



How Philosophy Shapes Theology

Muhammad Ali Abdullahi

University of Tehran

abdllahi@ut.ac.ir

Abstract: Most theologians are under the impression that philosophy must serve the purpose of theology, while there are some theologians who are skeptical of such a notion. In the West, from the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century onwards, the idea that theology employs philosophy was refuted by philosophers and theologians, but this did not result in its emancipation, rather, it led to it being at the service of the natural sciences and humanities. The relationship between philosophy, theology and religion is not an ambiguous issue in the Muslim world either; the connection between philosophy and theology, and their link with religion has been designated. According to some Islamic thinkers, theology is a science committed to the propositions of religion, while philosophy is free intellectual endeavor of the mind with no commitment to religion whatsoever, or at the least it can be said that it is impartial. On the other hand, a group of Islamic thinkers, both jurists and theologians, hold that utilization of philosophy in understanding religion and its interpretation is erroneous from the start because it leads to difference of opinion, esoteric interpretations (*ta'wil*), and misinterpretation. In the author's view, this claim seems to be incorrect since when it comes to understanding religion – what we have as religion, not what the prophet had – philosophy and theology are both prone to error and both bear the same potential of reaching the truth for that matter. Therefore, transmitted revelation has no advantage over reason.

Introduction

Much has been said concerning the differences between the science of theology and philosophy, and their relationship to religion. It is a common belief that theologians are committed to religious propositions, while philosophers are not—or at the least, are impartial. The reason being that the essence of theology comes from religion, while philosophy is the result of the activities of philosophers. At times their endeavor is in accordance with religion, yet at other times it is not.

By accepting such difference, one has implicitly accepted also the fact that reason and the methods of reasoning – by which philosophy proves its claims – are outside the scope of religion. Furthermore, philosophy clearly differs from theology with regards to its content

and methodology. It becomes manifest from this brief introduction that there are two connections here; the connection between philosophy and theology and the connection between theology and religion. Therefore, the central question this paper addresses is "What is the relationship between philosophy and religion?" Of course, another one inevitably follows this question, namely, "What is the relationship between philosophy and theology and between theology and religion?" The focus in this essay is to find precise and coherent answers to these questions.

The Service or Disservice of Philosophy to Theology

Without a doubt, both theology in Islam, and theology in Christianity have been influenced by philosophy

throughout history. Christian theologians such as Justin the Martyr and Augustine, as well as Thomas Aquinas have freely made use of philosophy in their works.¹ Even in the modern era, theologians such as Butler have been influenced by different philosophical schools of thought, especially the primacy of reason (*Esalat al-Aql*) of the eighteenth century. Muslim theologians also, especially Khajeh Nasir al-Din al-Tosi, employed philosophical concepts in their expositions of religious subjects. Nevertheless, in all of these cases, they did so with the aim of clarifying and defending religion. They used philosophical concepts and even foreign rational systems to present their theology and theological assertions as understandable and reasonable. However, to the extent that they used philosophy for their own goals, they confronted challenges and complications as well. But despite all these problems, through the use of philosophical systems in conceptualizing, clarifying, and ontologically and epistemologically interpreting the universe and man, theologians and theologians have succeeded in doing theology a great service. It is clear that such a relationship entails theology's exploitation of philosophy and its adherence to philosophers. This task though was made possible by theologians making religion to their own benefit; something they were relatively successful with.

In any event though, there are some who deny the exploitation of philosophy by theology and see grave danger in such endeavor. For example, John Macquarrie writes:

It is common perception that the subject of theology is only the revealed word of God, and that if human philosophies are allowed to have their effect on Christian faith, they will only make it more vague and cause its deviation. Much effort was made to put theological teachings aside from divine revelation and to marginalize elements of human thought from those teachings.²

In the Islamic world too, the use of philosophy as a tool by theology in clarifying and defending religion faced much opposition. Some Shiih scholars, whom today are known as followers of the school of tafkik (i.e., separation) in its moderate sense of course, believe that any knowledge that is not sourced in revelation

and prophetic teachings, and rather is sourced from human thought, taste and unveilings, is the source of great conflict and deviation.³ According to this group's perception, scientific realities and human knowledge are only accurate and reliable if and only if they stem from divine revelation and divine knowledge. One of the followers of this school of thought writes:

The sound individual must refrain from obtaining divine guidance and reaching religion, which is the basis of cognition of God, from other than the Qur'an and those vested with knowledge.⁴

Therefore not only is the use of philosophy by theology erroneous, but even referring to reason and human knowledge for understanding religion is totally baseless and leads to deviation.⁵

In the West, in addition to the theologians, there was another group who were also opposed to philosophy serving theology. From the Enlightenment and on, philosophers and scientists also voiced their opposition to the aforementioned notion, but instead of this resulting in the freedom of philosophy, it ended in it being at the disposal of the natural sciences and humanities.

To sum it up, both in the West and Islamic world, theologians, jurists, and scientists have opposed the use of philosophy by theology in understanding, defending and explicating religion. In this paper, we will not address the rationale of scientists and scholars in the field of the natural sciences and humanities. What this paper intends to cover, is the opposition of theologians in regard to philosophy. The usual reason for the opposition of both theologians in the West and theologians in Islam has been based on the claim that the religion of God cannot be understood by the fallible human mind, and that if religion and its assertions are to be correctly comprehended, it can only be done in the framework of canonical law and textual evidences. Man must only receive revelation directly, and

³ Muhammad Riza Hakimi, *Maktab-i-Tafkik*, Tehran: Farhang-i-Islami Publication office 1996, p. 51. [Henceforth cited as *MIT*]

⁴ Hasan Ali Murwarid, *Tanbihát Hawl al-Mabda'a wa al-Ma'ad*, Foundation of Islamic Research, Ustán Quds: Mashhad 1997, p. 41.

⁵ See Sa'd al-Din Taftaazni, *Sharh al-Maqasid*, Vol. 1, Qum: Sharif Razi 1991, p. 176; and 'Azd al-Din Eji 'Abd al-Rahman, *Sharh al-Muwa'qif*, Vol. 1, Qum: Sharif Razi 1994, p. 38.

¹ Muhammad Elkhani, *Tarikh-i-Falsafeh dar qarùn-i-wusôa*, Tehran: Samt Publications 2003, p. 92.

² John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin 1973, p. 19.

should not factor his mind or human findings into his understanding of religion.

The claims of theologians can be summarized as follows: (1) Divine revelation is pure and unadulterated and should not be mixed with human knowledge. (2) Giving intellect and philosophical concepts a role in understanding religion is the cause of conflict and diversity. (3) Employment of reason and human knowledge in understanding revelation necessitates esoteric exegesis (*ta'wil*) and interpretation (*tafsir*).

All of these ramifications and implications show how philosophy and other human sciences should not be utilized in the comprehension, interpretation, explication and defense of religion (*MT* 53 ff).

Transmitted Revelation has no Distinction over Reasoning in Understanding Religion

Five primary assertions against the use of philosophy in understanding religion are as follows:

1. The assertion that theology is committed to religion while philosophy is a product of unrestricted logical thinking is in essence an incorrect notion. While philosophy is initially indifferent toward the divinities (or the lack of), by disproving the various fallacies and doubts presented against the divinities and in turn establishing the existence of God, philosophy in turn is rendered a divine science. However, if this is not established [and the existence of a creator is not proven], this science would be considered atheistic. Meaning, if determining the existence of God is followed by proving divine intervention and the necessity of divine revelation, philosophy simply cannot maintain indifference toward religion.

Furthermore, how can a theologian rely on the message of revelation without first confirming its foundations and principles (i.e. the existence of God, the necessity of revelation, etc.)? If a theologian—like a philosopher—relies on logical reasoning with respect to the foundations and principles of revelation, what then is the difference between a theologian and a philosopher? After all, a plethora of Muslim philosophers, who in the framework of their own philosophical reasoning have proven the existence of God and divine revelation, attest to its legitimacy and substance. In his book *Asfār*, the renowned Muslim philosopher Mulla Sadra states:

We have repeatedly noted that philosophy does not conflict with true divine faiths. In fact, the objective of both is one in essence: the understanding of God and His divine attributes and actions. This

understanding may present itself in the form of a [divine] message, otherwise known as Prophethood (*nubuwwa*), and other times it is intellectually acquired, otherwise known as wisdom (*Hikmat*) or guardianship (*wilayah*). Indeed, one who finds contradiction between philosophy and jurisprudence lacks the ability to harmonize jurisprudential declarations and philosophical proofs.⁶

In another section of his book Mulla Sadra states:

Curse be upon that philosophy whose principles do not correspond with [the divine] book and [prophetic] tradition. [*MS* VIII 357]

Such expressions make it evident that the commitment of philosophers to religion is no less than that of theologians.

2. It is self-evident that religion, a compilation of that which God descended upon the Prophet (SAWA) by means of revelation, is pure from adulteration and true in essence. Also self-evident is that man's science and knowledge is imperfect, therefore capable of mistake. These two truths, however, do not imply that one should refrain from the use of philosophy in understanding and interpreting religion. Consider the following:

Firstly, as previously stated, religion as that which God descended upon the Prophet (SAWA) by means of revelation is true in essence and pure from adulteration. Such revelation—with the mentioned qualities—is exclusive to the Prophet (SAWA). Secondly, that which is accessible as a resource to man are the transmissions of these divine revelations. And although he can understand them, the bounds of an average man's understanding are incomparable to that of the Prophet (SAWA). By dealing with the words and phrases of the transmitted revelation, man's understanding may lead him to the truth intended by the divine—and other times not. This is due to the fact that the human being's understanding is not infallible from error or mistake. Through implementation of various methods in assessing divine revelation, man can expand his understanding of religion, which may in turn lead him to either correct or incorrect conclusions.

When we were aware of the precise reality lying behind the Prophet's (SAWA) revelation, man's

⁶ Mullah Sadra Muhammad Shirázi, *al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah fi al-Asfār al-'Arba'ah*, Tehran: Bunyád-i-Hikmat-i-Islami-i-Sadra 2001, p. 413. [Henceforth cited as *MS*]

independent knowledge and intellectual sciences would be deemed unnecessary and its implementation would be considered incorrect. However, when he is unable to directly access the core reality of religion, a natural byproduct of his understanding would be such errors. Bearing this in mind, what advantage does transmitted revelation hold over logical reasoning? Both methods are prone to mistake, and therefore, bear no advantage over the other. Furthermore, no reason exists for why these two sciences should be separated from the other. In conclusion, we can safely say that legitimate logical reasoning is just as credible a resource as divine scripture and tradition.

3. If we consider theology and the divinities sciences which by means of transmitted revelation discuss the existence of God, the afterlife, and the necessity of divine revelation; and narrations, as previously noted, depend man's understanding of that which was revealed to the Prophet (SAWA), then it can be said that theology and the divinities are sciences primarily shaped by philosophy. Therefore, the foundations and principles of the divinities including, but not limited to the existence of God and the necessity of divine revelation can only be proven through logic and philosophical reasoning. Understanding transmitted revelation and making use of them generally depends on a series of rules and regulations including: linguistics, hermeneutics, theoretical linguistics, and philosophical semantics. This is what the author means by using philosophy to shape the divine sciences.

4. It is true that a person who intends to explicate and interpret (on religious issues) must endeavor to remove any prejudices and any incorrect subjective mental interference, however, the possibility of emptying the mind of all prejudices is doubtful. Secondly, why is it that philosophical principles and intellectual perceptions pertaining to God's existence and His divine attributes are valid, and it is not necessary for the mind to clear itself from them, however, it is necessary to for the mind to be cleared from all other definite intellectual principles? Furthermore, does the rejection of knowledge acquired by means of reason and spiritual unveilings in the process of attaining a correct and precise understanding of revelation help in a pure unaltered understanding of religion?

5. One of the arguments of those who oppose the use of philosophy in understanding religion is that it would necessitate divergence and dispersion of viewpoints (pertaining to religious matters). They are of the belief that the method of guarding against this

divergence is to directly analyze prophetic teachings. I have already replied briefly to this argument and will now add a more detailed explanation.

First, some authors caution that we should not confuse revelation itself (that which is with a prophet) with its transmittal (that which has reached mankind).⁷ Mankind only has direct access to the transmittal of revelation, not revelation itself. Therefore, we shall still encounter the problem of human comprehension of the transmitted revelation, which is not infallible. The possibility of human error in direct comprehension of transmitted revelation is not one that will cease. We will not be able to eliminate this possibility by removing philosophy from the process of comprehending transmitted revelation.

Secondly, the claimants of the aforementioned, who have used direct reference to revelation as the source of understanding religion [correctly] have been unable to restrain divergence of opinion. This is perhaps the kind of difference renowned traditionalists and theologians such as Shaykh Saduq and Shaykh Mufid had with each other. They both would establish their own views and disprove the views of the other by utilizing traditions as the primary source for their claims. These two distinguished scholars differed with regards to issues such as divine will, destiny and predestination, the soul and spirit and other similar issues. An example of this is that Shaykh Mufid counters Shaykh Saduq's arguments pertaining to divine will and deemed Saduq's understanding of the matter self-contradictory. He brings the following as evidence for his claim:

He [Shaykh Saduq] has limited himself to the apparent [or literal] meaning of the traditions and has failed to contemplate over them so that through it he may be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood.⁸

Such divergence of views demonstrates that even direct reference to transmitted revelation shall not be able to solve the dilemma of differing viewpoints. There is no escape from differing viewpoints, for we have no access to the reality of revelation in the manner it is with the Prophet (SAWA). Individual comprehension shall ever be a medium of acquiring this reality. Thus, we can conclude that both the human reason and the transmitted revelation can be utilized in the

⁷ 'Abdullah Jawadi Amuli, *Manzilat-i-Aql dar Hindeseh-i-Ma'rifat-i-Dini*, Qum: Isrâ' Publication House 2007, p. 198.

⁸ Shaykh Mufid Muhammad Nu'man, *Tashih al-Etiqâdât al-Imamiyyah*, Beyrut: Dar al-Mufid 1993, p. 49.

comprehension of religion.

The gist of the author's discourse is that it is true that revelation, when defined as the knowledge that descended upon the Prophet (SAWA) is free from error and that it is incomparable to any other form of knowledge; however, revelation with this definition is inaccessible to man. Man must first, with the use of reason, followed by the use of transmitted revelation, endeavor to acquire a true comprehension of revelation.

Conclusion

The following assertions are central to this essay: (1) While philosophy is neither essentially divine nor atheistic, however, upon demonstrating the existence of God and the necessity of divine revelation, it is loyal to religious teachings. Many philosophers, Muslim philosophers in particular, have emphasized their loyalty to religious teachings in their comprehension of religion. Thus we cannot differentiate between theology and philosophy from this aspect.

(2) It is necessary to differentiate between revelation defined as the phenomena that descended upon the Prophet (SAWA), and its transmitted version, which is accessible to the layman. Revelation with the first definition is free from any form of error, whereas there is room for error in the latter. Just as there is a possibility of error in the process of a philosopher explicating the religion via reason, there is a possibility of error in the process of the theologians explicating the religion through the means of direct derivation from transmitted revelation.

(3) Putting aside human reason in the process of understanding religion, and abstaining from the use of philosophy in theology is not possible. This is so because certain foundational issues in theology, such as proving God's existence and the necessity of divine revelation are in their essence philosophical and intellectual discussions.

(4) Such separation of reason is also not possible since human reason is never placed horizontally with revelation, for revelation is a reality that is solely accessible to the Prophet (SAWA) and reason has no access to it. Reason however, is on par with transmitted revelation. It is only the transmitted form of revelation that is accessible to common humans.

In conclusion, both reason and transmitted revelation are utilized as epistemic sources in understanding religion.

Reply to Charles E. Butterworth (pp. 65-69)

Concerning the valuable comments by Professor Butterworth I have a few words to say: Dr. Sādeqi's comments on common themes will suffice and there is no need for repetition [see pages xx-yyy in this volume]. Professor Butterworth points out what is the main purpose of my paper and I appreciate that he found the arguments as novel and appealing. However, I did not mention that philosophers believed their teachings are aimed to serve Islam. Rather, I argued that both theologians and philosophers must differentiate between the revelation received by the prophet and what is accessible to them. Therefore, there is no other way than utilizing reason as an epistemic source in understanding Qur'an and Hadith (tradition). In understanding transmitted revelation, both theologians and philosophers are prone to err. Accordingly, it cannot be concluded that unlike philosophers, theologians are loyal to religious teaching and serve the religion. In projecting this view, I tried to utilize the work of the great philosopher and thinker Mulla Sadra.

I believe, the aim of this essay, like the other essays, is not to compare and contrast between the claims of philosophers in Islamic and Western tradition, and I never tried to criticize the claims of Western or Muslim philosophers, as this can be subject for another paper.