

"Shi'i Rationalism in "Nahj al-balaghah

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The discussion of theological problems and their analysis by the Shi'i Imams, of which the Nahj al-balaghah is the earliest example, was the main cause of the emergence of rationalistic approach and philosophic outlook in the Shi'i intellectual world from the earliest days of Islam. This cannot be labelled as an innovation in Islam; rather, its basis was laid down by the Quran itself. It was in accordance with the approach of the Quran and for the purpose of its interpretation that the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) expounded such issues. If anybody can be reproached in this matter, it is those who did not adopt this method and abandoned the means to follow it.

History shows that from the earliest Islamic era, the Shiah, more than any other sect, were interested in these problems. Amongst the Ahl al-Sunnah, the Mu'tazilites, who were nearer to the Shi'ah, did possess similar inclinations. But, as we know, the general view predominant among the Ahl al-Sunnah did not welcome it, and as a result the Mu'tazilite sect became extinct about the end of the 3rd/9th century .

Ahmad Amin, the Egyptian writer, confirms this view in the first volume of his Zuhr al-'Islam. After discussing the philosophic movement in Egypt during the reign of the Fatimids, who were a Shi'ah sect, he writes:

Philosophy is more akin to Shi'ism than it is to the Sunni Islam, and we witness the truth of this in the era of the Fatimid rule [in Egypt] and in that of the Buyids [in Iran]. Even during the later ages Iran, which is a Shi'ite country, has paid more attention to philosophy than any other Islamic country. In our own times, Sayyid Jamal al-Din al Asadabadi, who had Shi'ite inclinations and had studied philosophy in Iran, created a philosophic movement in Egypt when he arrived here.

Curiously, Ahmad Amin in his explanation of why the Shi'ah showed more inclination towards philosophy, commits an error, willfully or otherwise. According to him, "the reason for greater inclination on the part of the Shi'ah towards rational and philosophical discussions is to be found in their esotericism and their flair for ta'wil. [1] They were compelled to seek the assistance of philosophy for defence of their esotericism. That is why the Fatimid Egypt and Buyid Persia, and Iran during the Safawid and Qajar periods, were more disposed towards philosophy than the rest of the Islamic world."

This is sheer nonsense on the part of Ahmad Amin. It was the Imams ('a) of the Shi'ah who for the first time introduced philosophical approach, and it was they who introduced the most

profound and intricate concepts with regard to theological problems in their arguments, polemics, sermons, ahadith, and prayers, of which the Nahj al-balaghah is one example. Even with regard to the prophetic traditions, the Shi'ah sources are far more sublime and profound than the traditions contained in the non-Shi'i sources. This characteristic is not confined to philosophy only, but is also true of kalam, fiqh, and usul al-fiqh, in which the Shi'ah enjoy a position of distinction. All this owes its origin to one and same source: stress on rationalism.

Some others have tried to trace the origin of this difference [between the Shi'i and the Sunni intellects] in the concept of "the Shi'ite nation". According to them, since the Persians are Shi'ite and the Shi'ah are Persian, and as the Persians are a people with a philosophical temperament, fond of the intricacies of speculation and pure thought, with the help of their rich and strong philosophical tradition, they succeeded in raising the level of Shi'a thought and gave it an Islamic colour.

Bertrand Russell, in A History of Western Philosophy, expresses a similar view based on the above-mentioned argument. With his habitual or inherent impoliteness he puts forth this opinion. However, Russell lacks the capacity of vindicating his claim, since he was totally unfamiliar with Islamic philosophy and basically knew nothing about it. He was not qualified to express any informed opinion about the origins of Shi'ah thought and its sources.

Our rejoinder to the upholders of this view is: first of all, not all Shi'ah were Iranian, nor all Iranians were Shi'ah. Were Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni, Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Babawayh al-Qummi and Muhammad ibn Abi Talib al-Mazandarani Persian, but not Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, Abu Dawud al-Sijistani and Muslim ibn Hajjaj al-Nishaburi?

Was al-Sayyid al-Radi, the compiler of the Nahj al-balaghah, of Persian origin? Were the Fatimids of Egypt of Persian descent? Why was philosophic thought revived in Egypt with the inception of Fatimid rule and why did it decline with their fall? And why was it revived later, after a long interval, only through the influence of an Iranian Shi'ah?

The truth is that the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) were the only real dynamic force behind this mode of thinking and this kind of approach. All scholars of the Ahl al-Sunnah admit that among the Prophet's Companions only 'Ali ('a) was a man of philosophic wisdom, who had an altogether distinct rational approach. Abu 'Ali ibn Sina is quoted as having remarked: 'Ali's position among the Companions of Muhammad (S), was that of the "rational" in the midst of the "corporeal."

Obviously, the intellectual approach of the followers of such an Imam as 'Ali ('a) should be

expected to be radically different from that of those who followed others. Moreover, Ahmad Amin and others have been susceptible to another similar misunderstanding. They express doubts with regard to the authenticity of ascription of such philosophic statements [as exist in the Nahj al-balaghah] to 'Ali ('a). They say that the Arabs were not familiar with such kind of issues and such arguments and elaborate analyses as are found in the Nahj al-balaghah before their acquaintance with Greek philosophy, and evidently, according to them, these discourses should have been composed by some later scholars familiar with Greek philosophy, and were attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib ('a).

We also accept that the Arabs were not familiar with such ideas and notions. Not only the Arabs, the non-Arabs, too, were not acquainted with them, nor were those notions familiar to the Greeks and Greek philosophy. Ahmad Amin first brings down 'Ali ('a) to the level of such Arabs like Abu Jahl and Abu Sufyan and then he postulates his minor and major premises and

bases his conclusion on them: The Arabs were unfamiliar with philosophical notions; 'Ali was an Arab: therefore 'Ali was also unfamiliar with philosophical notions. One should ask him whether the Arabs of the Jahiliyyah were familiar with the ideas and concepts that were propounded in the Quran. Had not 'Ali ('a) been brought up and trained by the Messenger of Allah himself? Didn't the Prophet (S) introduce 'Ali ('a) to his Companions as the most learned and knowledgeable amongst them? Why should we deny the high spiritual status of someone who enriched his inner self by drawing on the bounteous wealth of Islam in order to protect the prestige of some of the Prophet's Companions who could never rise above the ordinary level?

Ahmad Amin says that before acquaintance with Greek philosophy the people of Arabia were not familiar with the ideas and concepts found in the Nahj al-balaghah.

The answer to this is that the Arabs did not become acquainted with the ideas and notions propounded in the Nahj al-balaghah even after centuries of familiarity with Greek philosophy. Not only the Arabs, even the non-Arab Muslims were not acquainted with these ideas, for the simple reason that there is no trace of them in Greek philosophy itself! These ideas are exclusively special to Islamic philosophy. The Islamic philosophers gradually picked these ideas up from the basic Islamic sources and incorporated them in their thought under the guidance of revelation

Note

The term *ta'wil* has been defined variously, but generally when used in the opposition of *tafsir* (which is applied to the explanation of the literal and explicit meanings of the Qur'anic texts) it is applied to interpretation of the Qur'anic verses which goes beyond their literal

meaning. According to Imamiyyah Shi'ah, no one except the Prophet (S) and the twelve Imams (A) is entitled to draw ta'wil of the Qur'anic verses. To illustrate what is meant by ta'wil consider these examples: (1) According to Shi'ah hadith, the verse 2:158, 'Where ever you may be, God will bring you all together', pertains to the 313 companions of al Imam al Mahdi (A) whom God will gather in a certain place from various parts of the earth in a single night. (2) According to another hadith the verse 67:30, 'Say: What think you? If your water (in wells) should have vanished into the earth, then who would bring you running water?' pertains to the ghaybah (occultation) of al Imam al Mahdi (A). Such interpretations, which obviously go beyond the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic verses, are called ta'wil.