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Al-Fārābī's Epistemology: The Role of Reason in the Discovery of Knowledge

ISHAM PAWAN AHMAD

The Muslim philosophers in spite of the variety of places in which they lived and wrote their works have an undeniable similarity in the themes of their writings and in the questions which they raised and attempted to answer. Anawati points out three major factors that unite the themes of Muslim philosophers: 1) they had the same starting point viz. the Qur'ānic truths and the everyday teachings of Islam, 2) they saw their philosophy as a continuation of past wisdom, 3) they were convinced of the oneness of all knowledge crowned by metaphysics or *Ilāhiyyāt*.¹

The Muslim philosophers never challenged or doubted the teachings of the Qur'ān, but rather at times, resorted to an allegorical interpretation of the Qur'ān, for example on the issue of creation in time, or the resurrection of the body when it seemed that the literal interpretation of the Qur'ān conflicted with their views.² In any case, as far as the Muslim philosophers were concerned, they always sought the right understanding of the revealed text i.e. the Qur'ān, because they thought they could reach the right interpretation of it in their own way.

The Muslim philosophers had gained much of their knowledge from non-Muslim sources and especially from the Greek philosophers. They considered that God had given wisdom to all men both through the use of his intellect and also, since the beginning of man, God had sent this wisdom through His continuous line of prophets to all peoples and all nations for guiding them culminating in the last Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh). The Muslim philosophers saw no problems in accepting truth from wherever it came. However, they saw the Qur'ānic revelation as a consummation of this wisdom.

The Muslim philosophers were convinced of the oneness of knowledge. In his book, *Ihṣā' al-'Ulūm* (Categories of the Sciences), Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (870-950) lists and describes the various sciences, and argues that philosophy must be their head because it ensures the certainty of all knowledge through the use of apodeictic reasoning.³

The Muslim philosophers were confident that they must and could interpret and assimilate philosophy i.e. Greek philosophy into the Islamic ethos. The Muslim philosophers' reasoning on why it was necessary to incorporate philosophy into the Islamic ethos is that philosophy provided the proofs for theoretical opinions in religion. Al-Fārābī says, "Theoretical opinions in religion have their proofs in theoretical philosophy, while they are taken in religion without proof."⁴

The result of this assimilation of philosophy into the Islamic ethos is the development of man's reasoning from the lesser forms of reasoning — rhetoric, dialectic and sophistry — to the highest form namely, demonstrative reasoning.⁵ The Muslim philosophers also felt confident that they could make philosophy acceptable to their Muslim audience because of their conviction of the universality of the human condition, both physical and spiritual.⁶

In order to reconcile philosophy to a religion, that is revelation-centric, they had to evolve a formula for incorporating revelation into philosophy. Their attempt to incorporate revelation into philosophy resulted in one of the Muslim philosophers' major contributions to the advancement of philosophy. The Muslim philosophers, using the materials from Hellenistic thought, pressed and shaped it into a new direction so that a novel original pattern emerged from them⁷. This incorporation of revelation is major because it led the way for incorporating philosophy into religion and paved the way for both medieval Jewish⁸ and Christian⁹ philosophers to reconcile philosophy to religion.

This reconciliatory attempt is a dynamic process. The philosophers were not only inheritors and preservers of earlier philosophical truths, but they were also Muslims believing in a faith in which revelation pervaded all aspects of life. The Muslim philosophers

did not view their task of reconciliation simply as an accommodation of religion, but rather as the correct understanding of religion. Marmura explains how the philosophers perceived this task:

They viewed themselves (these philosophers) as we had mentioned earlier, not only as inheritors and preservers of earlier philosophical truths, but as continuing the quest after the true nature of things. At the same time, they were part of a culture that was Qur'āno-centric, a culture whose ethos was religion. The Qur'ān and the mission of the prophet were the central fact of their history. As metaphysicians they could not bypass such facts. Here they were in search of "the true nature" of what was at the core of their way of life. Their interpretation of Islamic philosophy must hence be viewed in part as an attempt at self-understanding.¹⁰

Their attempt to incorporate philosophy into the Islamic religion must not be seen as superficial, and there is no reason to doubt that they were fully convinced¹¹ that not only was their concept of Islam in harmony with the Qur'ān, but it was also the true interpretation of the Qur'ān and hence the true interpretation of Islam.

In order to illustrate how the Muslim philosophers tried to reconcile philosophy to religion through incorporating the concept of revelation into philosophy, and thus try to resolve the role of reason and revelation in discovering/uncovering knowledge i.e. truths, we will examine al-Fārābī's views on this issue. For al-Fārābī, revelation is intimately connected to reason (*'aql*). It is this connection that we wish to explore here and thus explain the role of reason *vis a vis* revelation eventually showing the role of reason *per se* for discovering knowledge

Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Tarkhān ibn Uzalāj al-Fārābī (258/870-339/950), better known in the traditional Islamic sources as simply Abū Naṣr, the second outstanding representative of the Muslim peripatetic (*mashshā'ī*) school of philosophy after al-Kindī (185/801-260/873), gave Islamic philosophy its direction.¹² Al-Fārābī is celebrated as a great commentator on Aristotle and is called with enormous affection and appreciation "the second teacher", the successor to the great Aristotle, being the first teacher. Ibn Khallikān claimed that al-Fārābī is the greatest Muslim philosopher and he underlines the great

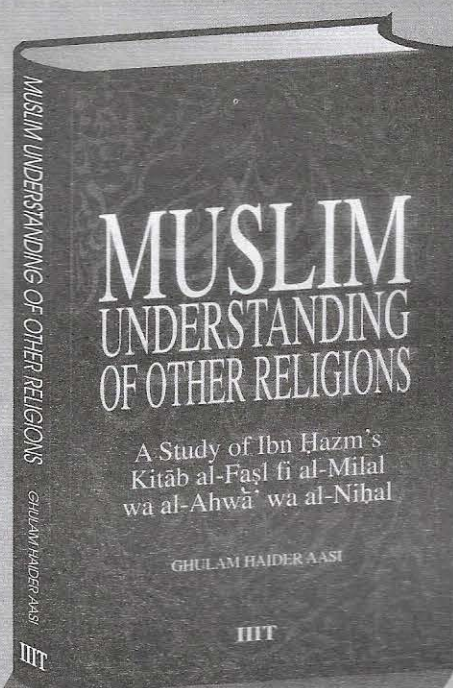
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A work of major significance in a relatively virgin field, Muslim contribution to Comparative Religion. This book brings to light a great deal regarding the Muslim attitude(s) towards other religions. It also brings into sharp relief the serious and painstaking effort of Muslim scholars to systematically study the religious traditions of others, the significance of Ibn Hazm as a pioneering figure in Comparative study of Religions, and his lasting impact on the development of this discipline. Ibn Hazm not only developed the canons for a proper and critical study of religions but also extensively used them in his study of other religions. What could be a better tribute to the greatness of Ibn Hazm as a Comparative Religionist than the fact that the critique of Christianity up until some seven centuries after him virtually remained confined to the points which he had raised.

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July 25, 2005

Dr Isham Pawan Ahmad
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Dear Dr Ahmad,

Assalamu 'Alaykum W arahmatullah W abarakatuh

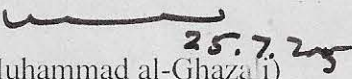
I hope this letter reaches you in the best of health and high spirits of Iman.

I take pleasure to inform you that your article "Al-Farabi's Epistemology: The Role of Reason in the Discovery of Knowledge" has been published in the Annual Journal of International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Kindly accept the heartfelt congratulations from the Editor and staff of Journal of International Islamic University.

We are mailing to you one copy of Annual Journal of International Islamic University, and twenty five offprints of the article by mail, which you will be receiving in due time.

With best wishes, sincere regards and expectations that you would continue making scholarly contributions to Annual Journal of International Islamic University.

Sincerely,


(Muhammad al-Ghazali)