<sup>10</sup>. Firstly, reasoning entirely depends on human effort and

initiative whereas revelation is based on a special natural capacity. Secondly, a person who arrives at the truth through his own experience added to the experience of past generations gradually assumes the use of certain similes and metaphors and an entire system of technical terms. Originally introduced to facilitate understanding, these metaphors later on conceal and obliterate the real meaning supposed to be conveyed by them. Thus he cannot make people understand exactly what he says nor can he guide them. A prophet, on the other hand, is born to guide people. Being himself the recipient of the ultimate truth, he can convey it to others in their own language so that they can comprehend it. There is a third difference also. A person who has arrived at the truth by a slow wilful effort not only of himself but also of those who have passed away remains doubtful of the genuineness of his discovery. A prophet has no such doubt. He is, so to speak, face to face with reality and thus free from the defects that creep in generally due to the fallibility of individual's memory and due to the act of communication from one generation to the other.

## II

The process of the rationalization of faith went on, as stated above, unchecked. When long ago the license for the comprehension, evaluation and interpretation of religion was first granted to reason, it was a significant event. Although charged with sincerity and good intentions, it was full pregnant with dangerous consequences. Reason is, in fact, of such a nature that once the signal 'go ahead' is given to it, its progress becomes difficult to arrest. The most recent attempt to arrest this licentious progress was made when in the beginning of this century, we heard of a revolution in theology. Incidentally this revolution corresponded to, and temporally almost coincided with, the celebrated revolution in philosophy that was brought about in the form of logical positivism.

Logical positivism was a revolt against the competency of speculative reason to solve the perennial problems of metaphysics like the being of God and other supersensible realities which, in the last analysis, are reminders of the impact that religion has had on the developments of philosophic thought.

Nor should philosophy be shown to be dependent on the sciences. Logical positivism is an attempt towards the achievement of independence and autonomy. In logical analysis, philosophers "have found an area of investigation where philosophy may legitimately operate free from the encroachments of the special science."<sup>11</sup> Logical positivism simply deals with the analysis of language and the propositions rather than with the facts these propositions indicate.

The corresponding movement in theology which is aimed at securing an independent position for religion and delivering it from the encroachments of philosophy has gone with the name of 'theology of the word'. This movement which began in Switzerland around the turn of the century was revolutionary in nature. It has since been nurtured, among others, by Karl Barth, E. Brunner, A Nygen and D. Bonhoeffer. According to these thinkers, the word of God—the sole subject-matter for a theologian—has an independent status and a sovereign validity of its own. The man of religion need not conform his discoveries to the current philosophical and scientific fashions. Nor is it at all possible to know God and the ultimate facts of religion by human reason. These can only be revealed through the words that God speaks to man. There is no traffic from man of God. Revelation is autonomous and has all its justification within itself. Human reason due to its serious limitations cannot pass judgements on it. Like the aristocratic position that logical positivism holds against all metaphysical discussions, theology of the word abhors all rationalization of faith.

The way of religion is thus supposed to be opposite to that recommended by a naturalist who would make the task of theology virtually identical with the task of science in general. According to a theologian of the word, revelation is novel and has no continuity with the secular thought of man. Knowledge of ultimate religious truths cannot be derived as a logical conclusion or as a necessary consequence from our knowledge of the things of the world. In revelation we come across "a strange new world, the world of God. There are no transitions, intermixings or intermediate stages. There is only crisis, finality, new insight"<sup>12</sup>. This, roughly speaking, seems to be in agreement

with the Quranic point of view. In Quran much stress has, no doubt, been laid on the observation of nature in order to understand God. But still the phenomena of nature are not considered capable to independently reveal His nature. These are simply signs of God and pointers to His immensity and majesty. It is, incidentally, to this autonomous nature of revelation that the Asharite school of muslim thinkers had referred when they said that the nature of God and His attributes as stated in the Quran are to be understood 'without asking how and without drawing any comparison' (*bi la kaifa wa la tasbbih*).

A prophet's experience, according to Sayyid Ahmad, is, as said above, characterized by a kind of strong feeling which causes his seeing of visions and on which he puts his interpretations. It is these interpretations that comprise the so-called revelations for his followers to abide by. This doctrine is strongly refuted by the 'theologians of the word' who are satisfied with nothing less authentic than the actual words of God communicated to His messengers.

One objection to revelation understood as a kind of feeling on which the prophet puts his interpretation and then expresses it in his own words, has already been referred to above. Revelation, thus understood, provides a very shaky foundation for religion and robs it of its independence and objectivity. It entails all those objections that have been raised against religious experience by psycho-analysts and others who confused this experience with other normal and abnormal states of human mind.

Further, religious experience is supposed to convey information about something beyond itself. But this is a simple psychological fact that "an experience of a distinctly mental kind, a feeling state or an image cannot of itself yield us any information about anything other than the experience. We could never know from such experiences that they had the character of messages from the divine unless we already possessed a prior knowledge of the divine and of the way in which messages from it were to be identified. The decisive evidence for the divine would then be anterior to the experience and not derived from it".<sup>13</sup> Thus religious experience, if it has to serve



as a real instrument of knowledge, must be conceptual and concrete rather than of the nature of feelings of an abstract nature.

### III

We have so far considered two extreme points of view. According to the theologians of the word, revelation is external and objective and is absolutely independent of the internal feelings, aspirations and thoughts of the recipient. For Sayyid Ahmad and those of his school, on the other hand, it is thoroughly internal and subjective to the prophet who, allegedly by dint of strong feelings accompanying his revelation, ascribes it to an objective source. The fact, however, seems to lie somewhere between these opposing doctrines. One thing clearly emerges from the above account : revelation is not at all a merely subjective experience of the prophet. It therefore comprises positively and undoubtedly the actual word of God. Quran speaks of the Prophet (p.b.o.h.) having seen a figure or spirit or some other object at the farthest end or on the horizon<sup>14</sup>. After having communicated His messages to the Prophet (p.b.o.h.) through the archangel Gabriel, God has taken upon Himself to preserve them in all their originality against any possible interference that might introduce human element in the Sacred Text.<sup>15</sup> But at the same time revelation does not seem to be very much external *vis-a-vis* the prophet. Quran is quite vocal on this point as well. It says : The trusted spirit has brought it down upon your heart that you may be a warner<sup>16</sup>. And again : Say He who is an enemy of Gabriel (let him be) for it is He who has brought it down upon your heart.<sup>17</sup> Now if revelation has come to the heart of the prophet (p.b.o.h.), how can it be external to him.

The verses just quoted are in fact intended to stress the point that the Prophet (p.b.o.h.) did not receive the word of God in a cold and dreary fashion just to transfer it to the people around him but rather first of all assimilated it and made it his own and then with a human touch and with the fullness and warmth of life conveyed it to others. The Prophet (p.b.o.h.) by virtue of his office, is stationed at that level of spiritual, intellectual and moral grandeur that the standards of human excellence contained in the word of

God become identical with the laws of his own being. He becomes the Quran itself—the Quran which speaks and moves. Thus religious experience is external as well as internal to the prophetic consciousness. Religion is autonomous and humanistic at the same time.

## REFERENCES

1. This is the title of one of his essays : Tahzib al-Akhlaq 1296 A.H., pp. 41:45.
2. The reference is to Haqiqat-i Mazahib-i maichiri wa bayan-i hal-i naichiriyān, published Hyderabad 1881 and Tehran 1924-25.
3. Tafsir Quran Vol. I, p. 32.
4. Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 125.
5. Ibid.
6. Tafsir Quran Vol. I, p. 32.
7. Quran XVI 68.
8. Iqbal goes still further and ascribes revelatory character even to the growth of plants and to the entire process of biological evolution - Lectures, p. 125.
9. Maryam Jameelah : Islam and Modernism, p. 35.
10. T. A. 1296 A. H. Article on 'Conscience' pp. 41-45.
11. Macquarrie : Twentieth Century Religious Thought, p.
12. Barth : The Word of God and the Word of Man, pp. 33 and 91.
13. Antony Flew and Alasdair Macintyre, Editors : New Essays in Philosophical Theology - Article on 'Visions' by Alasdair Macintyre, p. 256.
14. Quran LXXXI 23
15. Ibid, XV 9
16. Ibid, XXVI 194
17. Ibid, II 97