

RAZI ON RELIGION ——— A Critique

Mohammad ibn Zakriya al-Razi (864-925 A.D.), 'the greatest non-conformist in the whole history of Islam¹ is a naturalist and a faithful devotee of reason. He holds that as a mode of knowledge reason is supreme and that there is no surer way to understand truths about facts and values. "The Creator (exalted be His name);", he writes, "gave and bestowed upon us reason to the end that we might thereby attain and achieve every advantage.... It is God's greatest blessing to us and there is nothing that surpasses it in procuring our advantage and profit... By reason", he continues to say, "we have comprehended matters obscure and remote, things that were secret and hidden from us... by it we have achieved even the knowledge of the Almighty, our Creator... We must consult it in all matters, conducting our affairs as it dictates and bringing them to a stop when it so commands"² Consequent upon this glorification of natural reason, Razi denies cogency and usefulness of the institution of prophesy as well as genuineness of all revelation. Books on medicine, astronomy and then scientific subjects as well as the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle are, in his opinion, preferable to the entire religious literature as the former have provided immense benefits to man in terms of promoting harmonies and adjustments and making life worth-living. The latter, on the other hand, is, for him, responsible for narrow-minded attitudes of people and for all sorts of dissensions between man and man. Prophets, among themselves, are opposed to one another in their teachings and so are not reliable, he holds. They are not superior to ordinary human beings in any way. Miracles, reportedly having been performed by them, are no more than legends and fanciful myths. Having thus dismissed religion as a futile institution full of

1 Majid Fakhri, A History of Islamic Philosophy, p.97.

2 A.J. Arberry (Ir.), The spiritual Physick of Razes, PP. 20-21

confusions and contradictions, Razi further goes on to stress the impossibility of a rapprochement between philosophy and religion in the sense in which this problem was posed and discussed, directly or indirectly, by almost all the Muslim thinkers.

Rationalization of the traditional Islamic faith, which appears to have reached its climax in the religious thought of Razi, has a long history. It formally started with the Mu'tazilite theologians who, we know, flourished in the climate of opinion saturated with Greek thinking. They were among the earliest to put forth a sensible interpretation of the metaphysical Qur'anic concepts and produce a rationale of the attributes of God so that these could be reconciled with His oneness and with the moral freedom of man. The Ash'arites who rose in revolt against the Mu'tazilite 'heresies', also resorted to reason and logic to meet the logic of the 'free-thinkers'. They, in fact, encountered a lot of opposition from those of their own camp who held on to the opinion that religion should remain a matter of unreasoned conviction, pure and simple. So al-Ash'ari, the founder of this school, had to begin his career with an apology. He wrote a book *Istihsan al-Khawd*³ in which he brought out the serviceableness of the method of reason in religious matters. Anyhow, these two strains of rationalism pioneered respectively by the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites have persisted in the entire development of Islamic religious thought down to the present times in the form of liberalism and modernism, on the one hand, and an argued defence of orthodoxy, on the other.

Primarily there is no harm in the employment of rational arguments for the understanding of characteristically religious concepts and the solution of religious problems. The Qur'an, positively and in no uncertain terms, recommends a rational manipulation of experience in order to discover the significant nature of what it calls, the ayat of God that are spread everywhere in the external universe as well as in man's own being. We have also been asked to ponder over the Word of God: "Do they not reflect on the Qur'an or are there locks on their hearts".⁴ Further, the Qur'an says that those who are blind here will be blind in the hereafter,⁵ meaning thereby that one who chooses to be oblivious of the facts of life here and now will not have an encounter with the

3 full title of the work is *Risalah fi Istihsan al Khawd fil Kalam*

4 Qur'an. 47: 24.

5 Ibid, 17: 72

Ideal. But all this, of course, should not be taken to imply that reason is capable of going simply to any extent. The Qur'an itself, when carefully perused, gives, along with a strong commendation of reason, clear indication of its genuine limitations and infirmities. These limitations must be recognized by a philosopher of religion. Iqbal, in one of his lectures, rightly pointed out that philosophy has jurisdiction to judge religion no doubt, but what is to be judged is of such a nature that it will not submit to the jurisdiction of philosophy except on its own terms⁶. Evidently the most fundamental of these terms be that religion is not to be eliminated altogether during the operation of rational analysis. However, Razi, as we have seen, is prepared to accept no terms at all that might be offered on behalf of religion, his commitment to reason being absolute and total. As to his claim that natural theism is tenable, that it is possible to know God and prove His existence on purely rational and cosmological grounds, we need be reminded that the verses of the Qur'an that are generally quoted to substantiate this position do not 'adequately' do so in the strictly logical sense of this term. The Qur'an conceives the various phenomena of nature and facts of history only as the signs of God i.e., just the pointers to His existence. Thus, at the most, they point out the way in which a search for God can be fruitfully continued. What further helps in this enquiry is a problem independent by itself and needs a separate treatment. For the present it is sufficient to conclude that the phenomena of nature have not at all been stipulated to serve as the premises that would provide conclusive evidence for the existence of God. By no conceivable logic can eternity of God be deduced from temporariness and finitude that characterize natural existence.

Coming back to the main problem under discussion, let's try to understand what religion is. In this connection we find a medley of definitions. For instance:

'Religion is the belief in an everliving God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the universe and holding moral relations with mankind'---- James Martineau.

'Religion is the recognition that all things are manifestations of a power which transcends our knowledge'--- Herbert Spencer.

'Religion is ethics, heightened, enkindled, lit up by feeling'--- Matthew Arnold.

6. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam. p.2

'The essence of religion consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence'--Friedrich Schleiermacher.

What transpires from a careful study of these definitions is that they ultimately display a variety of attitudes towards the ultimate facts of existence. These attitudes can in the last analysis, be classified into three categories, viz., the attitude of an unqualified submission, the attitude of critical analysis and rational understanding and finally, the attitude of intuitive apprehension and sympathetic appraisal. Iqbal in his 'Reconstruction' calls them the periods of faith, thought and discovery, the stages, characteristically, of a layman, a philosopher and a mystic respectively. He says:

"In the first period religious life appears as a form of discipline which the individuals or a whole people must accept as an unconditional command without any rational understanding of the ultimate meaning and purpose of that command. This attitude may be of great consequence in the social and political history of a people, but is not of much consequence insofar as the individual's inner growth and expansion are concerned. Perfect submission to discipline is followed by a rational understanding of the discipline and the ultimate sources of its authority. In this period religious life seeks its foundation in a kind of metaphysics- a logically consistent view of the world with God as a part of that view. In the third period metaphysics is displaced by psychology and religious life develops the ambition to come into direct contact with the ultimate Reality. It is here that religion becomes a matter of personal assimilation of life and power; and the individual achieves a free personality"?

It is sometimes believed that the attitudes of faith, thought and discovery operate independently and that the persons concerned with religion thus stand classified, correspondingly, into three distinct categories. Razi, on this analysis, would belong to the second category. Anyhow, despite, Razi's exclusive infatuation with reason and for that matter, a similar passion of the laymen for faith and of the mystics for their characteristic intuitions, the fact is that faith, thought and discovery belong to a continuing series which is duly presided over by a supra-rational, direct and immediate cognition of the ultimate reality. Thus there is no water-tight

7. Ibid, p. 181

distinction between them. The ultimate reality stands realized more and more as we go up from the lowest to the highest stage.

Let's take faith first. Faith is generally defined to be a passive, irrational and blind certitude. But really it is not so. It is rather a conative state of mind characterised by immediate awareness whatever be the quality of that awareness of the object of faith. It is, as Iqbal puts it talking specially of religious faith, 'a living assurance begotten of a rare experience.'⁸ When, for instance, I say that I have faith in Mr. X, I do not say so without any rhyme or reason. I may not be able to actually give a rationale of my faith but still it must be grounded in sound knowledge. Had this not been the case, I might as will meet any person in the street and say that I have faith in him. The kind of knowledge to which the term 'faith' refers is direct, simple and basic and is therefore unshakable by analytical reasoning or, sometimes, even by the hard facts of everyday experience. A person who has faith in divine justice and love, for example, may find in the world events that exhibit injustice, hate and cruelty in the ordinary sense of these terms, but he irresistibly holds on to his faith. These and other such phenomena rather constitute a trial of his faith through which he almost invariably comes out successful and his faith is all the more strengthened.

Thought or reason, in an ordinary sense, is rightly considered to be incapable of grasping the ultimate reality in its organic wholeness; that is why Kant, the rationalist, declared thing-in-itself to be unknowable. However, reason has a deeper movement also which can be attained when it functions under the auspices of a cosmic insight, i.e., an insight into the total state of affairs. A beginner in mathematics, for instance, in order to do his sums has to undertake a lot of calculation but as he continues his exercise over a period of time, he develops what we may call, a mathematical sense. Those who have a natural, inborn taste for mathematics realize this sense much sooner than others. Anyhow, when this level of comprehension is reached one has not then always to go through all possible steps towards the solution. The solution simply dawns upon him immediately as the problems are posed. This is what Aristotle meant when he remarked that some people can hit upon the middle term without forming a syllogism in their minds. Similar is the case with the religious object. There are persons who know God through His names which, in turn, are understood somehow or other on the analogy of human attributes. But this would not be a true revelation

o. Ibid, p. 109

of the nature of God who is unique and has no likeness unto Him as the Qur'an says. On the other hand, a person who is moved by a sincere desire to have a genuine comprehension of God and ponders over the attributes and ways of God with thorough single-mindedness and absorption does ultimately cognize Him in His uniqueness and consequently the true significance of His attributes is known to him. This is what can be termed as the deeper movement of reason.

Discovery, the third and the last stage mentioned above, is a process that means personal encounter itself. It is thus different from knowledge or awareness in the barest sense of these terms. Russell in his 'Problems of Philosophy' makes a distinction between 'knowledge by acquaintance and 'Knowledge by description'. The former, he says, is the knowledge of objects and persons of which we are directly aware without the intermediacy of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths; the latter, on the other hand, is indirect: it is knowledge through the description of a property or a set of properties that the object is claimed to possess. Anyway, neither in acquaintance nor in description can we as a rule be said to discover the nature of a person or an object. We truly discover only when we are involved in personal encounter with the object of our knowledge. In order to understand what personal encounter is we must refer to a further distinction emphasized by Martin Buber between 'I-It' and 'I-thou' relationships. In both knowledge by acquaintance' and 'knowledge by description' I may equally have simply an 'I-It' relationship with the person known, that is, the person may be taken as an object only from which the 'I' as an observer stands detached. It is a relationship between a subject and an object. An 'I-thou' relationship, on the other hand, is dialogical as it is essentially a 'one-one' contact between two subjects. It is direct and mutual and involves a response which is thoroughly alien to the I-it attitude. If, for instance, I honestly seek to discover and understand thoroughly another person I must enter into an 'I-thou' a 'person to person' relationship with him. I may observe a person and his behaviour very minutely and I may collect the maximum amount of information about him from all possible quarters but still my knowledge of him will be deficient. In order to have sufficient knowledge, I will have to deal with him and have a dialogue with him in diverse situations. These two kinds of attitude - the 'I-it' and the 'I-thou' are found in men of religion as well. According to a classification made by John Dewey there are people who have a

religion' and there are people who 'live religiously'. The former, for all practical purposes, take God as an 'it' although they often do not realize this fact. They invariably approach Him with requests to forgive their sins, grant their prayers, and realize their aspirations. He is taken to be kind, loving, just and so on. In a remembrance and invocation of such attributes there is evidently an element of selfishness involved on the part of the man of religion. Incidentally, that is exactly why Hazrat Ali is reported to have once remarked that if a person loves God sincerely, he would be better advised to deny away His attributes. Those, on the other hand, who can be said to live religiously are above all selfish as well as externalist considerations in their approach to God. In their encounter with Him all considerations of personal convenience are totally held in obedience. They would burn the heavens and extinguish the fire of the hell so that God remains a goal realizable for His own sake. Instead of seeking to understand the attributes of God they would rather assimilate them with their own persons and thus earn a close companionship with God and a truly religious life.

So, whatever be the level at which we truly profess religion, it directly or indirectly does envisage a sympathetic, intuitive and total apprehension of the ultimate Real. Razi did not visualize this fact because of his unflinching and exclusive commitment to discursive reason. Actually, in the history of religious thought, whenever a thinker has made this sort of commitment, he, as a result of this, has necessarily reduced the religious phenomenon to the status of system of doctrines rather than a vital fact. The example of the Mu'tazilite thinkers immediately comes to our mind in this regard. Thus conceived, differences between religion and religion are bound to appear. It is verily because of this that Razi found contradictions between individual religions and so justifiably rejected the very institution of religion on that ground. However, if we duly take into account the essential nature of religion as a mode of direct experience, as I have explained above, then all genuine religions are ultimately found to be one: Ultimate Reality, the object of religious experience must of course be the same whatever be the shari'ah that we profess.