

AL-KINDI ON PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

A Philosopher can be understood best against the background comprising the temperament of his age or, what Prof. Whitehead terms, the climate of opinion. This is specially true with the earlier Muslim thinkers and in particular with al-Kindi, the earliest of them all,—“the intellectual ancestor of all Muslim philosophers.”

Abu Yaqub bin Ishaq al-Kindi, the celebrated “Philosopher of the Arabs”, belongs to the times when Abbasides ruled the Islamic empire. These days are known in history for, among other things, the supreme glory of mu’tazilism, the so-called rationalist creed of uslim theology. Mu’tazilism was then a declared religion of the state and most of the people subscribed to its doctrines. Repressive measures employed by the Government for its propagation, although ultimately responsible for its downfall, had, for the time being, given it an air of popularity.

Earlier in the beginning, however, mu’tazilism was a simple affair. The mu’tazilites were a purely theological sect sincerely dedicated to the purification of Islam of all innovations. They specially tried to steer the middle course between contemporary strains of rigid fanaticism and moral laxity represented by the kharijites and the murji’ites respectively. But later on, when they got engaged in an intense missionary movement and began to speak out their views, they inevitably met objections from various quarters. Particular there were the Christians with their doctrine of trinity and the dualist manicheans who had still a hold on the Arab mind. Their characteristic views disturbed the conviction, specially of the new converts, regarding the unity of God which, along with His justice, became the trademark, as it were, of the mu’tazilites.¹ The Muslims who unwarily accepted the un-Islamic views tried to justify them by interpreting Quran and Hadith in their own way and by putting forth reasons. The mu’tazilites, in order to answer the objections of the opponents and to dispell doubts

from the minds of Muslims, also began to reason out their convictions. This was indeed most needed. Objections of the adversaries could most suitably be met on their own grounds. It is through this accident of history that the mu'tazilites became the torch-bearers of the rationalistic movement in Islam. Through their rationalism and through the employment of logic in defence of religious dogmas, they were indirectly establishing a kind of rapprochement between philosophy and religion. This programme of the rationalization of faith was conveniently invigorated by large-scale translations of the works of Greek thinkers that were done during the Abbasid period under state supervision. It is this intellectual state of affairs that served as the atmosphere of opinion which al-Kindi inhaled. He supported, though not always without reservations,² the views of the mu'tazilite thinkers and created a philosophical sub-structure for them. Specially, he took upon himself a forceful defence of philosophy, "the human emulation of divine excellence". He was convinced that it could safely be reconciled with religion.

A story³ has been told that Ma'mum, an Abbaside caliph, who supported the mu'tazilite views and preached them with a missionary zeal, one night met Aristotle in dream. The latter told that there was nothing profane in the former's dedication to philosophy and rationalism because philosophy and religion ultimately led to the same truth. This mutual harmony between philosophy and religion having thus been further certified by no less a person than Aristotle himself was readily accepted by al-Kindi and those who followed him. This thesis served a two-fold purpose for the philosophers. Firstly, it satisfied their deeply religious natures on the one hand and their reverence for their Greek masters on the other. Secondly, by bringing religion close to philosophy, they sought to counteract the fear that philosophy would necessarily breed impiety, godlessness and atheism.

The goal of all religious enterprise, as we know, is the discovery of the Truth and the unveiling of the Ultimate Real. Religion, more-over, enjoins on its devotees certain rules of morality and principles of conduct which emanate from the character of that reality. Thus the individual has not simply to know and love God but also to be sincere to his convictions and

live according to the will of God. Now philosophy, "the sublimest and noblest of human arts", has also been defined by al-Kindi as "the knowledge of the reality of things within man's possibility because the philosopher's end in his theoretical knowledge is to gain truth and in his practical knowledge to behave in accordance with truth"⁴. A genuine philosopher, according to him, would combine the acquisition of wisdom with its actualization. Thus philosophy and religion are supposed to have the same goal to achieve.

It is, however, difficult to accept the premises on the basis of which al-Kindi establishes the analogy. Characterization of philosophy as knowledge of the Truth is understandable but to include conduct in its definition seems to be unwarranted. Although Socrates did identify knowledge with virtue, philosophy, in the first instance, has almost unanimously been recognized as a theoretical study only. It may sometimes occasion wise actions, but still the fact remains that it has no direct practical implications.⁵ For religion, on the other hand, action is indeed very important. The analogy is, however, important in so far as it refers to the valuable fact that truth is truth and it is one, no matter where it comes from and how it is arrived at. It is the common property of all genuine seekers—whether they are the philosophers with their method of reasoning or they are the religious people who acquire it through the instrumentality of prophetic revelation.

Anyway, al-Kindi admits, as is evident from his definition of philosophy given above, that philosophy, being the product of human reason, has got its own limitations and is thus unambiguously of an inferior order. It tends towards, but may not fully attain, the comprehension of the ultimate truth in its wholeness whereas religion does attain it. This is due to the fact that a prophet's knowledge is entirely through the inspiration and will of God: it is direct and immediate. Knowledge acquired by the philosopher, on the other hand, is the result of his own wilful effort and is attained with the help of logic and argumentation. The former is divine and therefore definite and certain; the latter is human and so it stops earlier in the process of the acquisition of full certainty.⁶ Al-Kindi, obviously, does not contribute to

the view, held by some thinkers, both ancient and modern, that prophesy is an acquired skill as if prophetic genius were a potentiality in human nature by whose development man could become a prophet.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad has distinguished four levels at which man gets guidance in his life.⁷ These are the levels of (i) instinct, (ii) sensory experience, (iii) reason and (iv) revelation. All these stages are distinct from, although not antagonistic to, one another. They depict one graded development. Each one of the first three, by virtue of its limitations and special function, stands in need of the higher faculty for correction and guidance. The higher faculty, in turn, employs the lower for the realization of its potentialities and designs. So human reason, according to Azad,—and al-Kindi agrees with him in that—must be considered to be an expedient, though quite an essential one, for revelation to become operative in the lives of individuals and of societies. It is ally to faith. We can quite legitimately put the words of P. Tillich in the mouth of al-Kindi: “Reason does not resist revelation. It asks for revelation, for revelation means the reintegration of reason”.⁸ Thus philosophy (reason) and religion (revelation) are like two wayfarers journeying towards one common destination: the latter, leading the way; the former, following. There is necessarily a perfect mutual harmony between them. They do not quarrel with each other. If they do so, that would be fatal for both of them. Reason without revelation would be without a sense of direction and revelation without reason would be deprived of its essential function because there would be none left for it to give its guidance to.

The doctrine of the superiority of revelation to reason advocated by al-Kindi brings him very close to the attitude of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali who lived later in 11th-12th century A.D. After having passed through a period of scepticism and doubt about the so-called experiential and philosophic truths, al-Ghazali received illumination from God and consequently re-affirmed the exceptional status and supremacy of prophesy.⁹ However, some of the philosophers who immediately followed al-Kindi and who also tried to reconcile philosophy with religion adhered, instead, to the primacy of philosophical reason. Farabi and Ibn Sina are the cases in point. Zakariyya

al-Razi went to the extreme in this regard. Giving full reins to the use of reason, he declared the prophets Moses, Jesus and Mohammad (peace be on them) as impostors.

Al-Kindi, in order to bring out his position more clearly, makes repeated references to the Quranic verses. He insists that the unphilosophical, rhetorical Quranic arguments which touch the very heart of the problem concerned are superior and more convincing than the arguments that a philosopher may produce. Purely philosophical arguments are lifeless, dry and cold; the emotional language, on the other hand, has a vital impact on the minds of people and what is being said goes down deep into their hearts and has a lasting influence. The supra-rational, sentimental approach, it may be pointed out, is resorted to by the Quran specially when it has to bring home to its readers the validity of the fundamental and basic realities. Doctrines of the necessary existence of God, His supreme power and authority, the indubitable certainty about the Day of Judgement and the life hereafter are not put forth by logical demonstration. For instance, answering the question of the infidels: Who will revive the bones when they are decayed?, the revelation says: He will revive them who originated them the first time Is He who has created the heavens and the earth not able to create their like.¹⁰ Logic because of its habit of conceptualization fails to comprehend the ultimate facts of existence. Its sphere of understanding is limited to the phenomenal world. This is what al-Kindi meant when he observed that the philosopher in his endeavour to know the Ultimate Reality can simply go upto a certain extent. Here one may conveniently refer to the so-called miracles described in the Quran which characteristically belonged to the prophets. The miracles are the supernatural incidents for a man of reason who cannot possibly explain them on rational grounds or, if he does, he simply explains them away. He cannot at all fit them into the scheme of things. Religion with its superiority of vision and with its cosmopolitan spirit looks towards miracles as perfectly fitting elements in the reality as a whole and does not regard them as awkward.

The doctrine of al-Kindi as elaborated above is that revelation and

reason, though having the same objective to attain, differ in their actual achievements. Revelation being divine is more certain and definite than, and superior to, reason because the latter being human has only a limited applicability. There is, however, a very much different strain of thought expressed by him to which reference has already been made in the beginning of this essay. Al-Kindi declares with equal force that there is absolutely no incompatibility between reason and revelation. They are equally certain and arrive at identical results. Each one of the Quranic concepts "is ascertainable by intellectual arguments. Only people deprived of sound reason and cloaked in ignorance would reject it."¹¹ Encouraged by this conviction, al-Kindi opened the door of the rational interpretation of the Quran. He provided a philosophic support for the religious doctrines like the unity of God, the relation of God to His attributes, creation of the world out of nothing and so on. This is the one concrete way in which he sought to bring philosophy and religion together. Wherever there seems to be a variance between reason and the word of God, he invariably attributes it to a misunderstanding on our part and resorts to an esoteric and allegorical explanation of the Quranic text.¹²

The most important of the Quranic doctrines with which al-Kindi deals philosophically is that of the creation of the world out of nothing. In opposition to the doctrine upheld by almost all the Greek thinkers that nothing can come out of non-being and in opposition to the views of later Muslim philosophers, Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd etc., al-Kindi declares that creation from nothing is valid both as an article of faith and as a philosophic truth. During a discussion on this problem, he comes across the Quranic verse: "If He wills a thing, His command reduces itself to uttering the word 'be' to it and it is".¹³ An upholder of the eternity of the world may here be duped by the literal translation of the verse and say: How can God utter the word 'be' to a thing which ex-hypothesis does not exist as yet. Al-Kindi, however, points out that 'be' is here used not in the usual sense in which we might use such words. It may ridiculously seem to imply the prior existence of the thing whose coming into being is ordered but in fact it does not. Moreover, God does not physically utter the word: that would entail a sort of

anthropomorphism. The imperative 'be', says al-Kindi, is rather to be understood metaphorically as a symbol of God's will and the verse simply means that God by his will can do anything He wants to do.

In a treatise captioned "On the bowing of the outermost sphere and its obedience to God"¹⁴ al-Kindi furnishes another example of a philosophical interpretation of the Quran, thus bringing philosophy and religion together. When asked to explain the meaning of the verse "And the stars and the trees bow themselves," al-Kindi did not resort to a literal translation to which men of orthodoxy would have resorted. He pointed out that it would be ridiculous to believe that the stars and the trees prostrate and bow before God as a Muslim inclines his body and head in prayer. The word *يسجدان* in the verse is therefore explained by him in terms of obedience to God and voluntary¹⁵ submission to His decree.

There are some passages in the writings of al-Kindi which indicate that religion is one among the various branches of philosophy. The latter being the pursuit of truth as such is all-inclusive whereas the particular disciplines—"theology, ethics and all the useful sciences"—search after truth in their own spheres and from their own specialized points of view. There seems to be an implication here that philosophy is superior to religion and that the latter is simply a hand-maid to the former.¹⁶ But really, I think, there is no such implication. Philosophy being cool, calm, sedate and calculating is indeed, in a way, more generalized than religion. Philosophy seeks to understand facts in their most objective status and strictly in their own right. The attitude of religion, on the other hand, is not unqualified that way. Knowledge of the Ultimate Real as imparted by religion is thoroughly tintured by a particular attitude of the man of religion towards the Real which is supposed to be personal in some way. What is, however, objectionable is al-Kindi's bracketing of religion with the sciences as if both of these had the same status vis-a-vis philosophy. The sciences as we know, differ from philosophy in the delimitation of their fields of study because unlike it they are always departmental in their approach. Religion, however, knows no such departmentalization. It is the expression of the whole man and envisages the vision

of reality as a whole.

The position of religion as compared to that of philosophy is, in fact, the central and the primary one. We have learnt from the Gestalt psychologists that the whole comes first in our experience. It is only later on that we split it into its constituent parts in order to see what it consists of. Religion with its immediate unreasoned out concept of reality is thus prior to philosophy which applies its method of analysis to understand the nature of this reality in its own way; consequently it is philosophy which can be shown to get its license from religion rather than religion serving as a hand-maid to philosophy. From the point of view of Islam in particular, philosophic thinking is not simply allowed but rather strongly recommended and ordered. Al-Kindi mentioned this point but, strangely enough, did not adequately stress it. Actually, this fact seems to be the most valid ground on which to arrange a meeting between philosophy and religion. On this ground al-Kindi could adequately meet the objections of those who declared philosophy a heresy and the philosophers innovators and who "disputed with good men in defence of the untrue position which they had founded and occupied without any merit only to gain power and to trade with religion"¹⁷ Teachings of the Quran are thoroughly inductive in temperament. Instead of giving ready-made rules and regulations for diverse situations, it generally exhorts its readers to cultivate the spirit of rational enquiry and empirical investigation—to move about in the world, observe and generalize for themselves. This characteristic of the Quran is in fact necessitated because of the stage of the development of human consciousness at which this book was revealed and because of the role that it is destined to play. Claiming to be the source of guidance for all times to come, it equips its readers with an instrument of investigation which may help them in this ever-growing, ever-changing world. "The birth of Islam", Iqbal points out, "is the birth of inductive intellect. In Islam prophesy reaches its perfection in discovering the need of its own abolition. This involves the keen perception that life cannot for ever be kept in leading strings; that in order to achieve full self-consciousness man must finally be thrown back on his own resources"¹⁸ Equipped

with these resources, man can think out newer and newer avenues to reach the ultimate truth. Surely, there are signs of God in the creation of the heavens and of the earth, in the alternation of night and day, in the ships which pass through the sea and so on. We have to think and philosophise about the phenomena of nature in order to grasp the principle underlying them and the teleological force working behind them. The Quran says in so very sweet words: Do they not look up to the camels, how they are created; and to the heaven how it is raised; and to the mountains how they are rooted; and to the earth how it is outspread.¹⁹

Apart from the phenomena of nature, there are two other main fields of rational enquiry which have been specifically recommended by the Quran. One of these is history which has been viewed as an important source of knowledge. A study of the rise and fall of nations and their collective behaviour is a thoroughly informative enterprise. The Quran has given account of various historical events of antiquity with the definite objective to impart certain moral lessons to its readers and to tell how the earlier people were rewarded or punished for their good and bad deeds. These facts truly understood give us guidance as to our own future conduct and furnish a clue to the ways of Divine behaviour.

The third source of knowledge whose rational understanding and efficient employment is prescribed by the Quran is our own self or ego. This is the nearest approach of man to God because He is closer to him than his neck vein.²⁰ Moreover, we have been fashioned after His image. He has breathed His soul into us and has fired us with an urge to realize in our nature His attributes and qualities. God is in us: We need simply have a seeing eye. Whosoever recognizes himself recongnizes God, said the Holy Prophet.

NOTES

1. The mu'tazilites called themselves "The People of Unity and Justice" Some historians, however, think that this phrase was a nickname given to the Mu'tazilites by their opponents.
2. Abu Ridah : Rasail-al-Kindi al-falsafiyya (*i*), P. 27
3. Ibn-al-Nadim : al-Fihrist, p. 339
4. Abu Ridah : Rasail (*i*), p. 97
5. Ibn Sina for instance, later on, correctly defined philosophy as "the knowledge of Being as such"
6. Abu Ridah : Rasail (*i*), p. 372.
7. Tarjuman (*i*), p. 174.
8. Systematic Theology (*i*), p. 94.
9. e.g. Munqidh min-al-dalal, Damascus 1939, p. 138
10. Quran, XXXVI 77-81
11. Abu Ridah : Rasail (*i*), p.224
12. It may be of interest to note that al-Farabi also recognised established religion as an essentially symbolic approach to reality but, in opposition to al-Kindi, drew from it the conclusion that religion is inferior to philosophical demonstration.
13. Quran, ii 117 ; xvi 40 ; xxxvi 68 ; xl 68
14. 8th "risala" in Abu Ridah's edition.
15. Al-Kindi, it may be noted, regarded heavenly bodies as endowed with life and reason.
16. George N. Atiyeh : Al-Kindi, the Philosopher of the Arabs, p. 23.
17. Abu Ridah : Rasail (*i*) p. 82
18. Iqbal : Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 126
19. Quran, lxxxviii 17-20.
20. Ibid, l 16