

ISLAM AND ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

At the beginning of the seventh century Byzantium, the Eastern Empire now completely separate from the disintegrated west, was the most powerful force in the world rivaled by Persia under the Sassanian dynasty. But in a small settlement in south Arabia a man was born who was to change the history of the east forever. In the last chapter I touched briefly on the differences between "inner-directed" and "outer-directed cultures." In an inner directed culture all of the activities allowed by the culture are determined by the members of the culture as they faced its emerging needs. For example, Periclean Athens where all activities were determined by the glory of the state and of the citizens who made up the Democracy. In the harsh environment of the Arabian desert life was determined in response to powers of nature which were seen as divine entities. It is necessarily outer-directed. Life in such an outer-directed culture is simpler. Cultural norms and activities are determined and enforced by the outer agency. In this case the desert. A culture which can come to grips with life in an outer-directed sense can achieve a degree of closeness that is not possible in an inner-directed culture because restrictions on activities are never arbitrary. And their authority is the world itself as represented by undeniable divine entities. The inhabitants of Mecca were Bedouin tribesmen with a long history of nomadic life in the Arabian steppes. They came from a life lived by a strict code developed in response to the harsh environment of the desert. Life in Mecca, on the other hand, was completely different. It was developed around its value as an oasis that lay on the crossroads of a number of highly successful trading routes. Success in Mecca was secular. Life was arbitrary. It was suffering the fate of millions of cities throughout the world where secular success becomes a new driving force. When Muhammad developed his new religion his purpose was to bring back the kind of community spirit that existed in the old life on the steppes. But, if there is anything that is consistent with secular success regardless of the culture, it is the loss of community, and more importantly a loss of the energizing spirit that makes community possible. In the nineteenth century Nietzsche called it 'Nihilism', a feeling of nothingness. In either case it is derived from the loss of an outer-derived, and thus objective source of truth. It is in this sense that Islam developed as a community of man in the service of Allah, the one God, the God of Abraham. By the eighth century the Moslem's had conquered Persia, Byzantium, had spread across Africa, and held practically the entire Iberian Peninsula.

As I mentioned before, the writings of Aristotle were lost to the west following the close of the Peripatetic school" (school of walking philosophers) that carried on his work after his death. While Boethius had translated a few of his logical texts, most of his works did not appear until much later. Even then they were in the hands of Islamic and Nestorian Christian Philosophers. To make matters worse some of the works

Thus, the problem of the Moslem philosophers was to make this somewhat distorted view of Aristotelianism compatible with the Koran.

When the arabs came into contact with Greek science and philosophy in the ninth century there emerged a new breed of Muslim dedicated to an ideal they called the *Falsafah*. The aim of the Fayllasufs (philosophers) was to live rationally in accordance with the laws that governed the universe. Since they believed the God of the Greek philosophers to be identical with Allah, they turned first to Greek science and then to Greek philosophy. According to [Karen Armstrong](#) they came to the conclusion that rationalism represented the most advanced form of religion, and that it had evolved a higher notion of God than what was revealed in the scriptures. They had no intention of abolishing religion, they wanted to purify it. It took a great courage, [Armstrong](#) said, to believe that the cosmos, where pain seemed more in evidence than a purposeful order, was really ruled by the principle of reason. They believed it was their duty to translate the Koran into the more advanced idiom developed through the ages by the best and noblest minds in all cultures. God was not a mystery, he was reason itself This is not to suggest even for a moment that the concept of a fully rational universe that dominated Greek thought was compatible with the thought of the Muslims. The Fayllasufs simply considered that natural law was a manifestation of Allah. [F. E Peters](#) explained the Fayllasuf's position in these terms

What falsafah added to the accumulating pieces of the Greek sciences was an epistemological claim. It brought before the Muslim an alternative theory of wisdom that simultaneously exalted itself and set down in an inferior position the channel of revelation opened by the Prophet of Islam.

This turn towards Greek philosophy, however, did not mean that the Muslims had adopted the Greek and western idea of a rational universe. Nor were the Fayllasuf's attempting to develop a natural theology. The universe was created by Allah out of nothing. Thus Allah is beyond rationality. They were not searching for a reasoned explanation of the world. They were searching for a reasoned explanation of the truth of the Koran. This explains somewhat the short career of the Falsafah in the Muslim world.

The first of the Fayllasuf's, Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq, called Al-Kindi, maintained that human reason can work out a valid philosophical theology. He was a prolific writer who produced books on science, mathematics and religion, as well as philosophy. His works refer back both to the Profit and to Aristotle and Plato. However, the thought of his day did not see the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato as different. His Aristotle, as was most in his day, was developed at least partially from translations of Neo-platonist works. Thus it is not particularly surprising that he introduced an interpretation of Aristotle's concept of the intellect that was as much

which comes from the outside to perform its function in individual human minds. You may recall from our discussion of Aristotle that his idea of the intellect was that it was the power whereby we recognize such things as first principles, or valid syllogisms. He departed from Aristotle too on the creation of the world. Aristotle's first mover was the ultimate cause of the world. The Koran stated that God created the world out of nothing. Some claimed that for these reasons Al-Kindi was not a true Faylasuf.

If so, then the first Faylasuf would be the Turk Faylasuf Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, in the tenth century. He argued that philosophers become aware of the truth through logical demonstrations and their own insight. Non-philosophers know truth and reality by symbols. Thus, philosophy is the highest form of knowledge. Since revealed truth is manifest through symbols, he concluded that one religion could not be suitable for all people and in any case is subordinate to philosophy. He linked the neoplatonist concept of the one with Aristotle's first cause as a self-thinking intellect or mind as well as with Allah. He claimed, in his commentaries on Plato's Republic, that the ideal ruler would be both a philosopher and a prophet. But he maintained that since no such Caliph was likely the philosopher and the politician should work closely together.

There is something outrageous in a culture that is not committed to the idea of a rational universe turning to Aristotle for an answer to the problem of truth. But the Faylasufs were a temporary phenomena of the ninth and tenth centuries. they began their deliberations with the idea that the world was a rational creation of Allah, and that did not require a rational God. If what he created was rational then reasoning was an avenue to its understanding.

Abu-Ibn-Sina, better known as Avicenna, introduced a concept that had important repercussions on later philosophy, the concept of possible being as a mode of being. He began with by showing that there was a clear distinction between essence and existence. For example, we are perfectly at ease discussing dinosaurs which do not exist because we both understand what a dinosaur is and that its nonexistence is irrelevant to our discussion. We also understand what is meant by the statement "the essence of a man can exist even though there were no men anywhere in the universe." Also, we can agree, in a very Aristotelian way, that the essence of a particular man is what it means to be that man. Thus, before he came into existence, his essence would be possible. When he was born, it would become conjoined with his existence. So, if we examine things this way, his essence and his existence can be considered two separate entities. If this were not true, and we were still thinking in these kinds of Aristotelian terms, then he could never cease to exist. He could never die. This means that possible being is a mode of being. It simply needs a cause in order to exist. This cause may be another human being, or it may be a super-natural being. Thus a being may be hypothetically necessary meaning that it must exist if some other being exists. In other words, the essence of a particular man might exist yet the man does not, however, if the man exists then his essence necessarily exists. On the other hand, a being may be absolutely necessary if it must exist in virtue of its essence. In other words, if part of the essence of a being is to exist then it cannot not exist. The point

that an absolute being exist and that being is God.

The idea of possible being is not really consistent with Aristotle because for him the essence of something would include its cause. Therefore there could not be an essence without a cause. Every essence had to be of something that had been caused. Therefore every essence had to be of something that is. But, the introduction of possible being opened the door for some very important advancements in the idea of being, Notably by Thomas Aquinas and Leibniz.

The absolutely necessary God is the ultimate cause of all other beings. In Moslem thought he is also a personal being who knows all that proceeds from him. Creation by God, Avicenna said, is necessary not because God is coerced into creating but because of what he is, "Whatever proceeds from a necessary being must necessarily exist." He therefore made the relationship between creator and created a logical implication. From God proceeded a whole hierarchy of created intelligences each of which is necessary only through the activity of God. The tenth intelligence is the giver of the forms. Through its activity forms are received in matter, the potential becomes the actual. These things, however, come into being and pass away. This series cannot be different than it is because that would imply that God could not know things by knowing his own essence as the source of all that exists.

The tenth intelligence also has the function of illuminating the human mind. This, of course is reminiscent of Augustine and is taken from the Neoplatonic concept of spirit and world spirit. However, he explained it in Aristotelian terms. Aristotle's remarks on the ontological status of the active intellect, however, are obscure and open to various interpretations. Avicenna claimed the active intellect to be a separate intelligence. This doctrine, he felt, is derived through reason but does not contradict the Koran. He also claimed that Aristotle did not deny personal immortality because the pronoun I pertained to the soul and not the body. The soul could therefore be immortal though the body is not.

A twelfth century Moslem named Ibn-Rushd, known to Christians as Averroes developed a more strictly Aristotelian approach to philosophy. Again, he was influenced by writings attributed to Aristotle that were in fact written by others. Of particular importance is his method of freeing philosophy from its traditional conflicts with revelation. He said there are different ways of understanding the Koran that reflected different kinds of minds. The mass of mankind, hardly capable of conceiving a reality transcending the level of the sensible, can be moved by persuasive arguments and apprehend the truth only when presented in imaginative or pictorial form. The Koran caters to such minds. The next level of minds includes those who can grasp dialectical arguments. They too can grasp truths through the Koran along with Moslem theology. The highest minds are those which seek strict logical demonstrations and are capable of apprehending rational truth. For them the Koran provides material for philosophical penetration. He added an idea that was to have serious repercussions later. That was, that if there is a discrepancy between truths determined by philosophy and revelation then both were true.

This attitude made it possible for Averroes to present a description of the Aristotelian intellect that at least begins as a reasonable explanation of the words of the great philosopher himself. Averroes said that in De Anima book III Aristotle used the word intellect four different ways. The first, was what he called the imaginative power or passive intellect. Second, was the active intellect which abstracts the intelligible forms from images in the imaginative power. Third, is the material intellect, a potential principle which receives intelligible forms from the active intellect. Fourth was all of these concepts as conceived in a single entity. He went on to say that the material intellects could not be distinguished apart from the others since it was pure form. The active element, then would be the unity of all of the intellects and this must be eternal because the human race is eternal. The problem this made for western religious philosophers, Moslem, Jewish, or Christian, was that it did not provide for personal immortality.

Science and western philosophy both begin with the same assumption, that the universe is a rational place. But Greek philosophy has always aimed at the unchanging, the pure forms of the divine. Even Aristotle in his role as a biologist was searching for what is universal and consistent in individual entities. Thus Plato's contribution to geometry dealt with pure forms of geometric figures and not those found in nature. Consider the two greatest mathematicians of the period, Eudoxus and Euclid. Though friends of Plato and former students at the Academy, they made their greatest contributions outside the Academy. Aristotle would call what most scientists do in their study of the phenomena of the changing world art (techne), or production. He would consider it something different from philosophy. Later Archimedes and Ptolemy would stop short of explaining the cause of the phenomena that they found in the practical use of mathematics in such fields as mechanics or astronomy. In this totally rational world that grew out of natural forces everything came to be for a reason, a final cause or purpose. These were the purview of the philosopher. The manifestations themselves and explanations concerning them as they were found, that was the purview of the scientist. In the west they have always been separate fields. Not so in Islam. The world was created by Allah. That meant that the study of anything within it was a study of the actions of Allah. During the early middle ages science in the west could not flourish. Scientific activity in Islam developed under the Faylasuf's in their search for an understanding of Allah's world. The scientific works that had the greatest impact on Western thought were those that dealt with mathematics and astronomy. While astronomical developments throughout most of the ninth century centered around developing astrological forecasts, some important Muslim astronomers concentrated instead on developing detailed mathematically exact star charts. Abu'l Wafa' al-Buzjsni, an Iranian, wrote a complete textbook on mathematical astronomy. Another Iranian, al-Quhi, observed the summer and winter solstices and the movements of the planets and was considered to have developed the greatest mathematical accuracy obtained during the tenth century. With this added accuracy the Ptolemaic description of the planetary revolutions began to be suspect. He had developed his description around the assumption that originated in Plato's Timaeus and was backed up by Aristotle, that the stars and planets, being divine, traveled of necessity in perfect circles. The apparent wandering movements were

originally by Eudoxus. But even with this added assumption the results of precise measurements did not confirm the assumptions. No Muslim philosopher questioned this idea, however, it was not to be questioned until the sixteenth century and even then it was by European and not Muslim astronomers. But, to a very great extent these European developments when they did occur did so based on these accurate Muslim observations. Undoubtedly the most lasting contribution to western thought of the Muslims was the introduction of the Arabic (which they adapted from India) numeral system that we use today.

During the medieval period Jewish philosophers generally had more freedom in Moslem countries than in Christian. The most famous was Moses Ben Maimon, better known as Moses Maimonides. Born in Cordoba, he was driven from his home town by the emergence of a powerful anti-Jewish Moslem sect. He moved to Africa and finally settled in Egypt. He indicated considerable admiration for the Moslem philosopher Al Farabi and like him made Philosophical inquiry a higher standard for judging religious truths than pictorial or mythical thought. However, unlike Al Farabi, he made prophetic illumination superior to philosophical reasoning. His intent seems to be to produce a set of philosophical commentaries which would explain doctrinal concepts in philosophical terms. However, they were presented in a way that would be inexplicable to the average person.

The ideas of Maimonides that had their greatest influence on western thought were those that dealt with God and his existence. The problem is one that occurs in all western religions. That is, how can we understand the infinity of God given the comments on him in scripture. For example, the statement, "let us make man in our own image and likeness" from Genesis is not meant to mean that God is corporeal. Maimonides explained that God is simple. When we predicate to God a variety of attributes we are referring not to God, but to the multiplicity of Gods effects. When we make positive statements about God, such as that he is wise, we do not know what they mean to God except that they deny something of him. In this case it is that there is no wisdom that he does not possess. If we say that he is powerful what we are really saying is that he is not powerless. But most important when we said that he did not exist we would be saying that the world is self-sufficient, that there is no divine reality. That would be a statement that is false. We therefore must say that God exists but, though that statement is true, God's existence is not the same as the notion of existence as it is applied to us. We know of God by what he is not rather than what he is. When we are thinking of god we are thinking of a divine reality of which we can have no direct knowledge. It is beyond human comprehension.

An interesting highlight concerning his attempt to prove the existence of God begins with a statement concerning the perennial philosophical problem of time. While he believed that time had a beginning, philosophy had never been able to show that the world did not exist from eternity. For him this meant that a philosophical proof of the existence of God must begin with the assumption that the world did exist from eternity. In this way the more difficult case would have been proven and if it should be shown through scripture that the world had a beginning, then the argument would

mover by presenting the argument several ways. He followed this by turning to Avicenna's argument that the existence of possible things (that is the essences of things that are possible even if they have never actually existed) implies the existence of a being which cannot not exist. His conclusion is that a being which is a necessarily existing being, which cannot not exist, is implied by the existence of possible beings. On the other hand, if the world had a beginning then it must have been created by God. For what has been created, existence is an accident. For God existence is part of his essence

About the Book:

Consider what must be true of a universe in order that there can be a species of life that is free. Freedom means more than the ability to choose. It means that the outcome of the chosen act must be in some way the expected result of the choice. The mechanisms by which human beings determine their choices are many and varied. But the one mechanism that is dedicated to understanding the implications of choice, and the most probable logical outcomes of choice, is reasoning. However, reasoning is only valid in an environment that is essentially rational. Reasoning can handle the unexpected and the unusual. It cannot handle the illogical and the irrational. Therefore if man is capable of being free then the world must be rational.

Wallace H. Provost, Jr.:

I was born in Springfield Massachusetts January 3, 1929. Graduated from Agawam High School in 1946. I raised a large family working as an electronics and instrumentation technician and returned to school only after the children were grown (as I write this I have 11 children, 30 grandchildren, and 4 great grandchildren). I received a Bachelor of Independent Studies degree from the University of South Florida in 1981, a masters degree in Philosophy in 1984 and a masters degree in Sociology in 1986. I taught philosophy courses at the University of South Florida, and Hillsborough Community College.

My primary philosophical interests are in social and cultural philosophy. My web site <http://www.n4bz.org> is devoted to a new approach to understanding complex social and cultural issues I call non-linear philosophy. By non-linear I simply mean bypassing the assumption of linear cause and effect that has led previous rationalist philosophers into avenues of absurdity. Instead I have devoted my energies to understanding the structure of complex entities.

Free Preview:

God Science and Reason begins by asking a simple question, 'What does it mean to be a member of our modern Western society?' If you are typical, particularly if you are American, you will probably begin your answer with thoughts concerning the freedom of man. No other culture in the history of the world has had this fixation on human freedom. In the west, particularly in

America, freedom is our most important possession. Now, what if we take step deeper into this concept, and consider what must be true of a universe in order that there can be a species of life that is free. Freedom means more than the ability to choose. It means that the outcome of the chosen act must be in some way the expected result of the choice. The mechanisms by which human beings determine their choices are many and varied. But the one mechanism that is dedicated to understanding the implications of choice, and the most probable logical outcomes of choice, is reasoning. However, reasoning is only valid in an environment that is essentially rational. Reasoning can handle the unexpected and the unusual. It cannot handle the illogical and the irrational. Therefore if man is capable of being free then the world must be rational.

The Universe, then, must be a rational place. Yet this is only an assumption. Even if it is an assumption no modern westerner could ever seriously question. For if it is wrong he cannot be free. But where did this strange yet absolutely necessary assumption come from? Certainly not from experience. The world as we generally experience it is fraught with the irrational and the illogical. So if we are correct and the world is rational but our experience in it is not, then how did we find out? Whose idea was it? Keep in mind that if you doubt that the world is rational then by all means never fly in an airplane, or drive your car down a modern highway, and don't assume you have a choice about either. What is it that sets off your electric alarm clock to get you up in the morning? Certainly not some God on mount Olympus, or the positions of the stars. Our modern world is intimately tied up with natural scientific laws in which we have absolute faith. Yet such faith depends just as absolutely on the rationality of the Universe.

What do we mean when we say the world is rational? We mean first that man as a reasoning animal can understand it. Though no one suggests that we understand the world completely, as modern westerners we have complete faith that the world is understandable, that it is capable of being understood, and that perhaps one day we will understand it completely. But to be understandable the world must be regular. We must be correct when we say that the natural laws that hold today will hold as well when we get up tomorrow. Natural laws are eternal, unchanging and absolute even if our understanding of them is not. This must be true if the world is rational. So, when you get up in the morning and turn on the television to get the day's weather, you are not worried that it might not work today because you know deep down inside you that unless some part failed last night it will work. And you know in the same way that you will see the morning weather girl even if you don't quite believe what she says. You know because you know the world is rational.

A scientific law that is true only for the moment, the day, or even for the millennium is not a law. Our conceptions of scientific laws may and do change over time, but the laws do not. They are in the category of the 'unchanging.' But the unchanging is eternal, outside of time. Throughout the centuries the term 'eternal' has been relegated only to the 'Divine.' the stuff of the Gods. God Science and Reason is the story that this single assumption, that the

world is rational, has had on the evolution of Western society. The story begins with the presocratics because they, more than anyone in the history of the world, saw the implications of this assumption. They laid out the questions that have plagued Western Philosophers throughout the centuries. The story is told through the words of the great western philosophers. But it is told in a historical context remaining at all time fully cognizant of the world in which each philosopher lived. Through this narrative we can live the evolution of modern thought. We can see the Platonic expression of the Presocratic problems in a way that is inimical to man and the Aristotelian expression as that of men who live in a real world.

The death of Alexander set the western world up for a syncretism between Platonic rational mysticism and a rogue brand of Jews that resulted in a Divine dominated by a caring God. Western Christianity took on new rational outlook through the ideas of Augustine. He not only developed an approach to Christianity that was to carry European man for nearly a thousand years, but was to become the cornerstone of the Protestant reformation.

Early feudalism united largely rural Europe in a way that gave freedom and dignity to every man. This might seem like an outlandish statement but in God Science and Reason this is illustrated by a comparison between life in Feudal Europe and that in Islam as that new religion swept across Africa and made inroads into Europe. It was the Islamic philosophers who brought Aristotle back into western thought. But it was Aquinas who united Augustinian Platonism and Aristotelianism to form the basis of the late middle ages culture and opened the door for the cultural renaissance.

If the world is rational then it can be known. What can be known is only that which is unchanging and therefore eternal. The Islamic philosophers saw the world as the rational outcome of Allah, the Christians of God. But Galileo discovered scientific laws. They too must be eternal. The rationalists attempted to unify a Divine and Eternal God with scientific laws. Spinoza even went so far as to make scientific laws the essence of God.

That the world is rational is an assumption. But is it by itself enough to build a complete description of the universe? Remember, that if you build from this basis you must acknowledge the existence of the eternal. When the English Empiricists rejected the rationalist approach to knowledge of the universe they severed the tie that linked knowledge with the eternal and with it much of the necessary connection to the Christian God. At the same time they remained an unacknowledged allegiance to the assumption to the rationality of the world. Like Aristotle John Locke made the immediate objects of experience things in the world around us. But the final separation from mediaeval logic was made by David Hume who recognized as experience only the senses and the passions.

The severing of the necessary as a route to knowledge had political repercussions. These can be seen in the tumultuous years of seventeenth century England. Locke's political philosophy made politics a development of man's experience as his empirical philosophy had made knowledge an

outcome of man's experience. It was the experience of man in a rational world that led to the American revolution in political thinking. And it was a turn toward Locke's empirical philosophy that led Jonathan Edwards to bring American Calvinism into the American political sphere.

In Europe Rousseau began where Locke left off, with man in the state of nature being free. But then his assumption that society has led man into chains led him to develop a path that would lead to an absolute Sovereign. However, his sovereign was developed through a contract among independent men. Power and liberty seem to be the most contradictory of all concepts. The American development was based on the rule of law and not of men, not even of an artificial man. But the European, holding the memory of such enlightened leaders as Louis IV in France, Frederick the Great in Germany, and Catherine the Great in Russia, would feel more at home with something like an enlightened Hobsian sovereign. God Science and Reason then follows the evolution of European thought through to the emergence of Nazi Germany.

While political philosophy, particularly where it was divorced from allegiance to a rational world, became a slave of the prevailing cultural winds, Science did not. Does this mean that the scientific way of looking at the world is a better route to truth? God Science and Reason then follows this line of thought through to modern epistemological thought. Throughout the book great emphasis is placed on the idea that philosophical thought is both evolutionary in the sense that it changes and is changed by the culture that it operates in, and by the realization that philosophers not only live in real worlds but are part of those real worlds. Our world today is experiencing the greatest cultural clash of all times. One that dwarfs the clash of the sixth century BC that gave birth to Western culture. Can we see in the development of the past the ingredients that will open our minds to the next Descartes? God Science and Reason finally looks at a few of the ideas developing in late twentieth century thought that just might underlie the thought of such a man. But, no matter who, and no matter what ideas, might inflame the future in a world that has more non-western peoples than western, one assumption will remain firm. The universe is a rational place. If you don't believe it don't surf the Internet, don't drive a car, and whatever else you do don't fly in an airplane. Can God be a part of such a universe? Yes.