As Far As You Are Able, Join Faith To Reason: Medieval Attempts At Reconciling Faith To Reason In Islam And Christianity

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Introduction

Medieval philosophers were confident that they must and could interpret and assimilate philosophy i.e. Greek philosophy into the religious ethos. The medieval philosophers' reasoning on why it was necessary to incorporate philosophy into the religious ethos is because philosophy provided the proofs for theoretical opinions in religion. Al-Farabi argues that "Theoretical opinions in religion have their proofs in theoretical philosophy, while they are taken in religion without (argumentative) proof."1 In order to reconcile philosophy into a religion that is revelation-centric, philosophers had to find a formula on how to incorporate revelation into philosophy. Their attempt to incorporate revelation into philosophy resulted into one of the medieval philosophers' major contributions to the advancement of philosophy. The Muslim philosophers, using the materials from late Hellenistic thought pressed and shaped it into a new direction so that a novel, original pattern emerged from them.² This incorporation of revelation is major because it led the way for incorporating philosophy into religion and influenced the way for both medieval Jewish³ and Christian⁴ philosophers on how to reconcile philosophy into religion

Discussions on revelation in any revealed religion have never been an easy subject to deal with. Issues surrounding the concept of revelation such as what is revelation, i.e. what kinds of knowledge does it actually give us and more importantly, what

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is the ultimate purpose of this revelation revealed to man are rarely discussed by religious scholars in any systematic manner. This lack of discussion is surprising since a religious scholar's position on any subject must inevitably be influenced and shaped by his/her understanding of revelation and inevitably the role of man's reason

The question raised by Socrates to Euthyphro on of what piety aptly sets up the debate on the relationship of revelation and reason.

> Socrates asked "Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you is not to tell me one or two out of the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all actions holy. I believe that you held that there is one ideal form by which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy.... Euthyphro replys "Well then, what is pleasing to the gods is holy and what is not pleasing to the gods is unholy....⁵ Socrates. Now think of this. Is what is holy holy because the gods approve of it, or do they approve of it because it is⁶

The question raised by Socrates above attempts to investigate what makes a right action right and vice versa a wrong action wrong. This very same issue is raised in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, however, the debate arose in the context on how we understand the role of revelation and its relationship to reason, both gifts of God to man. Is revelation to inform us from up high what is holy, right as decided arbitrarily by God?, or does it explicate and reconfirm that certain things are right or wrong because of the nature of the action. Therefore, God pronounces it is right or wrong because it is so by its nature which God Himself had created.

Al-Farabi representing the Islamic philosophical traditions answers the latter that God says it is right or wrong because it is so by its nature. God made man and He made man in such a manner as to recognize these acts as good or evil in tune with the nature that He God made man in. Al-Farabi and the philosophers begin from the postulate that the Creator God is a rational God, who manifest His rationality in all creation. Since the God that created the world and man created the world and man in a

rational manner, thus man utilizing his reason will be able to understand the creations and actions of God. Revelation is a creation and action of God. Thus man utilizing his reason is able to understand revelation.

On the other hand, al-Ghazali representing the theological traditions answered the former, that it (revelation) informs us from up high what is holy, therefore right or is only known or knowable after God had informed man because right or wrong is decided by God. Al-Ghazali begins from the postulate that the Creator God is an all powerful Being and acts out of His own Will and is subject to nothing but His own Will. His Will is manifested in the creation. Thus, al-Ghazali seeks out to prove that what is right or wrong is God's prerogative to decide as He wishes and what He decides is not and cannot be constrained by anything or anyone.

Although both of these scholars believed in the same revelation, the Qur'an the way they perceived the revelation differed greatly. Beginning from very different starting points, beginning with different perceptions of God and His creation, they reached very different conclusions. These different conclusions arising out of the same text should not be seen as unprecedented event in the Islamic tradition. Much earlier in the theological realm, raged the debates between the Jabarites and the Qadarites on the issue of free will in the Qur'an reaching totally opposite conclusions because they had emphasized diferrent aspects of the same revelation and pushed them to their extreme logical conclusions. However, these different perspectives on the relationship of reason to revelation greatly affects how one interprets the revelation and how one perceives the role of human reasoning in understanding revelation and the role of human reasoning for guidance of how one should live life especially where the revelation is silent on this or that matter.

Reason vis a vis Revelation in Al-Farabi

Al-Farabi argues that reason is not beyond or above revelation but revelation is a transformation of reason into symbolic and metaphoric language with the power and motivation that can

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make people understand the same truths that reason uncovers, however, in accordance to their own capacities to comprehend. Thus, revelation *vis a vis* reason is certainly not redundant nor futile but revelation is actually an extension of reason with the motive of enlightening all in accordance with their ability.

All human knowledge for al-Farabi is in a way 'revealed' to man.For al-Farabi, God indirectly via the Active Intelligence is responsible for giving man knowledge by the Active Intelligence acting upon man's intellect. Revelation is seen as just another means by which God conveys knowledge to man. The relationship between revelation and reason is certainly not antagonistic, contradictory, competing against each other nor the Latin Averroes' dual truth idea⁷. Rather, revelation is the transformation of reason and therefore, revelation and reason complement each other in conveying the same truths to all men.

Al-Farabi argues that revelation is not only an important but an essential factor for the fulfillment of the purpose of philosophy. The importance of philosophy is to benefit not just the individual but others i.e. society. Thus, in order for philosophy to benefit not just the individual, it must pass from the theoretical to the practical. This means of transforming theoretical truths to practical actions occurs through the means of revelation.

How revelation is transmitted to the prophet is essential to comprehend before we can discuss revelation's relationship vis a vis reason. Al-Farabi links prophecy with the perfection of the innate faculties of the soul itself and does not describe it as a state of possession by supernatural power⁸ which suppresses the prophet's personality but rather prophecy enlarges what already lies potentially in the prophet's personality, thus transforming it and thereby actualizing this potential. However, he qualifies this statement that it is not a state of possession of supernatural power by pointing out that this innate faculty must be endowed and cannot be acquired by learning.9 Therefore, al-Farabi argues that although prophecy is not possession of a supernatural state, it cannot be sought to be acquired through exertion of efforts but remains a unique gift of God to certain individuals whom He chooses. Therefore, God gives these men special qualities necessary in order to receive revelation and hence become a prophet.

For al-Farabi, revelation occurs as a result of the emanation from God via the Active Intelligence on an individual who possess a fully developed rational faculty combined with an endowed, fully naturally developed imaginative faculty. The individuals who possesses both these faculties are extremely rare as they only occur in prophets.¹⁰ Al-Farabi explains this process of transmitting revelation as follows,

> God Almighty (Allah) grants him Revelation through the mediation of the Active Intelligence, so that the emanation from God Almighty to the Active Intelligence is passed through the mediation of the acquired intellect, and then to the faculty of representation (imaginative faculty). Thus, he is, through the emanation from the Active Intelligence to his Passive Intellect, a wise man and a philosopher and an accomplished thinker who employs and intellect of divine quality, and through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his faculty of representation (imaginative faculty) a visionary prophet (nabi): who warns of things to come and tells of particular things which exist at present. This man holds the most perfect rank of humanity and has reached the highest degree of felicity.¹¹

Thus, for al-Farabii, revelation is a gift of God to His prophets. However, this revelation is a gift from God which occurs via the emanation of the Active Intelligence acting upon the prophet's intellect which is then transformed automatically through the imaginative faculty into symbolic language. Because these truths are transformed into symbolic language via the imaginative faulty automatically, thus the end product the revelation, it's wording is not the conscious effort of the prophet. The Prophet could not worded the revelation differently. Rather, the wording automatically flows from the imaginative faculty unconsciously. Therefore, revelation is the product of the highest philosophical truths combining with the fully naturally developed imaginative faculty resulting in a transformation of these philosophical truth into symbols. Thus, revelation should not and cannot be seen as inferior to reason nor beyond reason but as a transformation of reason.

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Why reason has to be transformed into revelation is closely connected with the mission of philosophy and the purpose of revelation. But, how then does revelation fulfill the purpose of philosophy? Al-Farabi repeats over and over again in all his writings the idea that true philosophy must benefit not just the philosopher but also all others. Al-Farabi explains the means of instruction utilized by philosophy and that of religion as follows:

Every instruction is composed of two things: (a) making what is being studied comprehensible and causing its idea to be established in the soul and (b) causing others to assent to what is comprehended and established in the soul. There are two ways of making a thing comprehensible: first, by causing its essence to be perceived by the intellect, and second, by causing it to be imagined through the similitude that imitate it. Assent, too, is brought about by one or two methods, either the method of certain demonstration or the method of persuasion. Now when one acquires knowledge of the beings or receives instruction in them, if he perceives their ideas themselves with his intellect, and his assent to them is by the means of certain demonstration, then the science that comprises these cognitions is philosophy. But if they are known by imagining them through similitude that imitate them, and assent to what is imagined of them is cause by the persuasive methods, then the ancients call what comprises these cognitions religion.12

Al-Farabii argues that revelation and reason intend to instruct and educate people in the same subject and the same truths but utilize different methods in conveying the same truths.

The same subject matter is dealt with by revelation and reason. Both seek the ultimate perfection and happiness of man. Therefore, both give an account of the existence of the universe and where man fits in it and what is the ultimate aim of man and how to attain this goal of man, happiness. Al-Farabi explains the two different ways that revelation and reason utilize to describe the existence of the universe and the purpose of man as follows:

> Philosophy gives an account of the ultimate principles (that is the essence of the first principles and the essence of the incorporeal

second principle), as they are perceived by the intellect. Religion sets forth their images by means of similitude of them taken from corporeal principles and imitates them by their likeness among political offices. It imitates the actions of natural powers and principles by their likeness among the faculties, states, and arts that have to do with the will, just as Plato does in the Timaeus. It imitates the intelligibles by their likeness among the sensibles: for instance, some imitate matter by the abyss or darkness or water, and nothingness by darkness. It imitates the classes of supreme happiness- that is, the end of the act of human virtues-by their likeness among the goods that are believed to be the ends. It imitates the classes of true happiness by the means of the ones that are believed to be happiness. It imitates the ranks of the beings by their likeness among the spatial and temporal ranks. And it attempts to bring the similitude of these things as close as possible to their essences. Also in everything of which philosophy gives an account that is demonstrative and certain, religion gives an account based on the persuasive arguments.13

It is clear that the methods used by revelation and reason is different. However, the message they intend to convey remains the same. Both attempt to teach peoples about the existence of the universe and man's place and role in it. Philosophy explains utilizing demonstrative means. Religion explains utilizing persuasive arguments. However, because of philosophy's demanding method only the few can comprehend it message and therefore, its audience is limited. Thus, reason's ability to convey its message it limited. Because of reason being a difficult, dry and abstract intellectual method, its ability to educate the masses is limited and reason is impotent in motivating and driving most men to right action. Revelation, on the other hand, can reach a mass audience from the educated to the layman. Through its means of persuasive arguments it not only educates all in accordance to their capacity but revelation fires imaginations and stirs souls inspiring people to righteous actions.

One may obtain the wrong impression here that revelation is merely an imitation of reason. In other words, revelation is reduced to only a popular philosophy for the uneducated man. This perception is inaccurate.Revelation has the ability to reach and educate the masses which reason by itself cannot and fail to achieve. However, for al-Farabi the more the philosopher has the power to exploit his theoretical knowledge for the benefit of others, the more perfect is his philosophy. Therefore, the role of revelation should never be underrated in the al-Farabi's philosophical system. Since, through the prophets, theoretical knowledge is transformed into revelation which is the best form of persuasion benefiting the greatest number of people, the prophets are the ones who must be seen as possessing the most perfect philosophy. Thus, for al-Farabi, the role of the prophet and the revelation are central to his philosophical system and their importance should never be underrated.

St. Thomas Aquinas.

Both medieval thinkers, al-Farabi and Aquinas grappled with the relationship of their faiths to their philosophy in their theory of knowledge. This relationship boiled down to the question of between the insights revealed to man by the grace of God and the insights man struggled to obtain for himself through his own efforts i.e reason.

Aquinas theory of knowledge differed to certain degree from al-Farabi. Al-Farabi has tried to integrate the theory of knowledge of Plato with the Neoplatonic with Aristotle clearly influencing in the background, and all three with the Islamic tradition. Al-Farabi produced a complex a theory of knowledge which saw revelation as a progression from reason. Al-Farabi sees revelation as the ultimate culmination of the highest intellectual truths transformed and put into a symbolic language with power to motivate man to right action. Revelation is capable to be understood by all and more importantly to drive and commit them to action. Thus, revelation is an extension of reason, an expression of reason.

Aquinas on the other hand had to grappled with the role of revelation far more because he had accepted basically the Aristotelian concept of human knowledge. The classical Greek philosopher, Aristotle had not to take into account revelation because he did not have a concept of prophecy. Thus, the question Aquinas has to deal with is relationship the Aristotelian concept of human knowledge and the knowledge brought by the Grace of God, revelation. Before Aquinas even deals with these issues,

he has already adopted the medieval assumption that truth is one and therefore, the truths obtained either through reason or revelation cannot contradict nor conflict with each other if they are true.

The question Aquinas first has to contend with is the scope of the two sources of knowledge, reason and revelation. Do they both discuss the same issues or not ? If they do, does one become redundant or complimentary? The next question is the method utilized by these two sources of knowledge? The two methods of obtaining knowledge is certainly not the same. Because they utilized different methods of obtaining knowledge, do they have different ways of reaching the same conclusion like seeing two sides of the same coin, thus the only difference is the means?

Questions on epistemology are never easy to answer more so when you try to integrate reason and faith. However, Aquinas saw the need and more importantly the value of this attempt to integrate faith with reason. Tranoy aptly lays out the intellectual climate at that time on this issue in the Christian faith. Tranoy point out three trends of thought on the issue with Aquinas adding a fourth. The first argues that faith alone is sufficient, in fact reason may be harmful to one's faith.

"Three different ways in dealing with the relationship between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, will be distinguish here as a background for an understanding of the fourth, that of Aquinas. In the second century, Tertulian's attitude¹⁴ to the problem has been epitomized in the phrase "Credo quia absurdum" (I believe because it is absurd" although this is not his own, exacting wording). In his teaching the revealed insights of Christianity made any kind of knowledge superfluous. "With our faith we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides."...We find similar attitudes expressed through out the Middle Ages. This is indeed an extreme position. But it would probably be unwise to underestimate the strength of the attitude even from a more theoretical point of view. It avoids certain problems by admitting one source of authority only"¹⁵.

The first understand of the relation of faith to reason although is extreme but it is very attractive to many and one should never underestimate its influence on the believers. This view is attractive because it argues that faith revealed by God complete and not needing any addition, thus its simplicity provides comfort and certainty, hence it great appeal.

A second view gives priority of faith over reason but sees a certain limited value to reason because the revelation from God is received by man through and understood by his reason.

> A second and probably a more important tradition which also gives priority to faith over reason is connected to Augustine. This tradition recognizes the need for certain rational endeavors and also admits that knowledge through reason is possible given certain conditions. These conditions lie in the Christian faith itself and in the divine grace and assistance accorded to the believers....Man's "natural light"-his intellect or reason- must first be lit by God; then and only then can man use this faculty to throw light on which he desires to understand. Therefore, faith in the dogmas of religion must come first; the credibility of Christianity is not dependent on rational proof...Revelation – the Scripture – is the word of God, and words are address to and properly received by the understanding. Now, the complete and perfect understanding of the word of God as the Truth can, at best, be attained in the state of beatitude after death.¹⁶

Here reason is conceived as the means to understand faith but in a limited fashion due to the limitation of human understanding and comprehension of the revelation. Man will only fully comprehend the truth of the revelation at the state of beatitude after death.

The third trends is an influence from the Muslim philosophers as Aristotle was initially transmitted to Christian Europe via the Muslim philosophers interaction with them in at that time Muslim Spain.

> A third tradition must be mentioned, Arabian and Latin Aristotelianism. It is here only that we can speak of the primacy of reason over faith....And it so happened that the greatest of the Arabian philosophers, Averroes¹⁷ (1126-1198), represented a fairly outspoken rationalism with a frank antitheological bias... Theologian do interpret the(Quran), but they do not have the proper training for such an exacting task. The professional philosopher, however are trained to deliver logically necessary

arguments and strict demonstrations. They alone fulfill the conditions required for a proper interpretation of the Koran. They alone are fit to serve as the final arbiter in conflict which may arise between reason and revelation.¹⁸

The third perspective on the relationship between faith and reason although originated from outside Christianity nonetheless influenced Christianity .

Aquinas Response: The Fourth Solution

Aquinas was well aware of all three trends of approaches to the relationship between faith and reason but he was dissatisfied with them all and so sought to provide a fourth alternative. Aquinas as a theologian saw great value in faith. Aquinas, the philosopher saw great value in reason. Since both faith and reason are gifts of God to man, they must be both for the benefit of man.

Thomas was the Great Compromise in medieval philosophy: a system of ideas which provided a possibility for logical coexistence of Christian dogma with some of the main ideas of, above all Aristotle, and, next Augustine and some of the Neo-Platonic ideas introduced into Christian thought by the early fathers of the Church. Thomas makes two decisive moves. In the first place, he introduces a fairly consistently maintained separation of philosophy from theology, of knowledge by faith and grace from knowledge by natural cognition. Second sensation – sensory experience – is made the basis of all cognition and knowledge.¹⁹

By Aquinas trying to maintain a separation of knowledge obtained by faith and that obtained by reason, one could be mislead to conclude that the two means of knowledge leads to different areas of study or they would lead to different understandings. The brilliance of Aquinas here is here, is he concludes that all knowledge is of God, either directly about Him or of His creation, which would lead to Him. Thus knowledge of anything is knowledge about God. The distinction between philosophy and theology produces no dualism in the system of Aquinas. The underlying unity of the system is provided, one might say, by the object of knowledge, which is the same in philosophy and theology. All knowledge is knowledge of God. "All conscious things know God in everything they know".²⁰

Aquinas contention that all knowledge is of God

The only difference in between the two sources of knowledge, revelation and reason is not in the object of knowledge but in the means of them understanding that object of knowledge. Since Aquinas' theory of human knowledge is basically Aristotelian, natural cognition is based on sensory experience. Since natural cognition is base on sensory experience, it experience is the experience of the creation, not the Creator. But since all creation is an effect of the Creator, it reflects and is knowledge indirectly of the Creator, God.

By our natural cognitive powers we can make inferences about God by way of knowledge of things He has created. To describe any piece of created nature is also to describe God in so far as a description of the effects of any x is also a description of x. And there is nothing which is not created by God. The difference, then, on which the distinction is based is primarily a difference in method an in the direction of the cognitive process.²¹

Thus, Aquinas concludes that there can be no contradiction between the knowledge brought by revelation with the knowledge obtained by reason.

Aquinas Natural Law Ethics: The Harmony of Revelation and Reason.

Socrates question raised at the beginning of the paper is answers by Aquinas argument that knowledge given by revelation (in Socrates language- by the Gods) is in harmony with the knowledge obtained through reason.

Socrates' question of "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve of it, or do they approve of it because it is" investigate what makes a right action right and vice versa a wrong action wrong and aptly sets up the whether one believes in subjective or objective ethics is answered that what seems to be the subjective ethical demands of God is actually the objective ethical demands of man. They do not conflict because the revelational demands of God on man become the same ethical demands uncovered or discovered by man's reason because the truths conveyed by these two sources do not and more importantly cannot conflict.

Endnotes

¹ al-FÉrÉbÊ, KitÉb al-millah wa nuÎuÎ ukhrÊ, ed. M. Mahdi, (Beirut, 1968), 47.

Fazlur Rahman, Islam, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 119

- For al-FÉrÉbÉ 's influence on Maimonides, see, Lawrence Berman, "Maimonides the Disciple al-FÉrÉbÉ ", Israel Oriental Studies
- (Tel Aviv, 1974) 154-178. For a general discussion of Maimonides' relationship to al-FÉrÉbÊ, see also, Shlomo Pines, "Translator's Introduction" in Moses Maimonides the Guide of the Perplexed (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1963). xxviii-xcii. Maimonides describes al-FÉrÉbÊ 's contribution and influence by saying," I tell you: as for the works of logic, one should only study the writings of AbË NaÎr al-FÉrÉbÊ. All his writings are flawlessly excellent. One ought to study and understand them. For he is a great man. Though the works of AbË NaÎr al-FÉrÉbÊ, AbĔ Bakr al-ØÉ'igh [Ibn Bajja] was also a great philosopher, and his writings are of a high standard." Moses Maimonides the Guide of the Perplexed, ix.
- See Robert Hammond, The Philosophy of al-FÉrÉbÊ and ItsInfluence on Medieval Thought, (New York, 1947)). In this book, especially in the chapters on Proof on God's Existence, Epistemology, the author tries to show how much St Thomas Aquinas was influenced by al-FÉrÉbÊ. See also, Etienne Gilson-The Elements of Christian Philosophy, (New York, 1963). See also, Etienne Gilson, Etudes de philosophie mediévale French trans. by Roland Huret, Strasbourg, 1921). Gilson describes Averroes' treatise Agreement of Philosophy and Religion as a landmark in the history of Western civilization. Etudes de philosophie mediévale, 51.

Euthyphro, translated by Cooper in Plato: The Collected Dialogues, eds. Hamilton and Cairns, New Jersey, 1985. (174:6E)

ibid. (178:10C)

- ⁷ This dual truth theory of the Latin Averroes has no relationship to Averroes himself. Stuart MacClintock explains this dual truths idea as follows; "that such thinkers (Latin Averroist) were actually practising a system of 'double truths' in which a proposition can be true in natural philosophy but contradict a proposition true in theology and conversely". Stuart MacClintock, Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, vol. 1, 224.
- ⁸ Richard Walzer, "Al-Farabi's Theory of Prophecy and Divination", Journal of Hellenic Studies 27, 1957. 142.
- ⁹ <u>Al-Farabi's The Political Regime (al-Siyasa al-madaniyya)</u>, 79. Mahdi. 36.
- ¹⁰ Al-Farabi on the Perfect State, Walzer, Richard (trans), Oxford:, 1985. 244-5.
- ¹¹ <u>Al-Farabi, Tahsil al-sa'ada</u> (Attainment of Happiness), (ed.) Ja'far Yasin, Beirut, 1983. Translated into English by Muhsin Mahdi, part I of <u>Al-Farabi</u>'s Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, (Ithaca1969). <u>Al-Farabi, Tahsil</u> <u>al-sa'ada</u>, 89. Mahdi, 44.
- ¹² <u>Al-Farabi, Tahsil al-sa</u>'ada, 90-1. Mahdi, 45
- ¹³ For an elaboration of the Tertulian primacy of Faith position, refer to Etienne Gilson, Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages, New York, 1938. See Chapter 1, "Primacy of Faith".
- ¹⁴ Knut Tranoy, Thomas Aquinas, in <u>A Critical History of Philosophy</u>, ed. D. J. O'Connor, New York, 1985. 100.
- ¹⁵ Knut Tranoy, Thomas Aquinas, in A Critical History of Philosophy, ed. D. J. O'Connor, New York, 1985, 100.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 100.
- ¹⁷ For excellent elaboration of the Averroes position on the relationship of reason to revelation, refer to George Hourani, Averroes. On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy, London, 1961. See also, George Hourai, " Ibn Rushd's defense of philosophy, in The World of Islam, edited by Kriitzeck and Winder, London, 1959.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 101. See also, Joel Krammer, "The Jihad of the Falasifa." Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam, vol 10, 1987. 288-324.
- 19 Ibid. 101
- 20 Ibid. 101.
- ²¹ Ibid. 101.