

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPIRIT OF ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

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Alfred North Whitehead would tell us that religion is a system of truths that have an effect of transforming character when they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended. Islam and its scholars could not agree more. They would emphasize that *all* truths under such a system should be lived.¹ They would also emphasize that only then these truths would be character transforming.

According to many Islamic philosophers², there are four themes that constitute an Islamic life. These themes are the mind (AL-AKEL), living the scriptures (AL-NAKEL), inner or super-consciousness (AL-WEJDAN) and experience (AL-TAJRUBAH).³ Leading a harmonious Islamic life must include all the previous themes integrally where each gives rise and meaningfulness to the other. The themes are presented here in their order of pronunciation in the Arabic language and not in importance, as they are all equally important. A mind, for example, without a systematic way of functioning would end in the ruins of madness. An experience without mind and consciousness is worthless if at all is perceived or understood as an experience.

The mind is where thought takes place. It is an amphitheater of possibilities.⁴ The process of thinking starts with simple interpretation, which gives rise to certain understanding that gives specific knowledge. The information that derives this process is perceived through the faculties of perception such as sight. The perceived information could be of two kinds, old or new. Simply, the old is already known and the new is known through the old. This is due to the fact that the brain actually does not know the difference between what it remembers and what it actually sees. This is one of the reasons that gives existence to the other themes. In Islam, the mind, at any moment, could go astray if not supported by the other themes. It is also worth mentioning that the mind has many methods, as to the way it deals with this old and new information, such as reflection, inference and reduction.

According to Islamic philosophy, this rationalism began with the prophet Mohammad himself where, for example, he asks for the ultimate purpose of the above mentioned process, "God, grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things."⁵ Again, he asks God because all four themes are interconnected. It is worldly reality that he is asking to know. This reality in Islam is connected with the functioning of the mind. The mind deals with the temporal aspects of reality. It is cognition. This worldly knowledge does not exist separately from the transcendental or divine knowledge and that is the purpose of the concept "ultimate nature" in this prayer. Simply, the

other themes such as inner-consciousness and its tool of intuition work alongside the cognitive methods of the mind.

Islamic philosophy has been considered for centuries to be the result of Greek philosophy; there is, however, something that has to be cleared. Yes, Islamic scholars took from the Greeks and progressed beyond but not in any way Islamic philosophy took its beginning and foundation from the Greeks. The anti-classicality of the Quran, when it comes to this matter, totally negates this idea. The following examples should solve this problematic.

For Socrates, the proper study of humans was humans themselves as specific entities. This is the opposite of the position of the Quran that acknowledges the planets swimming through infinity, the humble bee as a recipient of Divine inspiration and the alteration of the day and night⁶ also as important parts of the study. One cannot disconnect an aspect of reality and study it on its own. This is due to the fact that there is no self-existent phenomenon.

Another example is Ibn Rushed's defense of Aristotle that led him to the idea of immortality, which is the opposite of the Quranic position on human ego.

The following example, which is briefly explained, shows the contradiction between the Quranic view on mind and thought and that of the Greeks.

The logical process, as mainly a result of the Aristotelian view, fails in its vision of the multiplicity of mutually contradicting entities without a chance of their reduction to a unity. This gives rise to the skepticism of the limitation of thought. Logic cannot even envision this multiplicity of interaction as cosmos. Logic only investigates this phenomenon through generalizations that are based on similarities that are only based on unreal unities. These unities do not even show understanding or affect the ultimate reality of things.

Thought is movement that could acknowledge and reach an immanent infinite, which the finite concepts are only momentums of. Thought is not static in its ultimate nature. It is organically dynamic. Thought uncovers its internal endlessness through time as its medium, so to speak, like the small seed uncovers the unity of a tree as a timely continuing development through soil as its medium. Thought as dynamic-self-revealing phenomenon, which is due to interpretation and understanding, uncovers itself as a series of understandings that cannot be interpreted except through reciprocal reference. The meaningfulness here is not contained in self-identity but in

the larger whole in which it is a specific part. This larger whole is described, in Surah 85 (AL-BURUJ), last verse, as “A Tablet Preserved.”⁷

This preserved tablet contains possibilities of knowledge as present realities revealing themselves, through human choices, in time progression to reach a unity that is already contained in them. The aspect of infinity of movement of knowledge gives rise to the possibility of finite thought.

The second theme of this presentation is AL-NAKEL. The literal meaning of AL-NAKEL is copying or moving as is. This meaning was chosen to show that all other themes should not in any way clash with the following of the scriptures. This is due to the fact that if the other combined themes function correctly, there would not be any clash of any sort. Simply, the person copies (lives) the scriptures through the daily life of thoughts and actions. The person is the scriptures as the prophet is described by his wife as a Quran that walks earth. This should not in any way be confused with blindly following God’s word as it contradicts the understanding that is promoted by the Quran.

The over all meaning of AL-NAKEL is living or following the scriptures. This could not be done without the other themes which contain such sub-themes as understanding, intuition, daily experiences.

The scriptures include many teachings, but for the sake of Islamic unity of interpretation, it includes AL-QURAN and AL-HADITH.

The Quran is viewed by Islamic philosophy as the word of Allah which is received by Mohammad through pure vertical inspiration by the method of intuition as a quantum jump, so to speak. This happening does not include personal interpretation of any sort. Simply, Mohammad takes the exact word and tells it the exact way. It is not until later in time where hermeneutics plays a roll through interpretations and understandings of the scholars.

The second main half of the scriptures is AL-HADITH. AL-HADITH is generally viewed as Mohammad’s teachings through certain sayings, feelings, actions. This is divided into many sections that range between non-doubtfully- totally-correct and not-totally-wrong. This division is a whole specialty and science on its own, which in Arabic is called ELM AL-JARH WA AL-TADEEL. This field of knowledge is dependent on too many complicated factors that vary from scholar to another, which is very hard to discuss here.

The main aspect, when it comes to the scriptures, is its confinement and completeness that covers every part of Islamic life. This ranges between the discussion of the Ultimate Reality on one side and the teachings of

releasing bodily fluids (using the bathroom) on the other. Simply, a Muslim only needs the other themes mentioned in this article to understand the scriptures, the experience of knowing and living them.

The third theme of this presentation is AL-WIJDAN, and the closest translation to it in the English language is inner or super-consciousness. For the sake of simplicity, it is inner consciousness. This consciousness is not apart from the regular consciousness of everyday mundane life but it is defiantly and succinctly different.

Contrary to the mind, this theme has only one method of receiving and that is intuition. Intuition, simply as Henri Bergson defines it, a higher type of intellect. This is, of course, not to be confused with human instinct or the rare special ability of the sixth sense that many Islamic scholars tend to do.

Inner consciousness and intuition started appearing in Islamic literature as early as the first inspiration of the prophet. It is described as that which sees, reports and never wrong. According to Islamic philosophy this seeing and reporting is nothing mysterious. It is similar to the seeing and reporting of the sense-perceptual-world, however, it is vertical instead of horizontal like it is in the sense-perceptual-world:

...By the Star when it goes down, your Companion is neither astray nor being misled, nor does he say (aught) of (his own) Desire. It is no less than Inspiration sent down to him: he was taught by one Mighty in Power, Endued with Wisdom: for he appeared (in stately form) while he was in the highest part of the horizon. Then he approached and came closer, and was at distance of but two-lengths or (even) nearer; so did (Allah) convey the inspiration to His Servant-(Conveyed) what He (meant) to convey. The (Prophet's) (mind and) heart in no way falsified that which he saw...⁸

This, although not mysterious, is dealing with a reality where sensations do not exist and physicality of everyday reality is not part of. This experience is different from everyday experiences in its degree of immediacy, which takes us to the last theme.

Experiences, according to the stories of Islamic literature, are of two kinds. One is an everyday experience of eating and walking. This experience is associated with the first theme, the mind. An everyday experience is associated with perception, its faculties and its methods of reflection, reduction. The second experience is associated with the third theme of inner consciousness. Both experiences are without end. As it is possible to have new experiences to learn a specific skill from, it is also

possible to have an immediate experience that develops inner consciousness that takes humans to new horizons. The need for all the previous mentioned themes is human development and progression.

Although the two kinds of experiences are integral metaphysically, they have some ontological differences. First, everyday experience is associated with the properties of intellect in the way that it is not totally immediate. This experience is more of a learning process where interpretation and understanding takes place. This is why it is not suddenly immediate and that the experiencing humans respond and learn differently from it. The immediate experience of intuitive inner consciousness is suddenly immediate without any abstractions nor hesitations of thought. Second, an everyday experience can be explained and expressed through language. Simply, an everyday experience can be taught when understood correctly by the experiencing human. On the contrary, an immediate experience of inner consciousness cannot be explained or taught. Put simply, one cannot teach another how to intuitively be inspired or gain divine knowledge. In so doing, it is reduced to intellect that is absurd. Simply, higher intuition can penetrate lower intellect but the opposite is undoable. Last but not least, a regular experience is affected by time as thought itself is. An intuitive experience does not deal with the horizontal movement of time since it is not a process like the relationship between thought and time; it is a vertical immediate sudden transcendence where a lower property like time is not even important.

A human being needs the simple properties of the mind to be able to start understanding and living the scriptures. The scriptures help this simple mind by giving it the whole cosmos to think on. This wholeness stimulates and awakens the intuition where it is used along side the mind and scriptures to have the immediate experiences that will develop the inner consciousness to transcend mundane human abilities to be able to reach super-consciousness. This in its entirety will bring Whitehead's character-transforming notion into manifestation. It will go beyond it to reach the ultimate super-consciousness of vertical-intuitive-religious-experience. Only then the word religion, which in Latin literally means to reconnect, will be fully lived.

Notes:

- 1) The Quran in many instances very harshly critiques people who only follow what they think is good in a religion and leave that which goes against what they think is beneficial. See Surah 1 (AL-BAQARAH), verse 85 and 86.
- 2) See the different philosophies of Al-afghani, Mohammad Abdu and Shaltoot.

- 3) I did my best when it comes to translation. However, delivering the same absolute meaning in two different languages is nearly impossible. This is besides the notion that Arabic is old and poetical, and English is new and technical.
- 4) “The mind is an amphitheater of possibilities,” James W. Kidd, Ph.D., Hermeneutics Lecture, Lone Mountain, LM 169, University of San Francisco.
- 5) This is Hadith by the prophet Mohammad in a form of a prayer. I chose this one by heart because it is simple to translate, however, I do not recall the source.
- 6) Surah 21 (AL-ANBIYAA), Verse 33; Surah 16 (AL-NAHL), Verse 68 and Surah 24 (AL-NOOR), Verse 44.
- 7) See Mohammad Iqbal’s philosophy. It is helpful to read his different writings, lectures and poems. It might be also helpful to see Ibn Khaldoon’s writings.
- 8) Surah 53 (AL-NAJM), Verses 1-18.