

## IBN RUSHD'S HERMENEUTICAL STRATEGY

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### I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM

The encounter between the ancient Greek civilization and the rising Islamic one in 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD was bound to lead to some of the greatest philosophical, theological and methodological debates across the Islamic lands. The rationalistic-scientific orientation of Greeks was to inevitably clash with the monotheistic-revelatory world-view and value-system of Islam culminating into conceptual, hermeneutical, analytical and critical disputations and protestations that still divide the contemporaneous Euro-American western style of functioning from Islamic way of life. The great questions raised by this civilisational encounter dominate our ways of thinking till date.

The impact of Greek thought on human history and culture has been immeasurable and incalculable. Although the cosmological and ontological theories of pre-Socratic philosophers were powerfully rebutted by relativistic and skeptical positions taken by Sophists, yet Sophists were soon followed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who for better or worse, gave a new methodological, epistemological, ontocosmological and axiological turn to western philosophy and thereby to global civilisational march and cultural evolution. The rational and scientific spirit of Greek thought fascinated all those who came into contact with it.

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Muslim philosophers such as Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, Abu Nasr al-Farabi and Abu Ali Ibn Sina too were deeply impacted by the rational and scientific orientation of Greek philosophy. However, of all Greek philosophical theories, they were decisively influenced and guided by the principles and doctrines of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thought. These Muslim philosophers during 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD tried to work out a reconciliation between Aristotelian and Neoplatonic theories and the monotheistic conceptual framework advanced by Islam.

In the actual historical evolution of Muslim civilization; the need for social, political and moral order and stability reinforced the commitment of believers to the Qur'ānic weltanschauung and the unavoidable desire for change led them to appropriate philosophical or rational principles underlined by Greeks. Any civilizational reconciliation is a long drawn-out affair, and is, in fact, a continuous dialectical crossfire punctuated by violent and bloody physical and technological clashes. The reconciliation between Greek thought and the Qur'ānic or Islamic beliefs and values entailed the efforts of many versatile scholars and accomplished philosophers or men of vision. Whether such a reconciliation is possible is itself a matter of great controversy and a large historical debate.

Al-Kindi (801-873) was the first Muslim philosopher who tried to work out a rapprochement between Islamic world-view and Greek philosophy.<sup>1</sup> He wanted to bring about harmony between religion and philosophy<sup>2</sup> or affect an accord between the two. For al-Kindi, religion is truth, and philosophy as search for truth, cannot be contradictory to religion. The prophets have ordained believers to pursue truth and therefore there cannot be any discord between religion based on revelation and philosophy based on human reason.<sup>3</sup> However, the divinely ordained injunctions of the Qur'ān are superior to logical demonstrations carried out by men of learning and scholarship, for they lead to certainty of conviction.<sup>4</sup> Al-Kindi accused his religious or theological opponents to be actually engaged in the pursuit of property and power rather than being engaged in the quest for truth.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Farabi (870-950) takes a holistic view of philosophical, theological, legal, social and political questions within the civilisational framework provided by the prophetic revelations. As a philosopher, Farabi was deeply interested in understanding the sociopolitical role of religion and philosophy. Apart from working out a reconciliation between Platonic political philosophy and revelatory Islamic principles of polity, Farabi sees no essential contradiction between religion and philosophy. He elevates "philosophy to the place of highest value and subordinates the revelation and the *shariah*, or religious law, to it."<sup>6</sup> He accepts the Aristotelian principles such as 'First cause' and 'Prime mover' and Neoplatonic theory of Emanation<sup>7</sup> and tries to reconcile these ontocosmological principles and doctrines with the theocentric world-view of Islam.

Following Farabi, Ibn Sina (980-1037) too accepts the Aristotelian metaphysics and Neoplatonic theory of Emanation but tries to iron out the deficiencies of Aristotelian and Plotinian philosophical doctrines by postulating God as the Necessary Being and as the basis for the world process, thus making a fundamental distinction between God and the world as implied or demanded by Islamic faith.<sup>8</sup>

Ibn Sina does not accept the creationistic cosmology of Islam. Such a doctrine entails the acceptance of the eternity and primodality of God and creatureliness of the cosmos and violates the very basis of the Aristotelian ontocosmology. Therefore, Ibn Sina propounds the doctrine of the Necessary Existence of God with a view to distinguish it from the contingent nature of the existence of the world. In this way, Ibn Sina tries to solve the apparent or real contradiction between the creationistic world-view of Islam and the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic ontocosmology. Ibn Sina does make the world eternally dependent on God. However, following Aristotle, he does not accept the doctrine of temporal creation and affirms the eternity of the world,<sup>9</sup> a doctrine which incurs him the wrath of Ghazali in his celebrated book '*Tahafut al-Falasifah*'.

The divide between theologians and philosophers is perennial. The divide has been sharpest among Semitic religions

espousing monotheistic and theocentric world-views and value-systems. It can plausibly be argued that this seemingly ideological and methodological conflict is subtly informed by social, political and economic interests of the respective disputants. However, it will not be too helpful to reduce the controversy to a conflict of interests and ignore the multiple dynamics operating in the genesis, development, crystallization and articulation of such historically long drawn-out dialectics of interpretation.

The Muslim *Falasifa* (philosophers) were on the horns of a civilisational dilemma. They were too theocentric and monotheistic by culture, tradition, education and conditioning to break free of the glory and majesty of Islamic world-view and value-system and too enamoured of Aristotelian ontocosmological outlook and Neoplatonic weltanschauung to give up their irresistible attractions and indecipherable beguilements. It is an ontocosmological trap we are struggling till date to liberate ourselves from. Muslim philosophers too wanted the reassuring blessings of Islam and reinforcing refreshments of Greek philosophy on one and the same platter.

The dilemmaic situation naturally triggered off the ambition to work out a reconciliation between the postulates and principles of Greek rationalism and beliefs and values outlined in the creationistic ontocosmological outlook of the Qur'ān. However, the underlying assumption of Muslim philosophers was to adjust the Qur'ānic doctrines to the views and norms embodied in the philosophical writings of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus.

The traditionalist theologians rebelled against the audacious attempts of the philosophers at hellenising of Islam. For theologians, the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic metaphysical doctrines were outrightly incompatible with the Qur'ānic teachings and there was no point in struggling to find out the congruence of a square with a circle. Such an attempt was not only practically impossible and methodologically unwarranted but also Islamically impermissible and eschatologically unsalvificatory and therefore spiritually pernicious. Such an attempted adjustment will not only be a square peg in a round hole, but, more importantly, signifies disloyalty to the Qur'ānic

teachings and therefore warrants the punishment that should be meted out to heresy-mongers and infidels.

The alleged hellenisation of Islam by such distinguished philosophers as Farabi and Ibn Sina generated a groundswell of theological reaction against the *Falasifa* and their Greek Masters. However, there was no one who could put up the requisite intellectual resistance in favour of the Qur'ānic ontocosmology and against the hellenisation of religion with substantial critical dexterity, methodological competence and philosophical sophistication. In such a trying or critical situation Imam Ghazali was a God-send.

In his epoch-making and globally acknowledged powerful critique of hellenised Islamic philosophy, Ghazali launches a scathing attack on twenty doctrines espoused by Muslim philosophers such as Farabi and Ibn Sina. However, Ghazali specifically accuses philosophers of heresy, apostasy and irreligion in view of their advocacy of certain doctrines that patently go against the very grain of the monotheistic-creationistic ontocosmological world-view and theocentric value-system of Islam. The three doctrines espoused by philosophers seem especially offensive to the constantly, consistently and continuously held beliefs of Muslim *Ummah*, viz.

- (a) belief in the eternity of the world,
- (b) belief that Gods' knowledge does not encompass individual objects, and
- (c) belief in the impossibility of bodily resurrection on the Day of Judgement.

These doctrines are decisively antithetical to the Qur'ānic teachings, viz.

- (a) belief in the creation of the cosmos by *Allah*,
- (b) belief in the omniscience and absolute knowledge of Allah including the knowledge of universals and particulars, and
- (c) belief in the bodily resurrection on the day of judgement.

For Ghazali, philosophers such as Farabi and Ibn Sina who were inspired by Aristotle and Plotinus and tried to reconcile Islam and Greek philosophy were engaged in an essentially impossible mission. Their arguments against what they rejected and their arguments for what they accepted were equally untenable.

The issue taken up by Ghazali in his '*Tahafut al-Falasifah*' for most serious consideration is the question of the 'eternity of the world'. Ghazali argues that the Greek dogma of the eternity of the world is false and there are no logically compelling reasons to accept it to be true.

Ghazali charges philosophers of uncritically accepting Greek assumptions which are neither demonstrable nor self-evident. For example, the assumptions of Greek philosophers that every effect has a cause, that cause must be the action of some external force and that cause or an act of will when executed must immediately lead to the effect; are not logically compelling or coercive. Why should it be accepted that God's will has a cause or has a cause that is external to it? Where is the logical compulsion to assume that an effect should follow a cause within no time? There is no logical contradiction to assume that a cause can have a delayed effect. For example, if we accept that God's will is eternal and the object of that will has occurred at a particular point of time, we are not being caught in a logically contradictory situation. There is no logical contradiction in upholding the orthodox position that God eternally willed to create the world at a particular point of time.<sup>10</sup>

The philosophers' denial of God's knowledge of particulars or individual objects amounted, according to Ghazali, to flagrant violation of the categorical verses of the Qur'ān maintaining that God knows 'what is hidden in the inmost recesses of human heart and 'there does not escape Him the weight of an atom.'

The God of Greek philosophy as 'pure intelligence', is assumed to be devoid of any acquaintance with material objects by definition. However, such a God is nowhere to be found across the thousands of the Qur'ānic verses. The God of the Greek

philosophers and the God of the Qur'ān are poles apart and absolutely incompatible. The God of the Qur'ān is eternally watchful of the affairs of the world without a dose or wink of rest or sleep.<sup>11</sup> He is absolutely acquainted with what happens around humans and what has happened to them in earlier times<sup>12</sup>. He knows the inmost recesses of human psyche, and even what dark suggestions, human mind is capable of entertaining. No human behaviour, hidden or manifest, can escape His eternal watch for He is not only '*al-Alim*' (All-Knowing) but also '*al-Raqib*' (Al-Watchful). He rewards and punishes human beings on the basis of His absolute knowledge and vigilance. The eternal principle of divine justice demands that God be eternally cognizant and vigilant of all the choir and furniture of the universe.

The central feature of Ghazalian criticism is to illustrate that Greek philosophical principles, so glamourised by Muslim philosophers such as Farabi and Ibn Sina, are not only not rationally demonstrable but also patently incompatible with the Qur'ānic revelations vouchsafed to Muhammad ﷺ (*Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*); the only bedrock of certainty, certitude, knowledge and realization; so essential for the education and civilization of man.

## II. IBN RUSHD'S HERMENEUTICAL RESPONSE

In the galaxy of Muslim philosophers, Ibn Rushd outshines them all for his uncompromising quest for philosophy as a rational investigation or interrogation of phenomena with a view to grasp the nature of what is ultimately real. For the last eight hundred years he has been serving as a source of inspiration both to the European researchers as well as the Muslim scholars. For centuries, he has had the reputation of being the foremost commentator on Aristotle. European scholars translated his works into Hebrew and Latin which are still available in many European libraries. His original Arabic texts or commentaries were either burnt or proscribed due to the antagonistic spirit against philosophy and philosophers, then prevailing in Islamic countries. However, the Latin translations of his Arabic books became instrumental in bringing about the European Renaissance. Europe

during Renaissance was willing to accept the scientific method as emphasized by Ibn Rushd while science and philosophy began in the East to be sacrificed for the sake of mystical and religious movements. Religion won the battle in the East and science triumphed in the West.

The debate between Ghazali and Ibn Rushd is a great, large and perennial debate; perhaps central to the grand epistemological and methodological narratives worked out across cultures, times and climes. The debate mirrors a genuine conflict; the debate between religion and philosophy, between revelation and reason. Ibn Rushd tried to work out harmony between religion and philosophy by recourse to rational interpretation of the Qur'ān<sup>13</sup> and responds to the accusations of Ghazali with great virtuosity and sophistication.

For Ibn Rushd, the paramount question with regard to philosophy is as to whether it is permitted, prohibited, recommended or ordained by the Islamic *shariah*. It is his considered judgement that Islam ordains or, at least, recommends the cultivation of philosophical approach.<sup>14</sup> Ibn Rushd stipulates the function of philosophy to be nothing but to speculate on various types of beings and appreciate their significance in so far as they lead to the knowledge of the creator.<sup>15</sup> The Qur'ān repeatedly exhorts man to cultivate rational approach and try to decipher the significance of the multiple features of the cosmic order. It exhorts us to work out rational inferences, deductions and demonstrations. The learning or employing of inferential, deductive and demonstrative methods by philosophers implies that they should transcend dialectical reasoning employed by theologians and rhetorical ratiocinations indulged in by the masses.

Historically speaking, the foremost concern of early Muslim philosophers has been to bring about an accord or work out a reconciliation between the beliefs outlined in the Qur'ān and the claims advanced by or methods employed by Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. Ibn Rushd's has perhaps been the most decisive and significant contribution



towards working out a reconciliation between Hellenistic rationalism and the Qur'ānic world-view.

In response to Ghazali's monumental and supremely successful 'Incoherence of Philosophers' written with refinement and sophistication hardly surpassed in the annals of philosophy, Ibn Rushd who is perhaps the greatest of Muslim Aristotelians, wrote a number of philosophical works of exceptional merit and significance including the famous 'Incoherence of the Incoherence' in which he tries to dismantle the basic tenets of the Ghazalian critique of philosophers. Ibn Rushd cites the four sources of Islamic Fiqh, viz. the Qur'ān, traditions of the prophet, Consensus and *Qiyas* (Legal inference) with a view to substantiate his defence of philosophers and also to bring out that Ghazali was being more loyal than the king in declaring philosophers to be infidels. The Qur'ān and the traditions of the prophet have not specifically mentioned philosophers to be infidels or apostates or explicitly or implicitly condemned them. Furthermore, since all the qualified doctors of Islam have never arrived at a consensus with regard to doctrinal matters, Ghazali had no right to condemn the philosophers as irreligious on the basis of '*ijma*' (consensus).

It appears that Ibn Rushd is attitudinally or prephilosophically oriented to the truth of both religion and philosophy. His life-long intellectual mission was to rationally demonstrate the truth of religious beliefs as well as that of philosophical propositions. Striking or working out a reconciliation between the apparently conflicting claims of religion and philosophy was at the heart of Ibn Rushd's intellectual struggle. The guiding principle of Ibn Rushd's methodological treatise '*Fasl al-Maqal*' is that philosophical propositions and scriptural revelations both are true and therefore there cannot be any basic disharmony between religion and philosophy. The apparent contradictions, if any, are to be removed by an appropriate interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

Ibn Rushd's assumption, following his predecessors al-Kindi, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, that religion and philosophy do not really contradict each other, and apparent contradictions, if any, must be ironed out by recourse to interpretation, leads him to the

formulation of a hermeneutical strategy especially centred on the Qur'ānic verse pertaining to *Muhkamat* and *Mutashabihat* (viz. al-Qur'ān 3:7). This may be said to be the 'principle of *Tawil*'. The literal meaning of '*Tawil*' is "bringing something back to its ultimate point". In its technical designation, *Tawil* signifies a method of interpretation. What is to be interpreted can be a text, a passage, a sentence or even a single word by reference to its invisible or hidden meaning. By recourse to the method of *Tawil*, we work out an interpretation that consists in going from the surface level down to the depth level of its meaning.

The following quotations reveal as to what Ibn Rushd understands by '*Tawil*' and why and how he wants to apply it. They reveal the intentions of his hermeneutical project:

- (a) "Whenever the conclusion of a demonstration is in conflict with the apparent meaning of scripture, that apparent meaning admits of allegorical interpretation."<sup>17</sup>
- (b) "Philosophy is in general true and unalterable and so the work of reconciliation has to be effected chiefly through finding harmonious interpretations of the scriptures."<sup>18</sup>
- (c) "If the traditional (*al-Manqul*) is found to be contrary to the rational (*al-Maqul*), it is to be interpreted in such a way as to be in harmony with the rational."<sup>19</sup>
- (d) "Although Averroes believed that religion and philosophy are in two different orbits, he nevertheless felt the necessity of reconciling the two and of so stating the philosophic doctrines as not to offend religion and of so conceiving the religious dogmas that they would not conflict with philosophy."<sup>20</sup>

Ibn Rushd was convinced that philosophical demonstrations and scriptural presentations were two modes of grasping the same truth. The theologians were the real trouble-makers who give wide public circulation to apparent clashes between philosophical reasoning and scriptural injunctions, clashes that can easily be ironed out by recourse to the application of the principle of *Tawil*.

According to Ibn Rushd, the *Tawil* or interpretation of allegorical verses must be practiced only by philosophers for only they are trained in demonstrative or syllogistic reasoning. However, the interpretations worked out or deductions and inductions carried out by philosophers should not be divulged to the masses, for there is every danger that the esoteric interpretations of philosophers will push them into the vortex of heresy and infidelity or '*kufr*'. Furthermore, the craving for the popularization of esoteric philosophical interpretations does lead to sectarian or denominational polarization of Islamic *Ummah*. The disagreements propagated by Mutazilites and Asharites constitute the prime example of polarizing Muslims by recourse to differing hermeneutical strategies or principles hedged on their cherished dialectical mode of reasoning:

But going beyond this scholars, through *Tawil*, find the way of reason which leads to the understanding of the truth itself. They verify at the same time the agreement of Law and Reason, of religion and philosophy, while the common man profits from this agreement without knowing that it exists. But it is necessary to respect the situation of the common man and not to reveal to him anything of the interpretations. To act in any other way is to give rise to sects, and this was the error of Mutazillas and Asharis. The majority of the people should be taught the general methods recommended by the Qur'ān. The special method suggested by the Qur'ān should be reserved for the scholars. To conclude, the agreement of the *Ma'qul* and the *Man'qul* is not that of two formulations, of two expressions, of two equivalent types of representation. It is the fact that different types of mind can arrive at the same truth.<sup>21</sup>

In our commitment to any religions faith, we are driven to give assent to a representation (*Tasawwur*) of God. The genesis, development, articulation, crystallization and institutionalized expression of such a faith is motivated by our attitudes, orientations and temperaments. We may be temperamentally inclined either to demonstrative or dialectical or rhetorical modes

of argumentation. Our social and historical experience tells us that most of the people are not inclined to demonstrative mode of argumentation. In view of the same, Revelation, which addresses itself to the mainstream non-demonstrative temperaments, makes very little use of demonstration.

Common people are advised by Ibn Rushd not to get embroiled in the vortex of methodological sophistications, philosophical disagreements and theological disputations. It is better they avoid being caught in figurative, allegorical and metaphorical interpretations and unwarranted assumptions and presumptions in between the lines of philosophical and theological polemics; for in the process, they may loose their faith. In their engagement with philosophical demonstrations, there is every danger that they may loose their moorings orientated to or premised on dialectical and rhetorical modes of persuasion:

“The scholars, for their part, must not “popularize” their learning in the form of dialectical, rhetorical or poetic writings; they must write only works of demonstration (*Kutub al-barahin*) so that they will be accessible only to those who are capable of following such demonstration. Al-Ghazali did not follow this rule and was therefore in error, though his intentions were good. The books written by scholars must be forbidden to the ordinary man by the leaders of the community.”<sup>22</sup>

The truth is one. There cannot be two different expressions of one single truth as though it were spoken in two languages, that of reason and that of imagination, for that would only lead to different conceptualizations. Ibn Rushd stresses the importance of adherence to one truth. Men are prone to understand truth through multiple modes of reasoning. The majority consent to something because of what they themselves are, rather than because of what the thing itself is. Their truth is subjective. Incapable of adopting a rational objective attitude which would govern their personal reactions, they have to have their personal sensibility affected in order to accept what is proposed to them. Consequently it is necessary that the dialectical or rhetorical approaches which they

follow should lead them to a representation of the truth, either actual or figurative, which they can accept and adopt. Their subjective attitude should not lead them into erroneous representations.

If common people are not endowed with the capacity for demonstrative reasoning, it should not be deemed necessarily a disqualification. God out of His infinite wisdom has blessed the common people with images which inspire in them the same basic beliefs that the 'elite' arrive at through reason. For Ibn Rushd to dispute over the conception of God and carry on a philosophical analysis or programme with a view to formulate or legislate a general conception of God for the entire mankind without any regard to specific psychological and intellectual needs of the people is impossible as well as unnecessary. As a matter of fact, different classes of people – the 'elite' and the masses need different conceptions of God, the masses conceiving him or imaging him pictorially whereas the 'elite' conceiving him on a highly sophisticated plane of abstraction.

According to Ibn Rushd the Qur'ānic statements are directed to or addressed to the masses with a view to reinforce and sustain their faith in the unity and supremacy of *Allah*, in the authenticity of the prophethood and in the eschatological reality of the Day of judgement and accountability. Their faith would have hardly been reinforced and sustained had the Qur'ān indulged in the sophisticated platonic dialogues or Aristotelian arguments or Plotinian interpretations.

Ghazali according to Ibn Rushd is not fully appreciative of the significance and need of allegorical interpretation of the profoundly multisemic verses of the Qur'ān. Such interpretations, when conducted according to rules, can in no way conflict with the message of the text. Rather they are meant to uncover the true hidden meanings of the text.

The hermeneutical approach of Ibn Rushd formulated with a view to resolving the age-long conflict between reason and revelation or philosophy and religion may arguably or plausibly be deemed to be a sound strategy. However, this strategy is not

that clearly, categorically and powerfully applied by Ibn Rushd to exonerate philosophers of the charge of infidelity leveled against them by Ghazali on such issues as (a) eternity of the world, (b) denial of Gods' knowledge of particulars, and (c) denial of bodily resurrection.

One version of his answers is as follows:

- (a) The "creation" of the universe means its continuous transformation.
- (b) God knows' the particular facts of the world not as given objects but by his act of creating them.
- (c) Our physical bodies are dissolved at death, but we may receive new celestial ones in a resurrection, and these would hold our reconstituted individual souls.

Secondly, Ibn Rushd gives three different responses on these three issues:

The ascription of the denial of God's knowledge of particulars to philosophers by Ghazali, ostensibly under the inspiration of Aristotle and Plotinus, is patently denied or simply rejected by Ibn Rushd. That God's knowledge is different in kind from human knowledge, goes without saying. Nevertheless, according to Ibn Rushd, Ghazali was thoroughly mistaken in his belief that philosophers denied God's knowledge of particulars or individual objects.

With regard to the denial of the bodily resurrection by philosophers, Ibn Rushd is somewhat defensive and apologetic. He admits that philosophers have carried out allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of bodily resurrection. However, carrying out such an interpretation may be deemed to be permissible or we can say that such an interpretation may not be entirely deemed to be unwarranted. However, such a permissibility is qualified by Ibn Rushd by suggesting that a scholar undertaking such an allegorical interpretation may be deemed to be 'pardonable' for any interpretative inadvertence or hermeneutical trespass:

It is not, of course, impossible that the philosopher may be wrong on such difficult questions (*fî l-ashya al-'awisa*). But he may be excused and he will nevertheless have his reward, like the judge who blunders when performing *idjtihad*, since in this case his error is an involuntary one (*khata'*) which may creep in even when a duty is being performed.<sup>23</sup>

The question as to whether the universe is eternal or temporal is philosophically very explosive and theologically highly inflammable. The problem is at the heart of Semitic theology and ontocosmology. The very notion of the eternality of the universe is anathemic to Semitic theological and conceptual framework, for if the universe is deemed to be eternal, the postulation of a transcendental God becomes pointless and indefensible or the very notion of a transcosmic God will be deemed to be redundant. The relevance and the meaningfulness of a transcendental or transcosmic God is hedged on the temporality and creatureliness of the universe. An eternally existing universe is best explained within the naturalistic framework by recourse to physical and chemical laws, or, at the most, within a pantheistic metaphysical frame of reference.

For Ibn Rushd, the controversy with regard to the eternality or temporality of the universe is essentially ineffable. This ontocosmological *mysterium tremendum* is essentially beyond the ken of rational adjudication or scriptural articulation. The Qur'ân itself is not categorically transparent on the issue. The pertinent scriptural discourse is not unequivocally or unambiguously clear that the universe is temporally originated, *i.e.* has had its origin at a particular point of time. Consequently, the so-called Aristotelian eternalists and Islamic temporalists are sailing in the same methodological boat. Both the camps are trading in their respective allegorical interpretations. Furthermore, eternity/temporality debate is largely too verbal to be made a ground for excommunicating philosophers from the pale of Islam.

However, the basic contention of Ibn Rushd is that Ghazali and Asharite theologians, in general, have no right to declare philosophers to be infidels. Just as Ghazali was more concerned

about demonstrating the incoherence of philosophers rather than establishing some theses of his own, so is Ibn Rushd questioning the *Locus standi* of Ghazali and other theologians in declaring philosophers to be infidels rather than refuting their specific arguments against philosophy and philosophers.

### III. CRITICAL EVALUATION

Ibn Rushd was a man of encyclopaedic erudition. A versatile scholar and a multitasking thinker, he wrote on Philosophy, Islamic jurisprudence and Medicine with equal proficiency. However, the global acknowledgement of his scholarship rests on his analytical and elucidative commentaries on Aristotle's works. During pre-Renaissance centuries he was held in the highest esteem in European universities where his books and commentaries inaugurated a new climate of critical and analytical thinking. Nevertheless, the following points would be in order in the light of above-mentioned outline of Ibn Rushd's hermeneutical strategy.

- (i) However, Ibn Rushd's contention that there is or ought to be no tension between religion and philosophy can be deemed to be a judgement of profound wisdom. However, the judgement of history has substantially gone against Rushdian hypothesis of compatibility of religion and philosophy. The contention that philosophical reasoning was perfectly compatible with scriptural discourse was scoffed at by cynics as a desperate and disingenuous ploy designed as a defense-mechanism against the theological zealotry widely prevalent in pre-modern times and climes. The charge of disingenuousness was reinforced by his repeated exhortations that the real meaning of the attempted philosophical interpretations should be disclosed only to philosophically advanced learners or scholars.
- (ii) Ibn Rushd's belief that Islam encourages the study of philosophy and search for truth, and a true religion cannot rise against philosophy as a genuine philosophy



cannot go against religion is not only a tall order but a heavily value-laden judgement about the relationship of religion to philosophy and *vice versa*. Even if we accept that a 'true religion' and a 'genuine philosophy' cannot go against each other or cannot be mutually contradicting but corroborating, the supremely puzzling issue is as to what is true religion and what is genuine philosophy, etc.

- (iii) The jurisdiction of the 'principle of *Tawil*' is too large to admit of any demarcative delimitations. The applicability of the principle is too flexible not to defend or offend any theological position or philosophical outlook. In fact, theological and philosophical positions are not something over and above the extensions or amplifications of the 'principle of *Tawil*', some contemporary hermeneuticists would contend. Nevertheless, the application of the 'principle of *Tawil*' to the interpretation of the Qur'ānic discourse, does create serious implications for the representatives of orthodoxy. 'The principle of *Tawil*' cannot over-ride 'the principle of empathy' if we are genuinely concerned about judicious hermeneutical results or sound and widely acceptable philosophical investigations. The dialogue between theological orthodoxy and hermeneutical heterodoxy has to function within certain acceptable parameters in order to have some efficacy and relevance.
- (iv) The Qur'ān by its own admission is comprised of two types of verses: verses of established meaning and verses amenable to multisemic treatment or analysis. Verses of 'established meaning' are referred to as '*Mukhamat*' and multisemic or 'allegorical verses' are referred to as '*Mutashabihat*'. What is *Muhkam* and what is *Mutashabih*, are questions of great hermeneutical significance. Commentators of the Qur'ān are deeply divided as to the definitions, explanations and interpretations of these very significant methodological

terms both at the intra-sectarian and inter-sectarian levels. It is impossible to cite all the interpretations of many of the distinguished commentators and exegetes of the Qur'ānic discourse. Some of the commentators and exegetes have defined '*Muhkamat*' as clear verses, verses of obvious and established meaning which are interpretation – independent and explanation – free, *i.e.* verses which can be understood without any explanation or interpretation. On the other hand, the understanding of '*Mutashabihat*' entails explanation by a competent exegetical authority. However, for other exegetes, *Muhkamat* are those Qur'ānic verses which admit of only one interpretation and '*Mutashabihat*' are those Qur'ānic verses which are amenable to various or different interpretations.

The dos and donots emanating or derivable from *Muhkamat* or verses of established meaning are, broadly speaking, clear or consensually deemed to be clear. However, the *Mutashabihat* or allegorical verses are invariably ambiguous and such an ambiguity can, more often than not, lead believers to perplexing and confusing situations. Any ambiguous statement or body of statements, is, more often than not, amenable to sectarian distortions, ideological hyperbole, tendentious interpretations, angular formulations or even idiosyncratic fulminations. These interpretations or formulations do easily become tools of exploitation in the hands of social, political and economic power-holders and power-seekers.

Some scholars of the Qur'ān have advanced crucial and telling arguments against the very attempted interpretations of the *Mutashabihat*. The *Mutashabihat* or allegorical verses refer to states of affairs, prospective and retrospective or possible and actual, whose knowledge, meaning and truth are beyond the ken of human comprehension or understanding. The essential meanings of *Mutashabihat* are outside the confines or contours of human grasp as they are presumed to refer to such eschatological phenomena as apocalypse, last judgement, antichrist, paradise and hellfire etc., or to such ontocosmological concepts as God, soul,

universe etc. However, the eschatological or ontocosmological referents of such discourse are essentially unverifiable by time-honoured methods of human cognition.

Such a field-situation makes the entire exegetical endeavour a highly questionable or even objectionable methodological venture or hermeneutical strategy. Some of the scholars of Islamic sciences have taken the radical stand that the very exegetical effort is pointless in view of its misleading and misdirecting potential. Any attempted interpretation of *Mutashabihat* with a view to eliminate their ambiguity has the potential to lead us astray. They have argued that as per the Qur'ān 3:7, only God knows the true meaning of *Mutashabihat*. In view of the same, the *Mutashabihat* are best left uninterpreted. However, some other scholars have upheld the validity of the interpretation of *Mutashabihat*. They have interpreted the verse of the Qur'ān 3:7 as implying that besides God those who are well-grounded in knowledge or scholarship are also in the know of the true meaning of the *Mutashabihat*. In fact, undertaking interpretation of *Mutashabihat* is the duty of the scholars. The possibility of exegetical disagreement cannot be cited as an excuse to avoid the interpretation of allegorical verses. However, what is important to note is the fact that when the very interpretation of the seventh verse of *Sura Ale Imran* is deeply mired into disagreements of interpretation, how can the celebrated Muslim philosopher of 12<sup>th</sup> Century make it the basis of fashioning his strategy of interpretation. The verse itself has created more controversies than it has resolved.

Besides these crucial considerations that seem to invalidate the very exegetical endeavour or hermeneutical project of the Qur'ānic *Mutashabihat*, it appears that Ibn Rushd does not face the full force of the very verse under discussion, the seventh verse of surah Ale Imran, ostensibly providing vital methodological input about the entire revelatory discourse comprising the Qur'ān. After dividing the Qur'ānic judgements into *Muhkamat* and *Mutashabihat*, the verse further reads, "But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings ..." <sup>24</sup>

The full import of this verse seems not to give licence for interpretation to theologians, scholars, philosophers, exegetes, jurists, Imams, caliphs etc., as the case may be, but to restrain and control our interpretative itch or urge, leading to dialectical formulations, disagreements and disputations characterizing the essence or core of all philosophical and theological endeavours.

The Qur'ānic division of its verses into *Muhkamat* and *Mutashabihat* may also lead to some other interesting hermeneutical twists and interpretative turns. For example, the Qur'ānic verses supporting freedom of human will may be deemed to be *Muhkamat* by Mutazilites and therefore categorically binding on all Muslims to give assent to their truth, whereas such verses may be defined or stipulated by Asharites to be *Mutashabihat* and therefore of no categorical significance. Conversely, the verses emphasizing the absolute control of Allah and utter insignificance of human will may be accepted as *Muhkamat* by Asharites as per their ideological convenience and as *Mutashabihat* by Mutazilites in keeping with their own ideological commitments. In fact, the ideological orientation of the exegetical accounts of the Qur'ānic discourse worked out by the leading lights of various sects and denominations, may be deemed to be the most important reason for the emergence and continuance of interminable theological disagreements amongst Muslims of the world.

Ibn Rushd's mastery of legal, theological and philosophical sciences coupled with his courage of convictions inspired him to question the authority of Ghazali and other Asharite theologians to define or stipulate what is true or good within the conceptual framework revealed to the Prophet of Islam as embodied in the Qur'ānic discourse. He spoke with authority about the principles of Islamic law and their application to theological and philosophical issues. As a trained jurist as well as a theologian and philosopher, Ibn Rushd presented a battery of convincing and theoretically tenable arguments with regard to the respective claims of theologians and philosophers to interpret the '*Ayat-i-Mutshabihat*'.

It so seems that Ibn Rushd felt convinced that theologians have unnecessarily arrogated to themselves the right to interpret the '*Ayat-i-Mutashabihat*' or allegorical verses. The Qur'ān does talk in terms of '*ulil albab*', '*ulil Absar*' and '*Rasikhuna-fi al-Ilm*' or 'Men of understanding', 'Men of vision and insight' and 'Men of authenticated scholarship' respectively. However, it does not authorize any person or group to undertake interpretation of the ambiguous or multisemic allegorical verses of the Qur'ān. Therefore, Ghazali and his fellow – Asharites can be genuinely asked as to how come they deem themselves to be singularly qualified to undertake the interpretation of the ambiguous expressions of the Qur'ān or to settle the truth of beliefs or ascertain the nature of righteous conduct. And then have the temerity or audacity to declare such globally acknowledged scholars and philosophers as Farabi and Ibn Sina to be infidels. The Qur'ān and even the *Sunnah* of the Prophet of Islam do not specifically assign to you any such distinction. Furthermore, there is no global consensus of Islamic scholars as to exactly what true beliefs and righteous practices serve as the minimum or irreducible criteria to retain the membership of Islamic *Ummah* or Muslim community. At the most, belief in the existence of God, the Prophethood and Resurrection may be said to be essential qualifications of a Muslim. Otherwise, Muslims are free to arrive at their own inductions and deductions through any of the demonstrative, dialectical or rhetorical arguments. As a matter of fact, the Islamic theological, exegetical, legal and historical discourse is bristling with inter and intra-sectarian hermeneutical disputations and methodological disagreements of deepest significance.

It must be admitted that theologians as such have no specific or exclusive mandate to interpret the Qur'ānic discourse. Their interpretations, as a matter of historical fact, have been, are, and can continue to be half or quarter-backed accounts, informed neither by intellectual freedom nor philosophical wisdom and lacking in breadth of vision as well as methodological sophistication. It is no one's case that theologians are infallible or impeccable either intellectually or morally. Moreover, there is nothing official about them. Like philosophers, they too are

largely self-appointed guardians of the norms of moral rectitude and criteria of intellectual exactitude. And, in the process, they too have proliferated confusions worse confounded by reinterpretations and reconstructions carried out throughout centuries.

However, with profound apologies to the paradisaal glory and majesty of Ibn Rushd, it may be asked to him as to how come he opts for philosophers as really and singularly qualified for undertaking the so-called divinely ordained mission of interpreting the ambiguous portions of the Prophetic revelation. To say that philosophers are the people of demonstration and arrive at the sure and certain results is deeply confusing and misleading, to say the least. Firstly, the globally accumulated and historically enshrined philosophical discourse is not comprised of logical demonstrations as all philosophers are not logicians and all logicians are not philosophers. Philosophers are ontologists, cosmologists, axiologists, epistemologists, teleologists and methodologists and not ontologists, cosmologists, axiologists, epistemologists, teleologists and methodologists. Secondly, even if they were logicians as against being logists, there would be no substantial change in the field-situation of philosophy, for inductive generalizations of logic are always based upon incomplete enumeration and its' deductive conclusions can either be valid or invalid and may not be true and can be totally false and even absolutely absurd and fantastic. Thirdly, even if we accept the truth of logical demonstrations, how can metaphysical or ontocosmological questions be resolved by recourse to logical demonstrations. If metaphysical or ontocosmological questions were amenable to resolution by logical demonstration, philosophy would have long ceased to be a thing of beauty and joy for ever. At least, we still would not have been witnessing monists, pluralists, dualists, teleologists, mechanists, consequentialists, non-consequentialists, literalists, hermeneuticists, objectivists, subjectivists, relativists, absolutists, localists, universalists, modernists, postmodernists, reconstructionists, deconstructionists, communists, capitalists etc., all engaged in interminable disagreements and all self-righteously

feeling blessed out in their respective methodological paradises or should we say paradigms.

Why should philosophers be the sole proprietors of the interpretative rights? How are only philosophers qualified to undertake '*Tawil*' of allegorical, analogical, metaphorical, symbolic and figurative verses of the Qur'ān? Why not theologians or jurists or other authoritative doctors of Islamic studies? What is so special about philosophers? How come the 'referents' of '*Rasikhun-fil-ilm*' are philosophers and not theologians? These are questions of vital methodological and hermeneutical significance. Ibn Rushd does not have any answers to these questions simply because he cannot have any answers. These wide and large methodological questions are deeply rooted in our depth psychological and ideological dimensions.

In fact, the claimants of being 'referents' to the Qur'ānic description '*Rasikhun-fil-ilm*' have been too numerous to be counted; *Imams*, Caliphs, Kings, Spiritualists, Mystics, *Fuqha*, *Ulema*, Jurisconsults and other doctors of or specialists in the Islamic theological discourse; all claiming to be specially ordained by divine law to interpret the scriptural expressions and resolve the problems thereof. A similar exegetical disagreement of fundamental political significance has been generated by another Qur'ānic description '*Ulial Amar Minkum*'. As is too well-known, the Qur'ānic verse asks believers to follow what is ordained by Allah, follow what is taught by the messenger of Allah and abide by the dictates of those invested with authority. While the terms such as 'Allah' and 'Messenger of Allah' have fortunately operated monoreferentially throughout the history of Islam, the semantic and hermeneutical field of the description '*Ulial Amar Minkum*' is wide and large and amenable to polysemic and polyreferential analysis, exegesis and interpretation. Therefore, Muslim elites of all types have claimed to be specially invested with authority by Allah and so deserving to be faithfully and obediently followed by believers. The majority of the medieval theologians of Islam interpreted this Qur'ānic description to be referring to kings and monarchs who obviously could dictate terms to anyone at their sweet will.

Similarly, the Qur'ānic verse bringing out God's absolute sovereignty over the entire universe and His granting of power to anyone and taking power from anyone, has been cited by many political war-lords to justify the continuance of their overlordship.

The self-justificatory and self-glorificatory interpretations, formulations or projections cannot be the handiwork of ambitious politicians and zealous theologians only. Even the 'objective' and 'neutral' philosophers can be delightfully self-important and self-righteous if not egocentric. When Plato, the metaphysical and political philosopher par-excellence, has to visualize the presiding deity of his 'ideal state', he chooses a 'philosopher-king' to be ideally discharging that responsibility. When a philosopher jurisconsult like Ibn Rushd has to choose the ultimate locus of interpretative authority, albeit with reference to the Qur'ānic description '*Rasikhun Fil ilm*', he chooses a philosopher for the same. So do theologians, of course, with plausible self-righteous arrogance, deem themselves the fittest candidates for ideally accomplishing the perennial task of the interpretation of the Qur'ānic discourse.

The ineffability and indecipherability of human personality is a nightmare for philosophers, psychologists, historians and social scientists. The inexhaustible supply of self-love in the face of one's repeated and repeatable blunderous behaviour is simply mind-boggling. Our innate self-love coupled with a belief in the divine Beneficence can lead even the worst sinners to define or deem themselves to be the chosen people of God.

Our depth-psychological and ideological motivations and our professional, political and economic interests coupled with our rivalries, competitions, jealousies, likes and dislikes and many other intangibles and imponderables most subtly and subterraneously conspire to take or design a methodological stand; to tailor arguments, to philosophise and to conjure up a grandiloquent formulation or interpretation in terms of ideals, values, objectivity, authenticity and disinterested search for truth etc. The silence of our ultimate depths can blossom into philosophical eloquence and even methodological violence. We are most subtly bonded to indecipherable primordial fears and we



need to be reassured. We think, therefore, we exist. The perennial quest for world-views and value-systems entailing elaborate philosophical justifications may ultimately turn out to be an insatiable thirst for self-authentication and self-substantiation.

#### IV. EPILOGUE

The conflicts and controversies between the votaries of the Qur'ānic creationistic ontocosmological outlook and the Greek metaphysical *Weltanschauung* reflect deeper underlying civilisational perspectives championed by ancient Palestinians and Greeks across the Mediterranean shores. The basic perceptions, conceptualizations, formulations and articulations about man, cosmos, God and the interrelations thereof were hedged on differing pre-philosophical civilisational orientations or directions or irreconcilably competing ontocosmological visions inspired by differing requirements, values and priorities defining the ontic and civilisational core of a people. The Palestinian conceptualization of the universe was that of an order that was kind, compassionate, loving and attuned to our moral struggle and spiritual endeavour; presided over as it was by an All-Loving, All-Compassionate and All-Powerful Creator and Master God, the God who mysteriously and miraculously intervenes in human affairs, rewards and punishes herein and hereafter and gives man solace when he feels deeply forlorn or forgotten, alienated or isolated. On the other hand, for Greeks, the space-time continuum we are living in is a rationally ordered cosmos or universe and this rational order is perfectly intelligible and amenable to the epistemological and methodological endeavours of man, man himself being an integral element within this rational totality. In this scenario, the Aristotelian God is the 'Prime Mover' of the eternal momentum or Plotinian One is perennially emanating the universe. However, this absolutistic, abstract and emanationistic God could not be the personal God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims; God of the Abrahamic faith; the God who is First and the Last, Hidden and the Manifest; the end of cosmic teleology, yet the cynosure of human psychology; God who can be loved and who is loving; God who is the *raison*

*de'tre*, *locus standi* and *modus operandi* of human existence. The Greek Mind was not attracted to such a God who seemed capriciously personal and intervening, apparently capable of violating all the impersonal norms of a rational and intelligible order. Thus, the dispute between the Hellenistic ontocosmological eternalism and the Biblical or the Qur'ānic creationism is rooted in deep-seated, subterranean axiological considerations of profound civilisational as well as psychological significance. These profound depths may ultimately emanate from the 'cultural genes' of a people and thus give us a clue as to the genesis and development as well as the meaning and significance of differing Indian, Chinese, European, West-Asian and African civilisational projects.

The perennial conflict between reason and revelation is well-known to all students of the history of philosophy and such a conflict is transcultural and discernible in Indian, Chinese, Judeo-Christian and Islamic philosophical or theological traditions and Greeks have not had a patent on the so-called rational philosophy. Before any philosophical interaction with the writings of Aristotle and Plotinus and before the attempted reconciliations worked out between philosophy and Islam by Farabi and Ibn Sina in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century AD, there was a full-fledged and established school of rational theology amongst Muslims. It was heralded by the dialectical endeavours of Mutazilites who, almost with missionary zeal, tried to justify or demonstrate Islamic doctrines by recourse to rational arguments; demonstrating, for example, to the best of their ability, their cherished doctrine that Gods' will was not capricious but confirmed to universal principles of justice.

Philosophical arguments, doctrines and interpretations are neither verified nor falsified, neither confirmed nor disconfirmed. In the final analysis, they are either relevant or irrelevant, in tune with the times or out of sync with the ongoing cultural and conceptual evolution. They become successful or face failure owing to a multi-complex network of intangibles and imponderables; social, political, economic, educational, cultural, scientific, technological, etc. In fact, the entire subsequent

historical march determines the success or failure of a philosophical achievement or a critical accomplishment. The subsequent history was on the side of Ghazali. The post-Ghazalian Muslims felt deeply indebted to him for withstanding the onslaught of Hellenistic rationalism with methodological sophistication and for guiding them to the righteous path shown by the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*. The grateful *Ummah* conferred on him the title of '*Hujiatul Islam*' (proof of Islam).

However, that should hardly detract from the greatness of our philosopher, Ibn Rushd. He put up a valiant intellectual struggle in defense of philosophical rationalism and philosophers. He did not succeed in persuading Muslims to fall in line with him. His was a sublime failure. May be owing to cross-civilisational pressures and irresistible scientific and technological imperatives in a hypercompetitive world, we shall still rediscover the relevance of Ibn Rushd and inject the Muslim civilisational endeavour across the globe with the spirit as well as the courage of his rational convictions. May be he shall have the last laugh.

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