CHAPTER 71

The possibility of a philosophy of Islam

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Magic and arguably poetry are arts condemned by the Author of the Qur'ān (2: 102; 26: 224—6). Would academic philosophy of religion have escaped condemnation if the Sacred Text had been revealed in a different age or in a different culture (like, say, Socrates' Greece)?

Ever since the first currents of Hellenic philosophy overwhelmed the simple literalism of the Muslim creed, Islamic "orthodoxy" has never ceased to frown on the power of philosophy to plague its labours. Philosophy, we are told, creates at worst unnecessary doubts and hesitations, and at best mere conjecture and confusion; scripture by contrast, it is said, offers assurances for Paradise. The "orthodox" view prevalent among Muslims, as among orthodox Jews and orthodox Christians, is simple: there is neither the time nor the need for philosophy in a world under the burden of divine nemesis and blessed with the benefits of divine tuition. Does not the book of Allah contain sufficient guidance and education for the faithful student?

Here I intend to explore and refute various religious objections to any philosophical approach to the Muslim faith. I begin with the important if standard religious objection about the essential impiety of philosophical method when applied to revealed conviction. How can the philosopher judge the Word of Allah - one's Lord? Muslim scholars have, from the earliest times, emphasized the Qur'ān's role as final arbiter, as secreting a criterion (Furqdn; 25: 1; 3: 4) for judgment. Thus, revelation supplies, we are told, a supernatural verdict on humanity and all things natural or human, including human reason (ʻaql). God judges us; we do not judge God or His message. "Is not Allah, " asks the Qur'ān rhetorically, "the best of judges?" (95: 8).

Allah is indeed the best of judges. It is of course true - necessarily
true – that what God says about us is superior in insight to what we might say about ourselves or God. To say, however, that God's (alleged) revelation should be assessed by use of the normal methods of scrutiny is not to deny the ultimacy or primacy of God's views. It is merely a comment on how to seek to determine what God's views actually are, and the recommendation is that we should use the only apparatus we possess, namely, the methods of reason. (Remember that rejecting the supremacy of reason is one thing; rejecting the importance of reasoning is quite another.)

Related to the first objection is the accusation that reliance on reason in discussions of revealed claims is in effect intellectually idolatrous. The philosopher is an idolater. To obey the voice of reason rather than the revealed commands of scripture is sinful.

This is the most irritating of all the religious objections to rational method. For it is not as though, in the manner of a Faust, one were to sell one's soul in exchange for knowledge, aware of the superior worth of preserving one's soul in order to seek the pleasure of God. Our situation today is hardly that grandiose. At the very least, our alleged intellectual idolatry is unintentional. We are simply ordinary folk caught up in some messy epistemological predicaments in an age of uncertainty. Perplexed people, seeking to know the truth about life before leaving a scene where discordant cries of conflicting views assail them from all sides, are forced to rely upon their intellectual apparatus, modest as that may be for the purpose. Without the discrimination that reason provides, we cannot find our way out of the jungle. How is one to distinguish truth from falsehood – even revealed truth from merely impressive sounding untruth?

Nor is it as though one said, as a Nietzsche would in a defiant mood, "God has his own opinions: I prefer my own." One merely wishes to know what God's views really are. After these are known, it is, for a reasonable person, no longer an open question whether or not such views express an ultimate truth.

Anti-intellectualism runs deep in ordinary religious thought. Nor is it just plain religious folk or even plain religious thinkers who are under its spell. Many sophisticated philosophers believe that systematic rational theorizing about God is due to want of faith.

What are we to make of this? People engage in systematic theology and in philosophy of religion for many different reasons. While it is rare for an atheist to be interested in

Christian or Islamic theology proper, there is no shortage of disbelieving philosophers of religion. Now, presumably, the group accused of lack of faith are the believing theologians (isn't a Christian theologian necessarily a Christian believer?) and believing philosophers of religion, and not those who reject faith altogether. The believing theologians would find the charge of lack of faith a curious one:
after all they see themselves as professionally engaged in the service of their faith. Believing philosophers of religion may more plausibly be accused since part of their professional obligation qua philosophers requires them to suspend their religious commitments.

It is not easy to make the charge stick. As I understand it, it amounts to saying that, unless believing thinkers and theologians were assailed by doubts about their religious convictions, they would not need the props of academic theology or philosophy in the dark hour of scepticism. But how is this an accusation, even if we accept the foregoing reasoning as sound? Why should it be seen as culpable? We could say that believing writers who suspend their religious convictions temporarily (in the interests of objectivity) are people of "intermittent faith": they sometimes need to think and write like sceptics rather than as mosque- or church-going believers. But to be people of intermittent faith, in this sense, is not the same as being people of "little faith", in the derogatory sense in which this expression is employed in scriptural writings. And it is false to say that people of intermittent faith are people of no faith at all. For such a view would rule out the entire run of ordinary believers from the believing club, leaving only a few of the seminal religious figures (who lived in the heat of active faith and piety day and night) to qualify as genuine believers. Almost all believers

have their sceptical moments; believing thinkers or theologians merely seek to cultivate some kinds of sceptical moods as a part of their professional obligation in order to be objective about their religious convictions.

As it happens, the religionist's initial reasoning is itself unsound, inspired as it is by a mistaken view about the nature of faith. It is often said by religious writers that, once faith is proved or conclusively justified, it can no longer be an appropriate candidate for mere belief: one can only have faith where there is uncertainty. But, as the Christian thinker Terence Penelhum has ably shown, faith can incorporate knowledge just as it can incorporate doubts. Faith and knowledge, like faith and uncertainty, can co-exist in religious as in secular contexts. Thus, one can believe what one knows, have faith in what one knows; indeed one can even doubt what one knows or "knows very well". The Classical dichotomy between faith and knowledge, endorsed by such writers as St Thomas Aquinas and by many Muslim and Jewish religious thinkers, is actually untenable. It is surprising that theists should have seen faith as being incompatible with knowledge. After all, many of the seminal religious figures seemed to know that there was a God who cared about humankind and yet they were expected to have faith in him. The Qur'ān presupposes that one can possess knowledge (ʻilm) while having faith (īmān)-, again, to turn to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, such men as Abraham, Moses and Jesus enjoyed such strikingly intimate relationships with God that one may say they had knowledge of the Divine while simultaneously being faithful. To turn the religious coin, the whole scriptural emphasis on the perversity of rejection presupposes the compatibility of faith and knowledge. The

perversity of rejection (kufr) can be understood only in terms of people's wilful refusal to have faith in or believe in what they secretly know. The religious opposition to an intellectually sophisticated approach to religious issues is, then, in part the outcome of a misunderstanding about the nature of the life of faith, and of rejection.

At this stage, religionists may shift their ground in the hope of knocking out their opponents in the second round - supposing that all parties survive the opening scuffle. Even granted that the philosophical study of religious faith is religiously permissible, it will be said that it is none the less to be discouraged for various religious reasons. The Qur'ān is addressed to believers, at least in the first instance. ("O you who believe" is a frequent form of address in the sacred volume.) God is concerned to elicit a faithful response, not to make theologians or philosophers of us. The aim of revelation is not to provide us with the truth for truth's sake: the hope is that by knowing the truth we may be liberated from bondage to illusory divinities and attain success (falāh).

This objection is the outcome of confusing one correct observation with two incorrect inferences. It is true that the aim of the religious life is to find favour in the eyes of our Creator. In that sense, the purpose of revelation is not primarily to satisfy the intellect but rather to show us the way to Eleaven; a believer's motives in seeking to learn Allah's purposes from the teaching of the Qur'ān should primarily be practical and devotional rather than academic and controversial. But it does not follow from this correct claim that there is no room for reasoned speculation in the religious life or that the sole purpose of sacred literature is to preach to the converted.

Let me take these last two points in turn. There is both a place and a need for reflection, including detached reflection, about one's religious beliefs and allegiances. In the occasional cool hour, we need to ascertain, as far as it is humanly possible, the objective validity of our faithful convictions. Most of us can and should take off the religious cloak, if only occasionally, and if only to mend it for renewed service. This is the right thing to do given that we wish to live with intellectual integrity in an age of religious and ideological pluralism. Unlike some of the seminal figures of the theistic traditions, hardly any modern believer lives in the heat of an active religiosity day and night. For us, it is both possible and necessary to alternate in the roles of participant and critical spectator.

The Qur'ān is not, to pick up the second point, just a sermon for the faithful. Many of its verses are indeed addressed to or report the actual and normative deportment of believers; all of it was originally vouchsafed to one particular believer, Muhammad. But none of this could
imply that it is the exclusive property of the Muslim club; the document of revelation is the property of all mankind. The author of the Qur'ān has no hesitations about exposing the religious document and its credentials to the scrutiny of the idolaters, the rejectors, the hesitants, the Jews, the Christians and others. Is it too unnatural an extension to encompass the mild gaze of the believing thinker temporarily setting aside religious commitments and putting on the sceptical cloak in the interests of objective study?

The religionist could reply that the Qur'ān (56: 179) itself warns us that "none save the purified shall touch" the revealed Word of God. What are we to make of this? This

verse has been variously interpreted. It could mean that the heavenly version of the Qur'ān is inaccessible to those who are impure or it could refer to the Qur'ān in earthly currency being out of the reach of rejectors. The only plausible interpretation is that committed believers should place themselves in a state of ritual physical purity before perusing the Sacred Text: they should perform the necessary ablutions. Such a requirement cannot extend to those who disbelieve the Scripture's inspiration and claims. Any other interpretation is problematic. Muslims could argue that the Qur'ān should be inaccessible to non-Muslims and thus erect a high barricade of religious exclusivism. They could argue that rejectors are "impure"; and it is a short step from here to suggest that those whose orthodoxy is suspect are also impure even though they claim to be believers.

Patient religionists may feel that we have failed to get to the heart of the matter. Islam is not, they retort, some kind of spectator sport: one has to be a submitter to God's Will in heart and mind, in order to have any real idea about the whole thing. Submission to God's Will (i.e. Islam) must include intellectual submission. Can the rejector, or the detached scholar, really understand the quality of total submission, itself rooted in intellectual humility, that the Muslim faith demands? It is impossible, it will be said, to have a purely theoretical interest in Islam, for either one genuinely understands it and then rejects it out of perversity (since to understand all is here to embrace all) or else one simply fails to understand it. And how can the outsider or the thinker who suspends commitment to Islam even comprehend the faith and its scripture as momentous realities that secrete an immediate normative significance for all of us in this life?

Admittedly, one needs some imaginative sympathy with the religious ideal if one is to avoid serious misunderstanding, even a complete failure of understanding. However, sympathy with any religious ideal – though preferably a monotheistic one – usually suffices. (Certainly, it need not be a specifically Muslim ideal.) And most sceptics and secularists do have a participant's understanding of religious belief and practice: they were brought up in religious, including quite pious, homes.

The antipathy to detachment is inspired by the correct observation that to recognize the availability of religious knowledge is also partly to recognize the importance of pursuing it, indeed implementing it through a course of practical religious devotion. One cannot fully grasp the truth about the nature of religious belief without also realizing that it characteristically inspires specifically religious responses to reality. The religionist is mistaken, however, in concluding that one must be a religious believer in order to understand what religious belief is.

What, then, is the role of independent reason in the interpretation of scriptural claims? What is the true office of reason in theology? The Qur'ān itself implies an optimistic assessment of the potential of human intellect ('aql); people are constantly invited to think in order that they may believe. But, in the final analysis, faith has decisive priority over reason: faith defines the offices, power and the limits of reason in matters theological. The predominant view among Muslim theologians today as in the past is the view called "fideism" in Christian thought: an intellect unenlightened by God's grace cannot judge faith while an intellect enlightened by God's grace can only judge faith favourably. Faith does

not stand in need of rational justification; it is indeed, in religious domains, the arbiter of reason and its pretensions.

The primacy of faith is as much a feature of orthodox Islamic thought as of orthodox Christian thought. The Qur'ān does frequently invite us to ponder the signs of Allah in nature, society and the self. But the reality of Allah Himself is fully accessible only to faith – a faith that is itself a gift of grace. After all Allah is in the first instance the subject of faith and loving obedience, not of rational enquiry or purely discursive thought. Unaided human reason is inferior in status to the gift of faith. Indeed, reason is useful only in so far as it finds a use in the larger service of faith. For the orthodox believer, faith is a gift of grace, to be embraced on the authority of no less an authority than Allah Himself: credere Deum Deo (I believe in God on God's own authority) is the slogan.

The problem of the role of independent reason in the interpretation of religious claims brings us to the central issue. The disquiet is about the delicacy of combining a faithful fealty to Islamic convictions with an endorsement of free enquiry about their epistemological status. Can a Muslim, under the tuition of scripture, see the issue of the truth of Islam as an open one?

It is difficult to deny the irreducible tension involved in the making of two disparate commitments: one to the primacy of faith, the other to the primacy of reason. One way to effect an admittedly temporary armistice between faith and reason is to draw a distinction between the philosophy of religion, on the one hand, and theology proper, on the other. Now, the philosophy of religion is in effect the rational examination of

theological issues without reference to the authority of any revealed
dictum; theology, however, integrally relies on a supranatural authority. The philosophy of religion treats all types of religion and religious faith as its domain, not presupposing the privileged position of any type but aiming at discovering what religious truths, if any, are implied by the psychology, sociology and history of religion. Theology, however, simply starts with the faith of some particular religion, the Jewish or Christian, for example, and expounds that faith while accepting the central tenets of the religion in question as revealed or otherwise authoritatively grounded truths.

If we accept the legitimacy of this distinction, then the believing philosopher of religion will, in his or her philosophical capacity, seek exemption from the normal religious strictures on any criticism of the allegedly revealed bases of faith. The theologian may, however, work and think securely within the ambit of faith. Institutionally, faithful philosophers of religion may conscientiously teach the normal Western university syllabus while their theologically inclined co-religionists would most appropriately teach in a seminary (madrasah) set up by the religious authorities.

The Qur'ān itself does not outlaw free enquiry. But it would be self-indulgent to read into its verses any celebration of free enquiry in the modern sense of the term. There are no specifically Islamic reasons for encouraging Muslims to undertake any unduly critical study of their basic religious convictions. Indeed, free enquiry has always been a debatable concept in the madrasah-, what is the point of free enquiry if one already has the truth?

There remains a final question. What are the basic presuppositions of a philosophy of Islam? There are, I believe, at least three basic assumptions, each controversial, which any philosophy of religion must necessarily make.

Firstly, one needs to assume that religious belief is not sui generis-. it can be subsumed under a subsection of belief in general in the same way as historical or political or moral belief. Secondly, it has to be assumed that even if religious belief is indeed a special gift of grace, it is at another level simultaneously a purely human conviction whose content is subject to ordinary appraisal and scrutiny. Thus, even if it is true that authentic revelation is the only source of true religious ideas, the thinker may still reasonably assess the truth and plausibility of revealed claims once these have appeared on the mortal plane. And, thirdly, I take it that the actual existence of God is not a necessary condition of the very possibility of entertaining belief in God or belief that there is a God. Some religionists have, mistakenly, thought that the very fact that people actually believe in God implies that the human mind is an arena for the direct causal activities of God, Gabriel or the Holy Spirit.

The religionist may, rightly, argue that, in making these assumptions, I have begged the question against an important theological position
– the position one might call “Islamic neo-orthodoxy” or simply “Islamic orthodoxy”. But if the philosopher cannot keep all the balls in the air, neither can the religionist. No method, whether religious or philosophical, is fully presuppositionless. The least controversial method is the one nourished by the minimum number of controversial

assumptions. But questions are bound to be begged. (Is the trick merely to beg them persuasively?)

In disputes of this kind, it is customary for both parties to contend that the burden of proof is on the opponent. While these arguments about the location of onus are not compelling, they do, if successfully made, indicate a direction of enquiry. In this secular age, the burden of "proof" (or at least of plausibility) is on the believer's shoulders. If in the past men sought to subsume their world under the aegis of revelation, today they seek to interpret revealed dicta through the primacy of the purely huma

We have here a difference in temper, a conflict of loyalties: a religious mentality views scepticism and suspended commitment as being foreign to genuine faith while the secularized mentality seeks exemption from the dogmatic pressures of revealed conviction. These are genuinely opposed moods which cannot be fully reconciled without a retreat from integrity. Philosophy, as an autonomous branch of learning, can at best only indirectly serve religious ends. In the first instance, it has to be in what it takes to be the service of disinterested truth, whether that be religious or secular. Since philosophers cannot conscientiously assume that they, as philosophers, will always arrive at conclusions favourable to their religious convictions, they must part ways with the religionists. Philosophy can only be an apology for truth.

Routledge History of World Philosophies
Volume 1

History of Islamic Philosophy

EDITED BY
Seyyed Hossein Nasr
and Oliver Leaman

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1996

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park. Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Ave. Ne~lY- ork. NY 10016

Reprinted 1997 and 1999

First published in paperback 2001

Reprinted 2003,2007

Transferred to Digital Printing 2008

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group, an informa business

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

TJI Digital, Padston; Cornwall

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the B ritish Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBNl0: 0-415-05667-5 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-415-25934-7 (pbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-05667-0 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-25934-7 (pbk)