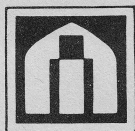


ISLAMIC RATIONALISM
IN THE LIGHT OF SHI'ISM

Abul-Fazl Ezzati

Seminar paper
London, 9 September 1978
(5 Shawwal 1398)



The Muslim Institute
for Research and Planning

ISLAMIC RATIONALISM IN THE LIGHT OF SHI'ISM

Abul-Fazl Ezzati *

Introduction

WE may find most of what is suggested in the following pages as Shi'i rational movement in fact Islamic, and applicable to most Islamic schools and sects. The Shi'ites base their reasonings in this field on what they regard as purely and entirely Islamic principles and doctrines. The Shi'ites also believe that their methodology in this field is Islamic. They employ Islamic texts and traditional elements to support their argument. We should not, therefore, be surprised to find what is said in my discussion here quite familiar to non-Shi'ite Muslims. This is why the title of our discussion runs as follows: "Islamic Rationalism in the Light of Shi'ism". That is to say, rationalism in Islam as Shi'ites see it. Other Muslims may also see it this way or otherwise as they are also entitled to see it their way for according to a tradition related to the Prophet "al-Iktilaf Rahmat", that is to say intellectual freedom (based on authentic Islamic source) is a blessing.

Islam consists of two parts: Islamic ideology (Iman) and reality (Shariah). Unlike some other religions, e.g. Christianity and Hinduism, Islam does not confine itself to spiritual salvation only, and unlike schools of materialism, e.g. communism, it does not confine its activities in world affairs alone. It is Iman wa Amal = Aqidat wa Shariah. However, my main purpose is not to discuss this point. The close link and relation between spirit and matter in Islam is a principle beyond doubt and question.

One purpose of bringing up this point is simply to show how Islamic rationalism concerns both fields.

Islamic rationalism in the field of Islam ideology, like any other discussion, begins with the question of Divinity. Let us see how rationalistic Islam is regarding this point(1). Islamic theology is rationalistic both from subject matter and from methodological point of view. As we know, Islam is transcendentalist. This is to say that God in Islam is wholly rational. Even the world's most transcendental and monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, have reduced God to matter. The consciousness of transcendence (rationalism) was confused by the anthropomorphic understanding of deity in Judaism and the incarnation theology of Christianity. We do not need to go into animistic religions in which divinity is frequently and completely mixed and confused with matter. Islam takes its distinguishing mark among the world religions precisely by insisting on an absolute metaphysical separation of transcendent from spatio-temporal(2). Islam draws a sharp line between the two generic kinds of reality: transcendent (creator, rational) and spatio-temporal (creatures, nature and man). God stands Unique and Continues to be Unique in transcendence and as Sole Rational Entity. Nothing is transcendent and rational but Him. The rest is matter and cannot be confused with rationality and mixed with transcendent.

God is Unique and the Whole Truth. God being One the truth is one and the unity of Truth requires that revelation and reason are identified with one another.

* Dr Abul-Fazl Ezzati teaches Islamic Culture and Philosophy at the University of Tehran, Iran

Revelation in Islam does not run counter to true knowledge and hence the harmony of religion and reason, science and knowledge(3). God is the source of Knowledge and His rules for running the universe are those the discovery of which is considered science.

Rationality of Methodology of Islamic Theology

Islam is also rationalistic in its methodology of study in theology. The way to true Islam is Iman. There is a sharp contrast between Islam and Iman. Everything, whether animal or inanimal is Muslim, according to the Qur'an:

"Unto Allah submitteth whosoever is in the heavens and earth."

(To God surrenders whatsoever is in heavens and on earth willy nilly)(4)

But the very word for faith, namely Iman, is contrasted severely with Islam which means surrender without question. While Islam is unintentional and natural, Iman is the act of believing with rational conviction, determining on the basis of data and knowledge, resulting certainty. While Islam may be individual as well as collective, Iman is an individual conviction which varies from one person to another for certainty may be obtained by different persons by different means, at various levels, etc, while Islam may be external, Iman is internal. However, Iman may be defined as a rational conviction and certainty. Islam requires that every individual Muslim conduct his own theological thinking and research. His Islam should be the result of his own intellectual endeavour or Iman. Here, the target and aim is Certainty and Conviction. In the field of theology, everybody should be his own teacher and leader: Mujtahid. Following others (Taqlid) is not allowed in the field of Islamic ideals. This is why Islam has emphatically denied organised religious and spiritual leadership and demanded absence of priesthood. Every Muslim is his own Mujtahid or guide. The only curriculum in the field of theology is intellectual self-exertion: (Ijtihad). Wherever any guidance is provided in this field, even that guidance is to help the Muslims towards their intellectual self-assertion. The Qur'an, for instance, has used rational arguments in various forms for the

existence of God and His Attributes, which man found rationally convincing. What is certain from these Qur'anic verses is the finality of the authority of reason and intellectual conviction.

In the field of theology only human faculties and the man's own mind and intellectual ability is his last and only resort. Nothing in Islam carries any authority beyond the control of human intellect and faculty. Islamic texts, both in the form of the scripture and tradition, are not automatically authoritative unless they lead to Certainty and Conviction, for scripture may be the subject of scrutiny as far as its definite meaning is concerned and tradition is the subject of scrutiny both from viewpoint of its meaning and its authenticity.

This is why Islam compared to Christianity for example, is regarded as rational and intellectual in content. "Islam is intellectual in content, although requiring emotion in the subjective reaction of the believer, but that in Christianity the teaching itself is emotional, relying on a sense of "Numinous awe" (5).

The entire Islamic creed is rationalistic, for the second principle of Islamic creed is prophethood (Nabowat) which is based on the doctrine of Bounty (Lutf) of God. It is not confined to Muhammad in person but he was one of the Many Prophets and based on the principle of Nabowat al-A'mma. Revelation in Christianity, for example, is confined to the person of Jesus as a Divine Being.

Another important point which explains Islamic rationalism is the inclusiveness of Islam. Islam, unlike other religions, is not only a spiritual system, but it is a comprehensive way of social and individual life. If Islam is to preserve its traditional inclusiveness, it has to take man as a whole, including his intellectual and rational faculties and potentialities into consideration. There is no compartmentalism between secular and spiritual aspects of life in Islam, between mind and body, between human reason and its other faculties. Life and man in their totality are taken into consideration. The unhappy situation in the west is caused by compartmentalisation, hence the conflict between religion on one side and science, knowledge, human reason and

nature on the other side. Islam believes in the wholeness of life, unity of outlook, body and mind, human reason and religion. This is lost in the west, hence conflicts. The believing Muslim is quite clear that science, human reason, knowledge and nature do not threaten faith in God, for everything between the heavens and the earth is Muslim. Every new discovery reveals only the Divine rules devised for running the universe and reveals more of the wonder of God's creation. There are verses in the Qur'an which can be interpreted as foreshadowing later scientific discoveries. What is more important, it blesses and commands the use and growth of knowledge and human faculties. There are many Qur'anic verses and Islamic traditions which encourage the development of science, human reason and philosophy(6).

The Muslim mind has always lived at the level of wonder vis-a-vis the world of nature, including human reason. Islam developed along with the development of knowledge, science and philosophy. Islamic civilization, culture and zeal was the torchbearer of scientific, philosophical knowledge for centuries. Islam rose, grew and spread in complete harmony with knowledge, science and philosophy. The harmony of human reason and Shariah is the part of the full harmony of philosophy, science and nature with Islam. Western science and philosophy developed totally divorced from the one experiment that was central for the men of old, namely experiment with oneself through a spiritual discipline(7). Western science and philosophy developed totally divorced from religion and Christianity. But Muslim scientific and philosophical achievement was in fact encouraged and introduced by Islam. All this leads us to the fact that there is a complete harmony between science, nature, philosophy and human reason on one side with religion, Shariah and spiritual development on the other side.

In fact, Christianity and the west have usually used Islamic material and sources to solve the inherent conflict between Christianity and science and philosophy. This is why Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Averroesism became very popular in western circles during scholastic philosophical development.

We know that the authority of reason in the field of theology and faith (Iman) is Islamic and is accepted by almost all Muslims except for extremists. In fact, reason here is the only authority or at least the main authority and Revelation is an auxiliary source of knowledge for it is obvious that everybody must first sort out the authority of Revelation by his own reason and Iman before he continues with his Islam proper. Reason is an attribute of God and nature His handwork and thus the compatibility of reason, nature and religion. In the field of jurisprudence and law (Shariah) the Qur'an and Islam might be interpreted on the basis of reason for it is impossible to understand and carry them out without reason. The use of the term Fiqh for Islamic jurisprudence explains Islamic rationalism in law from its early history. Fiqh literally means reason, intelligence and discernment: Faqiha = Fahima, as it is used in the Qur'an. It originally means rationalisation of the use of human reason as against knowledge based solely on text. However, the implication of the term Fiqh to Islamic law, at a very early stage in history, confirms that there was close connection between reason and law or 'Aql and Shariah at the earliest stage of Islamic legal history. The same applies to some extent to the term Ijtihad, or juristic reasoning.

There are many Qur'anic verses and Islamic traditions that support the authority of 'aql both in the field of theology and in the field of Shariah. According to Islamic tradition, God created 'aql (reason) not in sport but for a rational purpose and in a rational order (al-aghrad al-'aqliyya). Divine intellect is the cause of the universe. 'Aql is one of the first, and sometimes according to other traditions, or the second entities or substances (jawahir) created by God. The remaining entities coming after 'aql were created through the agency of 'aql and are, therefore, of much less importance. These substances either emanate (sudur) according to some Muslim philosophers, or diffused (ifada) according to others from Divinity. 'Aql was thus created as the first object of the entire creation.

'Aql as the first object and the first entity (a tradition states the first thing created by God was 'aql) is referred to as the viceroy (khalipha) or the messenger

(Nabi) of God. Another tradition states " 'Aql is the inner prophet of God for man just as prophet is his outer 'aql." Reason has been introduced as the foundation of all virtues. Know that every imperative has a foundation and every virtue has a source; that the foundation of all imperatives and source of all virtues is reason. God made reason the first principle of religion. He made His imperatives of two kinds: one is necessary by reason and the revealed law only confirmed it, the other is possible by reason and the revealed law commanded it. For both, therefore, reason is the base. It is related to the Prophet that he said: "Man has no better gain than the cultivation of a reason to guide him to good and away from evil." Everything has a ground and the ground of human action is reason(8).

Islamic Rationalism in the Field of Law

We have realised that as far as Islamic ideals, ideology and theology are concerned, all Muslims, except for small minorities, whether Shi'ite or Sunni, almost unanimously accept that the only avenue to Islamic beliefs and conviction is reason and certainty. There is no difference here between Shi'ites and Sunnis. The main difference between the two sects is in the field of law or Shariah.

In the field of Shariah we may start with the sources of Shariah. Both the Sunnis and the Shi'ites accept the authority of three of the four sources of law. They are: The Qur'an (scripture), the Seerah (the Prophetic tradition) and Ijma (consensus of opinion). They only disagree about the fourth source. While the Sunnis recommended Qiyas al-Fiqhi (analogy), the Shi'ites introduced Qiyas al-Mantiqi (syllogism). But the two forms of Qiyas are based on the authority of reason and human intellect and faculties.

While the Shi'ites openly accept the authority of 'aql as a main source of law and knowledge, the Sunnis use it only as an auxiliary source. The authority of 'aql leads in turn to two individual features in the Shi'ite legal system.

(a) Legal rules, man's actions are intrinsically good or bad. Shariah has

declared actions as commanded, forbidden, recommended, reprehended and legally indifferent (wajib, haram, mustahab, makrooh and mubah) according to their intrinsic values. In other words, Shariah has recommended as good or bad that which is really and intrinsically good or bad, and not that is good or bad by Shariah alone. There is no practical difference between the two for what is declared by the Shariah as good or bad is really good or bad.

(b) The standard value of goodness and badness is 'aql or reasoning, certainty, conviction (qata').

(c) Since 'aql is always available to provide jurists with legal conviction or qata', the door of legalistic reasoning (ijtihad) is always open to the jurists, and hence the continuation of ijtihad in Shi'ite legal system.

The Basis for Shi'ite Rationalism

Shi'ites, like Sunnis, base their doctrines concerning Islam on Islamic principles. Various bases for Islamic rationalism may be found in Islamic teachings - specially in the Qur'an: Do not follow that of which you have no certain knowledge. The hearing, the sight and the heart of all these (as faculties of knowledge and avenues to reasoning and conviction) are responsible(9). We have given them hearing, sights and hearts(10). These and similar points are so frequently made in the Qur'an as to obviate any listing of them. There are many verses in the Qur'an commanding the believers to follow certainty and to avoid conjecture. Most of them rely on conjectures; but conjecture is no substitute for true knowledge(11). The worst of the lowly creatures are those men whose minds are utterly closed; for they do not reason(12). There are even many more Islamic traditions making the same points. These texts and verses (nusoos) are used by both the Shi'ites and the Sunnis, but the conclusions they draw are different.

It is, therefore, necessary to explain briefly the background which led the two sects to understand differently the same text.

It seems that the most important question in a monotheistic religion such as Islam is the question of predestination and

human capability. This is the most burning question in Islamic rationalism too. The Qur'anic verses dealing with the subject state, at first sight and regardless of their proper context, either absolute fatalism and complete authority of God, or absolute human responsibility and choice.

The extremists on both sides took each group of verses at their face value and laid stress on commentaries and traditions that favoured them, hence the existence of two ways of thinking and sets of ideas in Islam regarding this matter from its early days. The struggle between the two groups was simple and natural in the beginning. But with the passage of time and as Muslims increased and Islam spread far and wide, traditions, political circumstances, geographical and many other conditions and factors helped one side or the other, inevitably two completely different schools of thought were developed and established gradually. Followed by:

Murjiah	Qadariyah
Khawarij	Shiah
Traditionist	Rationalist
Orthodox	Heterodox
Ashairah	Mutazila

Ahl al-Sunna wa
al-jama'a

Ahl al-Adl wa
al-Tuhid

The movement on both sides was basically Islamic and stayed Islamic for a fairly long time. Both sides of the argument employed Islamic materials, traditions and texts to support their views. Material from non-Islamic sources had not been available to them yet. The majority of these people during the democratic-Islamic period of the first four Caliphs were fairly impartial and remained the silent supporters of one side or the other side of the argument. The Umayyads with their pre-Islamic sha'obi (racial) background favoured fatalism and traditionalism against rationalism. The Abbasid at the beginning supported free choice for only through this doctrine they could get rid of the Umayyads but after establishing themselves they also supported fatalism.

During the struggle between the Umayyads and the Abbasids an opportunity appeared for the impartial Muslim intellectuals to review the original aims, objectives and doctrine of Islam. A neutral school with

moderate views was founded. The moderate and liberal Mutazila and the Shiah headed by Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq and his pupil Wasil b. Ata took the opportunity of the political struggle between the Umayyads and Abbasids and established the "Middle School": No fatalism, no absolute choice, but a combination of both. And, thus, this school represented the Shi'ite sect. This is mainly why they are called the people of God's unity and moderation.

Up to a certain time in the history of Islam, before the dialectical formulation of Islamic doctrines, there was no strict line between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites in matters such as fatalism, free choice, rationalism, etc. The followers of moderate school of thought were Sunnis and Shi'ites alike. The supporters of Islamic rationalism, for instance, were both Sunnis and Shi'ites. Only after Ashari school of dialectical theology (kalam) was well established, its doctrines were regarded as those of Sunni Muslims. The Ashari-Sunni school accepted the authority of Reason in theology, but not law. But Shii-Mutazila accepted the authority of Reason both in theology and law.

Here, one must realise that Islamic rationalism passed two different stages: (a) Islamic intellectual movement or al-Harakat al-Fikira fi al-Islam which was purely Islamic and was based on Islamic principles and derived entirely from Islamic sources. The intellectual movement influenced all fields of Islamic studies and after undergoing revision developed into Islamic philosophy. (b) Islamic philosophical movement which came into existence after Muslims developed Islamic rationalism and increased their knowledge of other civilizations, and were acquainted with non-Islamic philosophies and schools of thought. In this stage of development, Islamic doctrines and principles were also explained in terms of non-Islamic philosophies. It was at this stage that Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Avicenna put forward new explanation for Islamic rationalism.

We are not in a position here to go into the stage, history and development of Islamic rationalism. The struggle between traditionalists and rationalists took different forms. In this struggle, the jurists mostly followed the traditionalists

and were supported by the masses. The four Sunni schools of law based their legal systems on Ashari teachings, but the Shi'ites adopted the rational road and hence the authority of human reason as a source of law. But since the Shi'ites based their doctrine of the authority of human reason even in legal matters on Islamic sources which could not be ignored - the other schools of law also accepted the legal authority of reason as an auxiliary source and indirectly in forms of Qiyas al-Fiqhi (analogy), Ra'y (juristic reasoning), Istislah (consideration of public interest), Istishab (the presumption of continuation), Istihsan (rational preference), etc. The door of ijtihad (legal reasoning) which has always been left open to the Shi'ites as a result of the authority of human reason ('aql) is beginning to be open for the Sunnis too, hence the neo-Mutazilite movements of Egypt initiated by Sayeed Jamal al-Din Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, and that of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent to which eminent Muslim leaders such as Sayyed Ahmed Khan, Amir Ali and Muhammad Iqbal belonged. The new rational awakening in the entire Muslim world aimed at the re-opening of the door of legal reasoning (Iftitah Bab al-Ijtihad) is really based on early, purely rational thinking in Islam. This is why it is called neo-Mutazilism. This shows the continuation of rational movement in Islam.

It must be explained here that the Muslims unanimously accept the authority of reason in the field of theology (aqida). They even accept as the sole source of knowledge in dialectical matters. They cannot, therefore, reject it as one of the four sources of Islamic law.

It is important to notice that the Shi'ites do not suggest the absolute authority of reason. We know that reason usually serves passion and confuses

relation between facts and events. 'Aql or human reason is, therefore, subject to restrictions. This is why the Shiah reject the authority of personal opinion (ra'y). Taking the restrictions that the Shiah place on the authority of reason into consideration and the authority of rational norms (al-qawaid al-Fiqhiyya al-Aqliyya) such as ra'y, istislah, istihsan, qiyas, istishab, istidlal and so on by different Sunni schools of law into consideration, we may conclude that the authority of human reason as a source of law is accepted almost by all Muslims though in diverse forms and norms. However, there is a group of Shi'ite traditionists (Akhbaris) who also reject the authority of 'aql on the same ground that, for instance, Sunni traditionists (e.g. Hambalis) reject the authority of rational norms. It is, thus, reasonable to conclude that moderate Shi'ites and Sunnis are almost united in the authority of rational, juristic reasoning though they may differ in its forms.

Finally, it must be noticed that the Shi'ites place the authority of human reason on the authority of Certainty (qata'). That is to say that only that kind of juristic reasoning is authorised which is absolute and not conjectural. The authority does really belong to certainty, which is natural. Any reasoning, whether traditional or rational, which is absolute, is naturally and automatically authorised and should be followed. All Muslims agree that absolute reasoning is of absolute authority. They only disagree in what is absolute reasoning and what is conjectural. An example probably would explain how the Sunnis and Shi'ites meet when a rational reasoning provides certainty. We know that the Sunnis regard analogy as a source of Shariah and that the Shi'ites reject it, still the Shi'ites fully accept the authority of the analogy which leads to certainty, e.g. analogy of Munsoos al-Illa. The Sunnis, on the other hand, do not accept the analogy which is conjectural.

NOTES

1. Rationalism here is used mainly as against materialism.
2. Ismail al-Faruqi, 'The Great Asian Religions', p.309.
3. See Averroes, *Fasl al-Maqal fi ma bain al-Shariat wa al-Hikmat men al-Itisal*; on the harmony of Islam and Philosophy or reason.
4. The Qur'an III : 83.
5. Muhammad Asad. Quoted by N Daniel, 'Islam and the West', p.293. We have briefly explained Islamic rationalism in the field of theology to show that rationalism is inherent in Islam and does not confine only to Shi'ite Islamic doctrines.
6. See Averroes, the last word on the Harmony of Shariah and philosophy (*Fasl al-Maqal fi ma bain al-shariat wa al-Hikmat men al-Itisal*).
7. H Nasr, 'The Encounter of Man and Nature, p.94.
8. For some of these and other traditions see Ismail al-Faruqi 'The Great Asian Religions', pp 321-2.
9. Qur'an 17 : 36
10. Ibid, 46 : 27
11. Ibid, 10 : 36
12. Ibid, 8 : 21-2

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arbery, J *Reason and Revelation in Islam*
 Rushd, Ibn *Fasl al-Maqal Fi Ma Bain al-Shariat wa al-Hikmat Men al-Itisal*
 Hurani, George *Islamic Rationalism*
 Kerr, M *Islamic Reform*
 White, Dickson *A History of Warfare of Science with Theology in Christianity*
 Rahman, Fazlur *Islamic Methodology*
 Rahman, Fazlur *Prophecy in Islam*
 al-Tawil, Tufiq *Al-Din wa al-Falsapha*
 Rushdi, Muhammad *Al-'Aql Ind al-Shiah*
 Renan, Ernest *Averroes and Averroism*
 Tuqan, Badri *Muqam al-'Aql Ind al-Arab*
 Abduh, Muhammad *Risalat al-Tuhid*
 Abduh, Muhammad *Al-Islam wa al-Nasraniyya ma'a al-Ilm wa al-Madaniyya*
 Abdu al-Razzaq, M *Tamhid le Tarikh al-Falsafa al-Islamiyya*
 Farabi, Abu Nasr, M *Risalat fi Ma'ani al-'Aql*
 Kulaini, Muhammad *Kitab al-'Aql wa al-Jahl*
 Madhkur, Muhammad *Tarikh al-Fikr al-Islami*
 Mughniyya, M Y *Al-Islam wa al-'Aql wa al-Tashayyu*
 Nashar, Ali *Manahy al-Bahth Ind Mufakkir al-Islam*

