

The Rise of Mystical Philosophy in Islam

Arabs, who were the first people to accept the religion of Islam preached by a Prophet (Peace be upon him) from amongst them, were an illiterate community. Environmental factors had forced a nomadic style of life on the overwhelming majority of them, which could not afford the social and cultural developments possible only in a settled and politically advanced society. However, the short-lived unity and more durable self-confidence provided to them by the message of Islam, opened for them the gates of unprecedented conquests of an area which has been the very matrix of human civilization and culture from millennia. Within 18 years of the prophet's (PBUH) demise they became the masters of the most civilized areas of West Asia and Egypt. Conquests and settlement of these areas by Arabs were coincidental. Arabs had to learn every art and skill of civilized life from the local subjects and had Arabic language and the religion of Islam to offer. With their mix arose the edifice of the Classical Islamic Civilization.

The eagerness of the nascent Muslim society (mostly Arabs as the elite) to devour all the cultural assets which were denied to them till then, can be gauged from the fact that after establishing themselves as masters in the conquered areas, for one and half century (from the 8th to the middle of the 9th C.E) they remained patronizing, procuring, learning and digesting the cultural heritage of three leading civilizations of the time, the Greco-Roman, the Iranian and the Indian. These processes, whether through direct teaching and learning or through translations and commentaries were performed, at least in their earlier stages, by the local non-Muslim scholars. It was only after the initial phase of translations from the intellectual heritage of the above-mentioned civilizations, with the greatest portion, at least in rational sciences, from Greco-Roman tradition, had been converted into Arabic, that the original contribution by the Muslim philosophers, scientists and academicians started.

The classical period of Islamic philosophy extends, historically, from 9th to 12th centuries C.E. This period was clearly dominated by the approach and content of Aristotelian School of logic and philosophy, which had already been penetrated by Neo-Platonism before the emergence of Islam. Some of the important Muslim philosophers of this epoch, who followed or were heavily influenced by the vocabulary and the approach of Aristotle (384-322 B.C) while creating their own systems of philosophy, would include philosophers like Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Kindi (d.873), Abu Nasr al-Farabi (d.950), Abu' Ali Ibn Sina (d.103), and Abdul-Walid Ibn Rusd (d.1198).

The philosophical literature produced during this period by the above-mentioned and other philosophers, in spite of their particular differences, is marked by such a unity of premises, approach, world-view, and above all aims and objectives, that it can justifiably be classed into a distinct category of its own as 'Islamic Philosophy' of the Peripatetic hue. At this stage of the Islamic philosophy, if the challenge of bringing about a self-consistent exposition out of the various trends within the Greek philosophical heritage was one of the tasks before every Muslim student of philosophy, a yet more important endeavour was the effort to blend and harmonize the rationalistic tradition of Greek thought with the religious experience in Islam.

Greek philosophy was an attempt to search for basic realities with the help of human reason alone. In this venture it was bound to expound theories about the nature of the Ultimate Reality, its relationship

with this world, the nature of knowledge and the functioning of human mind, etc. On the other hand, beliefs in the Almighty Omniscent God as the Ultimate Reality, His creation of the world from *ex nihilo*, a supra-rational knowledge called *Wahy* and Prophethood, are central to Islamic Faith. The differences between the two traditions of the Greek thought and Islam, on these scores, posed major challenges for the Muslim philosophers. They tried to resolve these differences in ways which could satisfy the demands of both. The dilemma of the Muslim philosophers was that as the conscientious students of Greek philosophy they had to fit their thought in to the categories prevalent in the Greek philosophical tradition and maintain the standards of logical consistency required by it, while as Muslims they felt the pull of their loyalty to the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith in these regards. It was this tension of trying to ride the two horses at the same time, which ultimately bore fruit and the philosophical systems such as that of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina were born.

The greatness of such systems of Philosophy expounded by the early medieval Muslim philosophers does not lie only in the phenomenon that these were successful in complying to the demands of both the tradition of the Greek Philosophy and the Islamic beliefs, but it also rests on the fact that while attempting such a synthesis, these systems of Islamic Philosophy improved upon the theories of the ancient Philosophers such as Aristotle and Plotinus, scaled newer heights in philosophical thought, and justified the claim of philosophy to be the crown of sciences in the medieval period.

However, whatever the achievements of the Muslim Philosophers of the Peripatetic or Neo-Platonico-Peripatetic school may have been in the early medieval period vis-à-vis the field of philosophy, they remained suspect in the eyes of the Muslim orthodoxy and masses who were under their control. It was not the theories of these philosophers, which sought to establish some of the significant dogmas of Islam on philosophical grounds, that aroused this animosity: because these could be modified to adjust with the traditional understanding of Islamic doctrines, as was done with a number of these later on. Rather it was the approach of philosophers towards religion, which set human rational faculty as an alternative source of knowledge--and maybe of a superior class--to revelation, and philosophy as much as a guide to the Truth as religion; this was unacceptable to orthodoxy. It was the absolute status of Shari'ah which was at stake, and hence the opposition from the theologians' side. This opposition from the traditional quarter is no better symbolized than in the *Tahafatul Falasefah* of Imam Ghazzali (d.1111). In this work, Imam Ghazzali takes up one-by-one most of the important ideas of Muslim peripatetic philosophers and cuts them to shreds to show their unacceptability, not only on religious, but even on logical and philosophical grounds.

It would nevertheless be a mistake to assume that the career of the philosophy in Islam had come to an end after this period, as was considered till recently. In fact, there were yet loftier horizons and whole new chapters that were to be opened by the unexhausted genius of Islam in this field, as was the case in other fields like mathematics, astronomy, fine arts etc.

What happened, and that probably gave rise to the above-mentioned misunderstanding, was that in the changed circumstances of the crystallization as well as assertion of Sunni orthodoxy in the wake of Seljuq Empire in the 11th C. A.D and the growing appeal of mysticism in the Muslim society, the nature of philosophical thought underwent a remarkable change. Henceforth, abandoning its position as an independent system, if not as a rival to *Shari'ah*, philosophy adopted two courses of development in Islamic tradition. On the one hand, it compromised with theology to become its handmaid, and as a bargain, in this process not only philosophized *Kalam* (Islamic theology) wholly, but continued the process of the development of the philosophical thought in this new garb on not so radically different

lines than in the earlier phase. On the other hand, it reincarnated itself in a more bizarre form of the Mystical Philosophy or Philosophical Sufi thought.

This mystical course of Philosophy with its definite features, which set it distinctively apart from the corpus of philosophical thought produced by the earlier philosophers, starts as a major trend with Shihabuddin Suhrawardi Maqtul (d.1191). It was a movement of philosophical thought which acted upon the course of the development of Sufism in Islam and was reacted upon by it, in its turn, remaining as a living tradition in Islam till the modern times. It continued to develop very significantly from the time of the mystic philosopher mentioned above, through Mohyuddin Ibn 'Arabi (d.1240) down to Muhammad Sadrudin Shirazi (d.1640), the last original thinker in Islam. In between we have a series of philosophical thinkers who have enriched the philosophical heritage of Islam with their original works or through creative commentaries on the works of earlier philosophers. These would include philosophers like Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi (d.1274), Qutub al-Din Shirazi (d.1311), Qutb al-Din Tahtani or Razi (d.1365), Sa'd al-din Taftazani (d.1371), Mir Syed Sharif Jurjani (d. 1413), Jalalud al-Din Dawwani (d.1512), Mir Baqar Damad (d.1631), and Mir Abul Qasim Findiriski (d. 1640) etc.

The basic characteristics of this hue of philosophy comprised concepts such as that of the 'grades of being' in one and the same Reality, the doctrine about a Realm of Similitudes ('*Alam –al-Mithal*'), where the boundaries of the pure spirituality and the gross material images meet, and the idea of unity of thought and being, referring to the concept that all knowledge, or real knowledge, is gained through an immediate presence of the object to be known, rather than through a mental abstraction of it. This approach ultimately led to the concept of the identity of knowledge, knower and the known. Significantly, it was such an understanding of the process of cognition that paved the way for these mystic philosophers to assert the knowledge gained through their *zauq* or *kashf* i.e. their mystical intuition, as an authoritative argument like the one based on Aristotelian logic, or even better than that. The Aristotelian logic was never abandoned, nor the philosophical molds of peripatetic, though, as these were the long-established norms of discussion in the fields of philosophy, but these were superimposed upon by the knowledge gained through mystical intuition and the new philosophical categories. The goal of Philosophy, as comprehended according to this approach, was not simply to understand the basic questions of life, or even to explain them rationally; rather it was a means to culminate in a 'metaphysic of ecstasy,' without which it was considered as merely 'vain speculation.'

Let us observe in brief the life and philosophy of the first and last of the original thinkers in the area of the Mystical Philosophy, Shihabuddin Suhrawardi Maqtul (d.1191) and Mohammad Sadrudin Shirazi (d.1640) leaving out, at present, the greatest of them, Mohiuddin Ibn 'Arabi' (d.1240).

SHIHABUDDIN –YAHYA –IBN-HABASH-IBN-AMIRAK-SUHRAWARDI-AL-MAQTUL (d.1191)

Born as Suhraward near Zinjan in Northern Persia in 1153, Shihabuddin Suhrawardi al-Maqtul, in spite of his short life of 38 years, influenced Muslim thought and philosophy in a profound way. After his formal education he traveled widely in Persia, Syria and Anatolia meeting Sufis and benefiting by their thought. Finally, Suhrawardi al-Maqtul attached himself with al-Malik-uz-Zahir, governor of Syria for his father Salahuddin, at his capital Aleppo. During his stay at Aleppo, Shihabuddin, due to his certain statements, was successful in inviting the wrath of orthodox religious authorities, who appealed to Salahuddin for Shihabuddin to be punished for his heterodoxy. Al-Malik-uz-Zahir first resisted but had to give in to pressure from his father, and Shihabuddin was imprisoned, where ultimately he was either suffocate to death or died of starvation in 1191.

In his Mystical Philosophy, known as *Ishraqi* (of Light), Shihabuddin Suhrawadi--besides being indebted to earlier Muslim philosophers like Farabi and Ibn Sina and Sufi masters like Hallaj and Imam Ghazzali--was influenced by aspects of Zoroastrian tradition. This was particularly evident in his angelology and the use of the symbolism of Light and Darkness in his philosophy. He, however, distinguished between the Zoroastrian mystics of whom he approved and the exoteric tradition of Magi. Suhrawardi differed from Muslim Masha'i or Peripatetic philosophers, particularly Ibn Sina, in considering the distinctions like Essence and Existence or Necessary and Contingent, the categories on which Ibn Sina has built his whole philosophy, as mere analysis (*Tafsil-uz-Zahni*) and intellectual abstractions (*I'tabar-ul-'qliyaah*). In the same way he rejects the Aristotelian categories of matter and form.

Thus, for Suhrawardi Maqtul, between the Divine Ego and the human self, Existence and Essence being common, only a formal distinction of "perfect" and "imperfect" or *Ashadd-wal-Anqass* (relative intensity and feebleness) is kept. In fact, the whole trend of this philosophy is to abolish intrinsic distinctions in reality, which appear to him as a simple continuum punctuated only by differences in degree. Suhrawardi, like al-Farabi, has a scheme of emanations from God descending from a higher to a lower stage. However, for Suhrawardi, the longitudinal order *Tabqat-at-Tuul* of archangels forms a hierarchy of effusions of Lights *Nul-al Anwar*, in which meditation of lower on higher, as for al-Farabi, is replaced by the illumination of lower from higher lights, and the number of stages far exceeds.

SADRUDDIN SHIRAZI (MULLA SADRA) D.1640 A.D.

There is little doubt that the tradition of Mystical Philosophy found one of its major watersheds in the philosophy of Mulla Sadaruddin Shirazi. Coming some 500 years after al-Ghazzali (d.1111 C.E.), Mulla Sadra had many things in common with the former in his external and internal life. Both were renowned scholars of their age, both were disillusioned with mere intellectual grasp of the religious truths, as was customary among the scholars of their age, and both sought to enliven their knowledge by the direct experience of the Truth through the mystic path.

In his philosophy Mulla Sadra can be said to be a monist or *wahdatul-wujudi*. Thus, for him, apart from the concept of existence, which is a mere intellectual concept, derived from the observation of various existents, pure existence of God is the only Reality there is. This Reality defies intellectual perception because the intellectual faculty is incapable of grasping the essences at all. However, though it cannot be known through any effort of rational faculty, it is capable to be known through intuition or mystic vision. The apparent multiplicity of the contingent things was explained by Mulla Sadra as arising out of the limitations put on the pure existence by the attachment of essences, which have no reality in the external world, but are mere intellectual notions. Thus, from this point of view, Pure Existence or God would remain the only Reality behind everything, and the differentiations in the world of multiplicity arising out of non-existent differentiations in the world of multiplicity, arising out of non-existent essences can be considered as mere appearances. These essences, existing in our mind only, do not correspond to any outside reality.

The difference between God, the necessary being and the contingent beings, would be that while in the case of God the existence is in its purest form, being devoid of any essence, in the case of the contingent beings the existence is limited or diluted by the attachment of these beings with essences. In this regard Mulla Sadra postulates a hierarchy of beings with regard to their being polluted with essences. The simple law is that the more a thing partakes of essences the weaker it is in respect of the existence. God

being the purest existence has no essences at all while matter being all essence has only a potential reality or existence. Thus, the same existence, which is the sole Reality, is also exhibited as unique and different in various contingents. This is unity in diversity, which Mulla Sadra terms as the principle of *Tashkik* or 'ambiguity.' But this ambiguity is systematic also in that there is a movement in this caravan of existence. Every less perfect moves towards more perfect, the more general to more particular, and the indeterminate to more determinate or simple form of existence. This movement in existence is unidirectional, always from the lower to the higher, never the opposite.