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THE IRANIAN PHILOSOPHICAL TREND IN ITS PRESENT AND PAST CULTURE

Introduction

In contemporary Muslim territory we can find the trace of some different trends toward philosophy. Before studying the situation of philosophy in Iran, we shall enumerate these trends so that the attitude of Iranian philosophical activity can be discerned from other attitudes, especially in other Muslim countries. Afterwards we shall try to explain in detail the present perspective and elements of Islamic philosophy in Iran along with its background. In fact, the differences generated among Islamic philosophical approaches due to different interpretations of the relation between Islam and philosophy. By this distinction we can find these different views of philosophy in Islamic world:

1- Rejection of philosophy and rational approach to religious teachings with an emphasis on the ordinary meanings of Quran and *hadith* (Vahhabi approach).

2- Ghazzalian approach, a philosophical rejection of philosophy. A common view in Malaysia and Indonesia which is similar to the *tafkiik* (separation) movement in Iran.

3- Mysticism in Turkey and North of Africa like Morocco and Tunisia.

4- A review of Islamic philosophical heritages during the third to seventh century (9th to 13th). Thinkers of this kind are commentators who are not interested in establishing more advanced philosophical view. It is usual among traditional schools and departments of Islamic philosophy in the Arabian countries to reject the Vahhabi approach.

2 5- Westernized contemporary philosophical works in Islamic countries and also other parts of the world. Some of these thinkers are Muhammad Arkun, Hassan Hanafi, Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid, Ali Mazroui, Abdolkarim Soroush. They defend of a more secular approach based on different Western views in philosophy.

6- Ideological thinkers who study practical problems among Muslim countries with emphasis on a new return to Islamic doctrines.

7- Perennial philosophy of traditionalist thinkers like Rene Genon, Schowan, Dr. Nasr.

8- Sadraian transcendental philosophy (philosophy of Mulla Sadra) in Iran (also in Pakistan and India) characterized by particular development and background.

Background of Iranian Islamic Philosophy

The Western world's interest in learning about Islamic philosophy was, in the past, centered on the active influence of Muslim thinkers upon the historical formation of Christian scholastic philosophy in the Middle Ages. In order to study the philosophical ideas of such thinkers as Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus in their historical perspectives one must have a detailed and accurate knowledge of the thought of at least Avicenna (980-1037) and Averroes (1126-1198). Any adequate history of medieval Western philosophy, in consequence, should include an important chapter on the history of Islamic philosophy¹.

The reluctance of Western scholars to study in an appropriate manner this history is probably the result of a wrong assumption that Islamic philosophy came to an end with the death of Averroes and/or it ceased to exist by what was written by Ghazzali (1058-1111) against philosophical thinking in his important and influential book, namely *Tahafut al-Falasifat*. As a matter of fact, what came to an end was only the first phase of the whole history of Islamic philosophy. With the death of Averroes, Islamic philosophy ceased to be alive for the West, but this does not mean that it ceased to be alive for the East. In fact, Islamic philosophy did not develop in all Muslim countries after Ghazzali and Averroes. Especially among Sunni Muslims and in the Arabian part of these countries there was no longer a large interest in developing philosophy. Since these Muslims were majority in population and had more relations to the West, the assumption that there were no new philosophical views in Muslim countries grew in the West; and this assumption was an obstacle in the dialogue between Islamic phi-

3 losophy and Western philosophy, therefore there have not been any active relations between their ideas.

It is important in this connection to remark that even those "histories" of Islamic philosophy written not as a chapter in the history of Western philosophy but for their own sake, have largely been dictated by the idea that the golden age of Islamic philosophy was the period of three centuries extending from Farabi to Averroes, and that after Averroes, in the ages subsequent to the Mongol invasion, except for a few isolated prominent figures (like Ibn Khaldun, for example), the Muslim world produced nothing but commentators and super-commentators – a long series of lifeless and mechanical repetitions without any spark of real creativity and originality.

That this is not a true picture of the historical facts has amply been made clear by the remarkable work done by scholars like Henri Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr concerning the intellectual activity of the Safawid Dynasty. It is at any rate quite recently that Orientalists in general have begun to realize that the philosophical thinking in Islam did not fall irretrievably into decadence and fossilization after the Mongol invasion.

In fact, the truth of the matter is that we can go to the extent of asserting that a kind of philosophy which deserves to be regarded as typically and characteristically Islamic developed not so much before the death of Averroes as after. This typically Islamic philosophy arose and matured in the periods subsequent to the Mongol invasion. In Iran it reached the apex of vigorous creativity in the Safawid period. This peculiar type of Islamic philosophy, which grew up in Iran among the Shiites, has come to be known as *hikmat* or "wisdom". We can trace the origin of the *hikmat* back to the very beginning of the above-mentioned second phase of the history of philosophy in Islam.

Hikmat is structurally a peculiar combination of rational thinking and Gnostic intuition, or, we might say, rationalist philosophy and mystical experience. It is a special type of ontological philosophy based on existential intuition of Reality, a result of philosophizing the Gnostic ideas and visions obtained through intellectual contemplation. Historically speaking, this tendency toward the spiritualization of philosophy finds its origin in the metaphysical visions of Ibn 'Arabi and Suhrawardi. In making this observation, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that *hikmat* is also a rationalist philosophy having a solid and strictly logical structure. And in this latter aspect, it goes beyond Ibn 'Arabi and Suhrawardi back to Avicenna in the first phase of the history of Islamic philosophy.

4 *Hikmat*, having as it does these two distinctive aspects, must be approached from two different angles, if we are to analyze properly its formative process: (1) as a purely intellectual activity, and (2) as something based on trans-intellectual, gnostic experience – *dhawq*, “tasting” as the mystics call it – of the ultimate Reality.

The most famous and important philosophers of the second phase of Islamic philosophy is Mulla Sadra. He had very new ideas in philosophy (especially ontology) that make him the brightest star in the sky of Islamic philosophy. His new ideas mark a turning point in Islamic philosophy so that the other philosophers after him were affected by his viewpoints.

The appearance of an intellectual figure of the dimensions of Sadr al-Din Shirazi during the Safavid period indicates the presence of a strong living intellectual tradition whose deepest currents he was to bring so brilliantly to the surface. Mulla Sadra is a metaphysician and sage of outstanding stature who cannot be taken in isolation and separated from the tradition that produced him.

What remains much less known, however, is the revival of Islamic intellectual life in the eastern lands of Islam, especially in Persia. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this was made possible by the establishment of new intellectual schools by Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi, followed by the resurrection of Ibn Sina’s teachings during the middle decades of the thirteenth century by Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi. The background of Mulla Sadra must be sought in these schools as well as in the Sunni and shi’ite schools of *kalam* as they developed from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries².

The four classical schools of the post-Mongol period, namely, the peripatetic (*mashshai*), the Illuminationist (*ishraqi*), the gnostic (*irfani*) and the theological (*kalam*), with all the inner variations contained in each of them, developed extensively during the four centuries preceding Mulla Sadra and also approached each other, preparing the ground for the major synthesis brought about by Mulla Sadra. To understand the background of Mulla Sadra, it is necessary to delve into the development of each of these schools as well as the interactions that occurred between them during this very rich and at the same time most neglected period of Islamic intellectual life, from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries.

The Characteristics of Sadraean Philosophy

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The following can be said about the characteristics of Sadraean Philosophy:

- 1- Compatibility of religion with philosophy.
- 2- The necessity of rational study of religious doctrines which may bring some rational views as religious one.
- 3- A combination of four traditional schools of thought in Islamic territory (mysticism, peripatetic philosophy, Illuminationist philosophy and religious teachings of Quran and *hadith*)
- 4- The importance of studying Western and other philosophies as some other sources of human thought.
- 5- A continuous attempt at a comparative study in philosophical views that looks for revealing the strengths and weaknesses of transcendental philosophy and for possibilities of its further development.
- 6- The belief in an evolutionary essence of Islamic philosophy that excludes any interpretation of Islamic philosophy as suggesting particular theoretical models of world and human being.
- 7- Preference of ontology to epistemology and of reason to experience in philosophizing.
- 8- The influence of the theoretical philosophy on other human activities, discourses and disciplines (like politics, economy, education, aesthetics, ethics and so on).
- 9- The importance of Quran and *hadith* and prayers to give keys of philosophical views without grounding the philosophical views being advocated on revelation but on reason alone.
- 10- Belief in dialogue among philosophers in the world and the possibility of achieving better ideas of other human heritage.

Philosophy in Contemporary Iran

To be sure, Mulla Sadra’s philosophy is a very important heritage for Iranian Islamic philosophy. This philosophy has matured in the work of some scholars like Sabzavari and Tabataba’i. Because of the advantages of this philosophy that is compatible with Islamic traditions, this kind of philosophizing could find a very honorable situation in Islamic thought in Iran, so that it became an official teaching taught in religious seminaries (*hozeh elmiyyeh*). Shiism has been a good context for all rational thinking that allows and also encourages this kind of learning and thinking.

6 Therefore, understanding and confronting with every kind of rational and philosophical thinking has been a major duty of Islamic scholars in Iran. Islamic philosophy has been a strong hidden foundation of Iranian culture, and has influenced other dimensions of thought. It has been Islamic philosophizing that built an obstacle in front of every kind of foreign ideas and traditions attacking and attempting to penetrate into Iranian culture. Whether it was entirely successful or not is another subject of research. However, it was Iranian Islamic philosophical background that succeeded in protecting Iranian people from some foreign doctrines like Marxism and atheistic positivism.

Although not all significant problems in the public debates are philosophical problems, they all have some roots in philosophical views. One of the major efforts of scholars and philosophers in Iran has been to find out and show these roots and to criticize them. Some research centers were established for this matter. There are a lot of problems and new perspectives in other kinds of thought like sociology, psychology, economics, culture, politics, management, and so on that need solution. These solutions are based on previous philosophical views. Accordingly, some of the major efforts of scholars are invested in discussing about these philosophies, like philosophy of sociology, philosophy of economics and so on from the point of view of Islamic philosophy and thought. Therefore, there is a strong tendency toward philosophy and philosophizing, because many literate people believe that the kind of political construction of their country is based on foundations that might have been informed by Iranian cultural and therefore philosophical backgrounds.

The tendency toward philosophy is justified from both perspectives: a negative and a positive one. From the negative point of view, the efforts are invested in refining the understanding of alien thoughts or criticizing them. From the positive point of view, one tries to introduce a kind of life and construction of the country that not only gives them a native structure of thought for management of their country, but also it can serve as a model for every society.

It is obvious from the foregoing considerations that philosophy in Iran must be a widely accepted mode of thinking and debating in Iranian public life. Researchers in philosophical subjects are active public figures, and philosophy is very lively. The philosophical studies in both Islamic and Western views provide an essential source of intellectual inspiration to many students of universities as well as graduated people. Students, for example, whose major fields are industrial or medical disciplines, are trying

7 to learn philosophical views or participate in philosophical classes contributing thereby in understanding philosophical disputes. Some Institutes are established for feeding these increasing tendencies.

There are a lot of journals (more than 50) that contribute directly or indirectly to philosophy, in both its specialized and general aspects, like *Hekmat va Falsafeh*, *Qabasat*, *Naqd va Nazar*, *Nameh Farhang*, *Kalame Eslami*, *Hozeh va Daneshgah*, *Farhang*, *Ketabe Naghd*, *Namaye Pagoohesh*, *Kheradname Sadra*, *Keyhan Farhangi*, *Nameh Elm va Din*, *Keyhan Andisheh*, *Ma,arefat*, and so on. Some of the important newspapers often publish articles about philosophical views. For some periods of time, philosophical books have been the most widely published books in Iran. There are nineteen governmental universities and an equal number of nongovernmental universities in Iran that have one or two departments for philosophy and offer B.A and M.A. programmes. A few of them offer Ph.D. degree. Learning and teaching Philosophy is also a main subject in seminaries scattered all over the country. In some cases the period of teaching philosophy is more than 10 years in these seminaries. There are also more than 40 important institutes for philosophical research. All of these show that rationalistic thought plays an important role in present-day Iranian life.

It must be noted that philosophical research is not only focused on Islamic philosophy. After confronting seriously with Western philosophy in Iran, for the past fifty years, the efforts have been directed toward understanding Western philosophy along with Islamic philosophy. Translation of Western philosophical books and articles is a large and interesting endeavour. But it is not the only way of learning in philosophy. Islamic philosophy is being learned as well as Western philosophy. The comparative studies in philosophy are the main subject of philosophical research projects and conferences. Many scholars, especially religious men of the seminaries believe that Islamic philosophy has enough power for the solution of many contemporary philosophical problems, and this strength is unknown for the West. Imam Khomeini mentioned this matter in his historical letter to Gorbachev. This letter was a message from the Islamic civilization to one of the most important ideologies that could attract a lot of people in the world. The group that presented the letter included two men and one woman, and two of them were philosophers. Imam Khomeini suggested to Gorbachev that the leadership of the Soviet Union and all of their people study carefully Islamic philosophy and mysticism, especially Mulla Sadra's view and Ibn Arabi's doctrine as an alternative way for updating Marxism.

8 These matters show that important spiritual dimensions of the public life in Iran are based on Iranian Islamic heritages of philosophy, and philosophy is a determining factor in other aspects of Iranian thought, like economy, politics, culture and also religious attitudes.

Therefore, this matter must be considered in every kind of dialogue between Iranian culture and other cultures. Since philosophical thinking relies on an intellectual method, and reason is the judgment of philosophical disputes, and it is the most common basis for mutual understanding, philosophy can play an important role in international relations of thought. There are historical backgrounds of different sorts that can be obstacles in a peaceful dialogue between two countries. False news, biased political analysis, incompatibility of two cultures, different systems of value and so on, might create some presuppositions that naturally cause conflicts and misunderstandings. It is only reason and rational thinking that can go beyond these boundaries and make mutual understanding possible, and can lead to better life in both cultures. Besides, because many misunderstandings are based on conflicts of interpretations and modes of thinking deeply rooted in philosophical views (as the case of Iranian culture shows), it is important to understand the relevant philosophical heritages of the other civilization for establishing a productive dialogue with it.

As a result, I think, it is important for the West to study Iranian Islamic philosophy as a kind of worldview asserting that it can transform some alternative philosophical viewpoints and solutions into philosophical problems.

Notes

- ¹ Mohaghegh, Mehdi and Tsihiko Izutsu, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari*, P. 3, University of Tehran Publication.
- ² Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Sadraddin Shirazi an His Transcendental Theosophy*, P. 16, Institute for Cultural and Humanistic Studies, 1997.