

'Allamah Tabataba'i And Contemporary Philosophical Theology

'Philosophical Theology' is a term that has been employed in recent years among philosophers and theologians in the West to designate a specifically philosophical approach to theological issues. During much of the twentieth century, philosophical theology has not been taken very seriously either by philosophers or by theologians.

Philosophers have found fault with philosophical theology because of the lack of philosophical sophistication of the writings in this area. Theologians, on the other hand, have expressed little interest in philosophical theology because of the irrelevance of the attempts at analysis and careful argumentation to the living concerns of theologians preoccupied with the integration of religious thought in contemporary social life.

Over the course of the last twenty-five years, however, this situation has changed. Philosophers whose technical expertise is widely recognized have started writing works of philosophical merit on theological topics.

The Western rejection of religion took place for two kinds of reasons: reasons having to do with the apparent opposition between religion and science, and reasons having to do with social, political and moral views. In recent years there has been a shift in attitude among intellectuals in both these areas.

There is a greater appreciation now than there was in the heyday of positivism that science need not be seen as antagonistic toward religion, and epistemic theories are currently being advanced which would allow for the rational justification of both scientific and religious beliefs.

The social, political and moral attitudes that were prevalent prior to the 1970's are being displaced by views that are critical of liberal/leftist thought. The current resurgence of philosophical theology benefits from both these kinds of attitudinal changes, even as it indirectly encourages them.

At the same time as these developments have been taking place, theologians have begun serious debate about the significance of non-Christian theologies for Christian thought. Theologians such as John Hick, W. Cantwell Smith and Hans Kung have argued vigorously that the doctrine that salvation can be achieved exclusively through the Christian tradition is not rationally defensible.

While maintaining their own allegiance to the Christian tradition, they have suggested that the doctrines of the divinity of Christ and the trinity should be reinterpreted, and they have been willing to concede that there may be some sense in which the Qur'an may be admitted to be the word of God.

Theologians discuss such questions under the rubric of religious pluralism. Although in recent philosophical theology the issue of religious pluralism has not been central, an increasing amount of attention is being turned in this direction.¹

In this context we may well wonder what, if anything may be found in recent Islamic thought which may be of relevance to Western philosophical theology. Sometimes Western writers have been dismissive of the prospects of finding anything of philosophical interest in recent Islamic thought because their acquaintance has been limited to Muslim writers who lack philosophical erudition or who are even hostile to philosophy.

However, in the Shi'i philosophical and theological tradition we find ample materials of significance to the questions raised in philosophical theology by Christian philosophers. Certainly one of the best ways to become familiar with Shi'i philosophical theology is through the works of 'Allamah Tabataba'i.

His authoritative position in the Muslim world as an exegete of the Qur'an, coupled with his philosophical expertise gives his work a stature which demands greater notice than it has yet received by students of comparative religion and philosophical theology.

Perhaps some of our Muslim readers will ask why Muslims should be concerned about trying to address problems which arise in the context of Western philosophical theology. There are several reasons.

First, by means of the formulation of a Muslim response to such issues, a respect may be won for the Islamic tradition which, unfortunately, has often suffered due to political enmity. Secondly, it provides the opportunity to familiarize those who often restrict their view of Islamic thought to the middle Ages with the living tradition of Islamic philosophical theology.

Thirdly, such intellectual engagements contribute to the development of depth of awareness of the complexity of the issues involved, and may promote the further development of Muslim thought on a variety of issues.

The recent increase in interest in philosophical theology in the West is symptomatic of a sincerely felt need to take religion seriously once again, after it had been discarded by many intellectuals as incompatible with a modern scientific outlook. Many who had drifted away from the churches are

returning.

However, the problems that caused the original dissatisfaction with religion have not been solved. In the West, the problems with Christianity have been typically generalized and considered as problems with religion per se.

Few, have considered the possibility that Islam may be immune from the failings which led to their dissatisfaction with Christianity. For example, one of the most important Christian doctrines is that of the trinity.

Yet it has been generally conceded by theologians since the Middle Ages that this is a doctrine which must be accepted as a matter of faith, where faith is understood as a way of accepting that which cannot be accepted according to the standards of reason. Modern theologians have gone further to admit that this doctrine is a mystery incapable of rational defense.

Various contemporary philosophers of religion, such as Peter van Inwagen and Thomas v. Morris have attempted to provide a philosophical defense of the rational coherence of the doctrine. This is a place where the relevance of 'Allamah Tabataba'i's thought is immediately apparent.

Much of the philosophical discussion which is scattered throughout his exegesis of the Qur'an, *Al-Mizan*, is designed to demonstrate the incoherence of Trinitarian doctrine and to defend belief in a strict divine unity.

Many of the relevant passages have been collected by the late Ayatollah Husayni Tehrani in his volume, *Mehr-e Taban*. The inherent rationalism of Islamic theology is clearly displayed in these discussions, and the contrast with the irrationalism of tendency found in much modern Christian theology to confuse mystery with incoherence is made readily apparent.

On the other hand, 'Allamah Tabataba'i's writings on topics of Islamic mysticism or *'irfdn* display a sensitivity and deep appreciation of a true mysticism which is rational even if it expresses itself in apparent contradictions. Thus, the writings of 'Allamah Tabataba'i not only presents us with an example of an Islamic theology, which is at once contemporary and rational, but also a rational mysticism.

On the other hand, the student of Western philosophy who is used to looking for the distinctive and original elements in a philosopher's thought may miss the significance of 'Allamah Tabataba'i's works.

'Allamah is a defender of a school of thought originated by Mulla Sadra and called transcendent wisdom. This philosophical outlook has an influence on contemporary Shi'i theology somewhat analogous to the influence of Aquinas on Catholic theology.

Much of what is of significance in 'Allamah's philosophical theology may be found in the works of Mulla Sadra or Nasir al-Din Tusi, but rather than detracting from its importance, this only serves to underscore the consonance of 'Allamah's theology with the tradition in which it is situated.

Like contemporary Western philosophical theology, 'Allamah's theology makes use of careful definitions, deductive proofs, and fine distinctions among rival positions. These are features which the broadly analytic tradition in Anglo–American philosophical theology share with the Shi'i tradition, which reflects the taste for logic in Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and the tremendous influence this, has had on subsequent Islamic philosophy.

However, the intuitions about what can be accepted without argument differ widely between analytic philosophy and Islamic philosophy. The Western student of Islamic philosophy must therefore learn to suppress the tendency to dismiss arguments for being based on implausible premises, and learn to seek beyond the stated premises for more fundamental rational intuitions, which are often at odds with contemporary Western presumptions.

The most striking difference between contemporary Christian and Muslim theologies is that while Christians believe that God is a person, Muslims worship a non–personal deity. Despite the importance of this difference for a host of theological issues, it is a difference that has gone largely unnoticed by Christians and Muslims alike.

Yet Christians everywhere will affirm that God is a person, while the average Muslim will readily deny this. Theism is often defined by philosophers of religion who work in the Christian tradition in such a manner as to require the belief that God is a person.

Thus The Encyclopedia of Philosophy has it that, "THEISM signifies belief in one God (theos) who is (a) personal, (b) worthy of adoration, and (c) separate from the world but (d) continuously active in it."[2](#)

John H. Hick admits that, "Theism ... is strictly belief in a deity, but is generally used to mean belief in a personal deity."[3](#) Richard Swinburne states that a theist is one who believes that there is a God who is a "person without a body ((i.e.) a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe",[4](#) and J. L. Mackie, while arguing the case of atheism, endorses Swinburne's definition of theism.[5](#)

One can surely find no better representative of contemporary Christian philosophical theology than William P. Alston, whose works are a model of analytic precision and reflective insight. He writes that God, as construed in theistic religions, is "a supreme or ultimate personal agent that acts in the light of knowledge, purposes, and intentions."[6](#)

The tendency of Alston, and the other writers mentioned, is to emphasize the similarities between God and man. One reason for this is that it is assumed that if God is treated as a being who, is excessively unlike man, any claims made about God will become incoherent. The idea is that in the case of human beings, we know what it means to make decisions, to know various things, and to act.

So, if we want to know what it is we are talking about when we attribute knowledge, decision and action

to God, we should mean something closely analogous to what we mean in the case of human beings. One of the most extreme results of this tendency among Christian theologians is the process theology of Charles Hartshorne.

Hartshorne held that the medieval concept of God was incoherent and proposes that God be considered more like a person, such that God should be considered to change, to improve Himself, to exist in time, to increase His knowledge, etc.

Alston, who was a student of Hartshorne, rejects these claims, but he tries to develop a theology which will preserve the claims of divine transcendence associated with medieval theology while retaining as much as possible of the personalistic view of God.

Another reason for the emphasis on the personal nature of God in modern Christian theology is that this is seen as being more faithful to scripture. Much of modern Christian theology has reacted to the philosophical attacks on theology found in Hume and Kant by divorcing itself from philosophy altogether.

It is held that medieval Christian theology went astray by employing Greek philosophical concepts instead of working exclusively with the concepts found in divine revelation. This view has been contested by Robert Cummings Neville, who argues that Jewish thought had already been Hellenized prior to the time of Christ, and that the opposition between the perspectives of Athens and Jerusalem have been over emphasized.⁷

In the Shi'i theological tradition there was also a period in which some held an extremely anthropomorphic view of God, but this tendency was thoroughly refuted and rejected as unorthodox at an early stage by scholars such as Kulayni (d.329/941) and Shaykh Saduq (d. 381/991), who gathered sufficient reports from the Prophet and Imams (Peace be with them) to demonstrate decisively that the anthropological language used to describe God must always be understood as figurative.

The thought of 'Allamah Tabataba'i must be understood as holding a position in the long tradition of philosophical theology encouraged by these early scholars. This is a tradition in which the key to the resolution of apparent conflict between reason and religion is to be sought in proper interpretation. Characteristic of proper interpretation in the Shi'i tradition is authorization by reports attributed to the Imams (peace be with them), rationality and frequent indication of a depth of spirituality associated with Islamic mysticism.

A word of caution is appropriate regarding the attribution of rationality to esoteric interpretation in the Shi'i tradition. What is meant here is by no means the conception of rationality that informs the empiricist or scientific philosophies of the West, rather, by claiming that esoteric interpretations of scripture in the Shi'i tradition are rational is meant that they contribute to a systematic theological picture, a picture which is drawn with conscious attention to the logical relations between the concepts and doctrines expounded.

So, we find two contrasting approaches to apparent conflicts between religion and science. The approach of modern Christian theology, whether liberal or neo-orthodox, has been to cut off the relations between theological issues and the scientific or philosophical perspective from which objections have been launched. The approach characteristic of Muslim traditions, on the other hand, has been an attempt at synthesis through interpretation.

Christian theologians have sought to assert their orthodoxy by claiming that their doctrine of a personal deity is more faithful to the Biblical picture of God than the abstract deity of medieval theologians. Perhaps, however, the tendency to personalize the deity was always latent in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation.

Muslim theologians, on the other hand, have found ample support for their claims to orthodoxy in the Qur'an and ahadith. Those Muslim thinkers who have found fault with philosophical theology have argued against the interpretations offered by the theologians and philosophers, but rather than offering an alternative theology, they for the most part have abandoned theology altogether.

The sort of philosophical theology one finds in the works of 'Allamah Tabataba'i is one in which God is not understood as being personal, in the sense that it is held that terms which are normally attributed to persons must be reinterpreted when they are applied to God because of the fundamental ontological disparity between the Creator and His creation.

Consider, for example, 'Allamah's philosophical discussion of the speech of Allah (in the commentary to 2:253–254). 'Allamah writes that the Knowledge of Allah is 'ilm al-huduri, that is, knowledge by presence. Knowledge by presence is defined as a non-conceptual, non-representational knowledge in which the known object is directly present to the knower.

This sort of knowledge gained an important place in Islamic philosophy with the works of Sohrawardi, and was further elaborated by Mulla Sadra. Examples given are of the knowledge one has of one's own consciousness and of those states that are considered causally dependent on consciousness, such as pain and hunger. In knowledge by presence, it is held that the knower, the knowledge and the known are united.

'Allamah criticizes both the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites for implicitly attributing to Allah 'ilm al-husuli, knowledge which is acquired when ideas are produced in the mind. There is an ontological distinction between the kinds of knowledge to be attributed to men and to God and this distinction is based on the ontological distinction between persons and God.

Another distinction in Islamic theology to which 'Allamah appeals, in order to explain the knowledge of God, is between detailed knowledge ('ilm al-tafsili) and summary knowledge ('ilm al-ijmali). A subject has detailed knowledge when he is aware of the specifics of and object, as, for example, when he entertains specific propositions descriptive of what is known.

A subject has summary knowledge when he does not entertain specific propositions about the object of knowledge, but he is able to provide specific information under the appropriate conditions. The distinction is roughly equivalent to that between occurrent and dispositional doxastic states discussed in contemporary Western philosophy.

'Allamah writes that since God is simple pure existence and is not devoid of any perfection, all the details of creation exist in God in their highest forms without distinction, "Hence they are known by Him with summary knowledge which is at once capable of detailed disclosure."⁸

Contemporary Western philosophical theology has been grappling for a number of years with the problem of how God can have knowledge of temporary truths, such as that today is Saturday. The answer suggested by Islamic theology is that God's omniscience is different from human propositional knowledge and must not be understood anthropomorphically to mean the occurrent entertainment of all true propositions in the mind of God.

All difference and change are to be understood in terms of limitations. We can attribute to God the knowledge that today is Saturday because He could reveal to someone that today is Saturday, but God never entertains this proposition per se.

'Allamah writes that Allah (subhanah wa ta'ala) is too great to be attributed with a mind with which He might perceive ideas and essences which are to be found in the imaginations of perceivers. Otherwise, He would become compound or composed and would be liable to transitory phases; and even His speech could be potentially wrong.

Far greater is He than what they attribute to Him! In other words, the glorification of God is seen as being more than worth the price of interpreting scriptural claims of divine knowledge in such a way that the emphasis is on the differences rather than the similarities between divine knowledge and human knowledge.

The divine mystery and transcendence is also asserted in the claim that God is not only not a person; He is not even a substance. Substances are taken to be composed of essence and existence and this implies limitation. God is unlimited, so He can have no qualitative properties, no essence, and hence cannot be a substance.

While 'Allamah emphasizes that speech and knowledge for man and for God are metaphysically distinct, he answers the charge which would be raised by Alston that such a distinction renders such concepts as the knowledge and speech of God unintelligible. 'Allamah Tabataba'i goes to some trouble to distance himself from those who have held that the entire universe is the speech of God.

Tabataba'i rejects this view because it would mean that any claim that God communicates to his prophets would have to be interpreted as mere allegory. On the contrary, Tabataba'i maintains that God's speech is real communication. Divine revelation is real communication because it is directed to

specific individuals, and because through revelation a message is conveyed.

However, when it is said that God communicates His message to the prophets, this does not mean that He has thoughts, which are conveyed from one person to another. When God is said to communicate with a man, this means that He creates something that gives that man an inner knowledge of a message.

It becomes clear that the laws which can guarantee the happiness of human society cannot be perceived by reason. Since according to the thesis of general guidance running throughout creation the existence of an awareness of these laws in the human species is necessary, there must be another power of apprehension within the human species which enables man to understand the real duties of life and which places this knowledge within the reach of everyone.

This consciousness and power of perception, which is other than reason and sense, is called the prophetic consciousness, or the consciousness of revelation.⁹

'Allamah claims that although, we use the term 'communication' to signify the exchange of ideas between human beings, the term can be used to describe "revelation" because the effect or function is the same, i.e., a message is obtained. In like manner, we use the term 'lamp' to describe an electric light, even though it has none of the elements of the lamps to which the term was first applied.

Thus, revelation may be considered in a real sense to be God's communication to man, although this communication does not originate from a mind or a person.¹⁰ Thus Tabataba'i illustrates one means by which one may consistently hold that revelation is divine communication without committing oneself to the view that God is a person.

In so doing, 'Allamah also demonstrates how religious language may be given a rational interpretation without attributing to God the metaphysical limitations which accord to man and other substances.

The rationalism of Islamic theology is also exhibited in 'Allamah's discussions of other topics. In his discussion of miracles, for example, he asserts that miracles should not be considered as violations of natural laws.

He does not even require that miracles should have no natural explanation. If there were some theory by which all the alleged cases of miracles could be explained and even predicted this would not detract from their miraculousness.

What makes an event a miracle is merely that it should be out of the ordinary, good, and that it should be religiously significant in the posing of a challenge, e.g., establishing the truth of a prophetic claim.

In the tradition of transcendental wisdom from within which 'Allamah writes, God is pure existence itself. While this claim can also be found in Aquinas, it is more fully developed in the transcendental wisdom than it is in Thomism, for it is in this identification of divinity and the reality of being that transcendental

wisdom is linked to Islamic mysticism, and it is here that we may find the answer to the second sort of objection raised by modern Christian theology to the sort of theology advanced by 'Allamah.

Many Christian theologians and philosophers have claimed that God must be understood to be personal because the alternative is to consider Him as impersonal, as an It instead of a He. This dichotomy informs much of Christian theology and Western religious studies, and yet it is a dichotomy that has no place in Islamic thought.

The distinction between personal and non-personal conceptions of deity is very important in the philosophy of mysticism, especially since R. C. Zaehner proposed a basic dichotomy between theistic and monistic mystical experiences.¹¹ Those who favor the personal view of God claim that in order for God to be a proper object of worship, He must be something to which the worshipper can relate personally as loving.

The idea of God as pure existence is seen as one that makes God into a cold and static abstraction, a sort of cipher. The mercy of God is described by 'Allamah as God's causal power. A thing is called merciful because it bestows that which is needed by another. Since God provides all things, He is merciful. The persona list theologian will object that to offer this sort of impersonalistic analysis of divine mercy is to deprive it of warmth and empathy.

The response to this sort of criticism is that the persona list confuses the poetic and the philosophical approaches to the Real. The fact that an impersonalistic theology is favored by reason in no way detracts from the appropriateness of a persona list poetic response to the Real in worship.

There is a famous story in the Mathnavi of Rumi about a shepherd who is heard by Moses praying to God in extremely anthropomorphic terms, saying that he wants to serve the Lord by picking the lice from His hair and such things. Moses rebukes the shepherd and in turn Moses is rebuked by God for interfering with the sincere worship of the shepherd.

The criticism of persona list theology to more abstract philosophical theologies springs from the same sort of mistake, but in the other direction. It is as if the shepherd were to find fault with the Mosaic conception of God.

While 'Allamah defends a very strongly rationalist and impersonalistic theology, this does not prevent him from using the shepherd's imagery in his worship and in his imaginative relation to the divine, as is evidenced in his own spiritual writings, such as the following poem:

I Alone was Captured

The valorous heart and its religion have been captured by love of beauties.

They were not captured by a rook, they were rooked by a pretty face.

Do not imagine that Majnun became mad of his own will.

He was caught and hauled in from the bottom of the sea up to the heavens by Layld.

I did not find my way to the source of the sun by myself. I was a mote, and your love raised me.

I am just some scum washed away in the flood. As it was passing it carried me off to the heart of the sea.

Where was the goblet of red wine? From whose hand was it poured at this banquet to capture the pining heart?

It was the curve of your eyebrow and the palm of your heavenly hand that in a single disclosure—all at once—captured me.

From you yourself have I learned love, and by you am I burned. With your blushing cheeks you have unsettled me.

My friends and I were at the head of your lane, but Your sad face saw me, and I alone was captured.

We had all fallen in love and were anxious lest your sadness leave us all behind, but I alone was captured.

The anthropomorphic imagery found in 'Allamah's poetry in no way conflicts with the abstract conception of divinity found in his philosophical theology, because it is clear that each has its own place. The relation between these two realms is maintained by the possibility of rational interpretation and imaginative expression.

Mystical poetry may be seen as the imaginative expression of that which is given the form of rational interpretation in philosophical theology. The religious moment is not to be characterized as monistic or personal, but as personal in its imaginative expression and non-personal in its rational interpretation.

[1.](#) See Muhammad Legenhausen, *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (London: al-Hoda, 1999).

[2.](#) H. P. Owen, 'Theism', *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1972), VIII, p. 97.

[3.](#) John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1973), p. 5

[4.](#) Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 1.

[5.](#) J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 1

[6.](#) William P. Alston, "The Perception of God," *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 16, No. 2. Fall 1988, p. 25. Alston's principle works in philosophical theology are collected in two volumes: *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1989), and *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[7.](#) Robert Cummings Neville, *A Theology Primer* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), p. 5–6.

[8.](#) 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i *Biddiyat al Hikmat: The Elements of Muslim Metaphysics*, Part 9, trans. 'Ali Quli Qara'i, *Al-Tawhid*, vol. XI, No. 1–2 (Muharram –Jamad i II, 1414/July –December 1994), p. 171.

[9.](#) 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Shi'ite Islam*, trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, (Houston: FILINC, 1979), p. 143.

[10.](#) 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan*, trans. Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran: WOFIS, 1982),

vol. 4, p. 133–42.

[11.](#) R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

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