

The shi'ite kalam

Now it is time to take up Shi'ite *kalam*, if only briefly.

Kalam, in the sense of logical and rational argument about the principal doctrines of Islam, has a special and distinguished place in the Shi'ah tradition. The Shi'ite *kalam*, on the one hand, emerges from the core of Shi'ite *hadith*, and, on the other, is mixed with Shi'ite philosophy. We have seen how, in the early centuries, *kalam* was considered to be inimical to the *Sunnah* and the *hadith* by the Ahl al-Sunnah. But the Shi'ite *kalam* not only does not come into conflict with the *Sunnah* and the *hadith*, it is firmly rooted in the *Sunnah* and the *hadith*.

The reason is that the Shi'ite *hadith*, contrary to the Sunni corpus on *hadith*, consists of numerous traditions in which profound metaphysical or social problems have been dealt with logically and analysed rationally. But in the Sunni corpus such analytic treatment of these subjects is missing. For instance, if there is any mention of such problems as that of Divine providence and preordination, the all embracing Will of the Almighty, the Divine Names, Attributes, or such topics as the soul, the life after death, the final reckoning, the *Sirat*, the Balance, or such issues as *Imamah*, *khilafah*, and the like, there is no argument or rational explanation of the topics mentioned.

But in the Shi'ah corpus on *hadith*, all such issues have been dealt with in a rational and discursive manner. A comparison between the list of the chapters of the six Sihah and that of al-Kulayni's *al-Kafi* will make this quite clear.

Accordingly, "*kalam*", in the sense of rational and analytical treatment of problems, is found in the Shi'ah *hadith*. This is the reason why the Shi'ah were not divided into two groups like the Sunnis were into "Ahl al-Hadith" and "Ahl al-Kalam."

It was on the basis of the Sunni textual sources that we stated, in the former lectures, that the first doctrinal issue to become a subject of controversy was the issue of the *kufr* of a *fasiq*, brought up by the Khawarij during the first half of the first century. Then emerged the problem of freedom and fate, which was raised and argued by two individuals by the names of Ma'bad al-Juhani and Ghaylan al-Dimashqi.

The belief they professed in this matter was contrary to the one held and propagated by the Umayyad rulers. Thereafter, during the first half of the second century, the notion of the unity of Divine Attributes and Essence was posed by Jahm ibn Safwan. Thereupon, Wasil ibn 'Ata' and 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd, the founders of the Mu'tazilite school, adopting the belief in free will from Ma'bad and Ghaylan and the doctrine of the unity of Divine Essence and Attributes from Jahm ibn Safwan, and themselves innovating the doctrine of *manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn* in the issue of the faith or infidelity of *fasiq*, initiated debates in some other issues, thus founding the first school in Islamic *kalam*.

This is how the Orientalists and the scholars of Islamic studies in the West and the East explain and interpret the origins of rational speculation and debates in the Islamic world. This group, advertently or mistakenly, ignores the profound rational and demonstrative arguments advanced for the first time by Amir al-Muminin 'Ali (A). The truth is that the rational approach in Islamic teachings was first initiated by 'Ali (A) in his sermons and discussions.

It was he who for the first time initiated profound discussion on the subjects of Divine Essence and Attributes, temporality (*huduth*) and pre-eternity (*qidam*), simplicity (*basatah*) and compositeness (*tarkib*), unity (*wahdah*) and plurality (*kathrah*), etc. These are recorded in the *Nahj al-balaghah* and other authentic texts of Shi'ah *hadith*. These discussions have a colour, perfume and spirit which are totally distinct from the approaches of the Mu'tazilah and the Ash'arite to the controversies of *kalam*, or even from that of the Shi'ah scholars, who were influenced by their contemporary *kalam*.

In our *Sayr dar Nahj al-balaghah* ("A Journey Through the *Nahj al-balaghah*"), and in our preface to the Vol. V of *Usul al-falsafeh wa rawish al-riyalism*, we have discussed this matter.

Sunni historians confess that from the earliest days the Shi'ite thinking was philosophical in approach. The Shi'ite intellectual and theoretical approach is opposed not only to the Hanbali thinking – which fundamentally rejects the idea of using discursive reasoning in religious belief – and the Ash'arite approach – which denies the independence of reason and subordinates it to literalist appearance – but also to the Mu'tazilite thinking with all its predilection for reason. Because, although the Mu'tazilite thought is rational, it is dialectical or polemical (*jadali*), not discursive or demonstrative (*burhani*).

In our lectures on the basics of Islamic philosophy, where we have clarified the difference between peripatetic (*hikmat al-mashsha'*) and illuminationist (*hikmat al-ishraq*) philosophies, we have also explained the difference between dialectical (Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite) *kalam* and mystical or intuitive approaches to philosophical issues¹. That is the reason why the majority of Islamic philosophers have been Shi'ah. Only the Shi'ah have preserved and kept Islamic philosophy alive, since they acquired this spirit from their Imams (A), particularly from the first Imam, Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A).

The Shi'ah philosophers, without having to mould philosophy into *kalam* and without transforming rational philosophy into dialectical philosophization, consolidated the doctrinal basis of Islam under the inspiration of the Qur'anic Revelation and the guiding principles of their spiritual leaders. If we wish to enumerate

the Shi'ah *mutakallimun*, that is those who have applied rational thought to the doctrines of the Faith, we shall have to include a group of *muhaddithun* as well as a group of Shi'ah philosophers among them. Because, as said earlier, both the Shi'ite *hadith* and the Shi'ite philosophy have accomplished the function of *'ilm al-kalam* to a greater extent than *kalam* itself.

But if by "*mutakallimun*" we mean only that group which under the Mu'tazilite or Ash'arite influence had resorted to the tools of dialectical reasoning, we are forced to select only a particular group of them. However, we see no reason to concentrate our attention on this particular group only.

If we leave the utterances of the infallible Imams (A) about doctrines, delivered in the forms of sermons, narratives, or prayers, the first Shi'ah writer to compile a book on doctrines of faith was 'Ali ibn Isma'il ibn Mitham al-Tammar. Mitham al-Tammar himself was an orator, expert in debating, and was one of the closest companions of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A). 'Ali ibn Isma'il was his grandson. He was a contemporary of 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd and Abu al-Hudhayl al-'Allaf, the famous figures of *kalam* during the first half of the second century, who were from the first generation of the founders of Mu'tazilite *kalam*.

Among the companions of al-Imam al-Sadiq (A), there is a group of individuals, referred to as "*mutakallim*" by the Imam (A) himself, such as Hisham ibn al-Hakam, Hisham ibn Salim, Humran ibn A'yan, Abu Ja'far al-'Ahwali – known as "Mu'min al-Taqi" – Qays ibn Masar, and others.

Al-Kafi relates the story of a debate between this group and an opponent in the presence of al-Imam al-Sadiq (A), which pleased him. This group lived during the first half of the second century, and was trained in the school of al-Imam al-Sadiq (A).

This shows that the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), not only themselves engaged in discussion and analysis of the problems of *kalam*, they also trained a group of their pupils for the sake of conducting such debates and arguments. Among them Hisham ibn al-Hakam distinguished himself only in *'ilm al-kalam*, not in *tafsir*, *fiqh*, or *hadith*. Al-Imam al-Sadiq (A) used to treat him with more respect than others even when he was a raw youth, and used to offer him a preferred seat. All are in agreement that the Imam paid him so much respect just because of his expertise in *kalam*.

By showing preference for Hisham the *mutakallim* over other pupils, experts in *hadith* and *fiqh*, al-Imam al-Sadiq (A), in fact, wanted to raise the status of *kalam* as against *hadith* and *fiqh*. Obviously, such an attitude of the Imams (A) played a decisive role in the promotion of *'ilm al-kalam*, and as a result, gave the Shi'i thought a dialectical and philosophical character.

Al-Imam al-Rida (A) personally participated in debates in which al-Ma'mun invited *mutakallimun* of various schools to take part. The records of such meetings are preserved in the Shi'i texts.

It is indeed very amazing that the Orientalists should be completely silent about all such events pertaining to the efforts of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A) and ignore the role of the Infallible Imams (A) in the revival of rational inquiry in matters of religious doctrine.

Fadl ibn Shadhan al-Nishaburi, a companion of al-Imam al-Rida (A), al-Imam al-Jawad (A), and al-Imam al-Hadi (A), whose tomb is in Nishabur, apart from being a *faqih* and a *muhaddith*, was also a *mutakallim*. He is reported to have written a large number of books.

The Nawbakht family produced many illustrious personalities, most of whom were *mutakallimun*. Fadl ibn Abi Sahl ibn al-Nawbakht, a contemporary of Harun, was attached with the famous Bayt al-Hikmah library, and well-known as a translator from Persian into Arabic; Ishaq ibn Abi Sahl ibn al-Nawbakht; his son, Isma'il ibn Ishaq ibn Sahl ibn al-Nawbakht; his another son, 'Ali ibn Ishaq; his grandson, Abu Sahl Isma'il ibn 'Ali ibn Ishaq ibn Abi Sahl ibn al-Nawbakht, (called "shaykh al-mutakallimin" of the Shi'ah), Hasan ibn Musa al-Nawbakht, a nephew of Isma'il ibn 'Ali, and several others of this family – all are Shi'i *mutakallimun*.

Ibn Qubba al-Razi in the 3rd/9th century, and Abu 'Ali ibn Miskawayh, the famous doctor of medicine and the author of *Tahdhib al-'akhlāq wa tathir al-'araq*, during the early 5th/11th century, are also Shi'i *mutakallimun*.

The Shi'i *mutakallimun* are many. Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, the famous philosopher, mathematician, and the author of the *Tajrid al-'Itiqad*, and al-'Allamah al-Hilli, the well-known *faqih* and commentator of the *Tajrid al-'Itiqad*, are well-known *mutakallimun* of the 7th/13th century.

Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, himself a learned philosopher, created the most solid work of *kalam* through his writing of the *Tajrid al-'Itiqad*. Since its compilation, the *Tajrid* has attracted the attention of all *mutakallimun*, whether Shi'ah or Sunni. Al-Tusi has, to a great extent, brought *kalam* out of dialectical labyrinth and made it closer to discursive (rational) philosophy. During the latter ages, *kalam* almost completely lost its dialectical form. All thinkers became followers of discursive (rational) philosophy, and, in fact, left the camp of dialectical philosophy to join philosophy proper.

The Shi'ite philosophers after al-Tusi brought the essential problems of *kalam* into philosophy, and applied the philosophical methods of enquiry to the study and analysis of these problems with greater success than attained by the *mutakallimun* who employed the older methods. For example, Mulla Sadra or Mulla Hadi Sabzawari, though they are not usually counted among *mutakallimun*, have been far more influential in Islamic thought than any of the *mutakallimun*.

It is a fact that if we compare their approach to that of the basic Islamic texts, such as the Qur'an, the *Nahj al-balaghah*, and the prayers and traditions transmitted from the Ahl al-Bayt (A), we shall find this approach and style of reasoning to be closer to that of the original teachers of the faith. Here we are compelled to be content with these brief references only.

1. Murtadha Mutahhari, *Ashna'i bi 'ulum al-Islami* (An Introduction to the Islamic Sciences), see the section on philosophy, the fourth lecture entitled "Rawishha-ye fikri-ye Islami".

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