Method in Mufid's Kalam and in Christian Theology

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I. Al-Mufid's Notion of Kala'm

II. Al-Mufid's Kala'm in Practice

III. Comparison with Theology

Notes

I do not think I can tell you anything new about al-Shaykh. Most of you are scholars in his tradition and you study his works and know his sources to a degree and with a facility that I shall never attain. I have, though, and do, make an effort to understand his kala'm as best I can, and to understand what he was doing, and what he meant to do and tried to do.

In a book I wrote about al-Shaykh al-Mufid, I provisionally translated 'ilm al-kala'm by the word "theology", as its closest equivalent in the languages of the West. It is not a very satisfactory translation, for 'ilm al-kala'm is not quite the same as what Christians call "theology." Now my purpose is to come back to these two terms and consider a few differences between what al-Mufid, the mutakallim was doing in his discipline and what Christians mean by theology. To be quite plain, I am thinking inside my own tradition, which is that of a Catholic Christian whose model and ideal in theology is Thomas Aquinas. I admit that my aim here is personal, simply to answer a question I have long ago asked myself but have not investigated before. I am trying today to see the two methods in comparison: that of 'ilm al-kala'm and of theology. Noting the differences helps me to understand al-Mufid better, what he is aiming to do and what he is not aiming to do. Perhaps also it may help you to understand Christian theology more, what it does and does not try to do.

My guide in all this has been the monumental study by Louis Gardet and Georges Anawati, Introduction a' la Théologie Musulmane, which however suffers from the defect, recognized by its authors, of not considering the Shi'ite mutakallimu'n.[1] It is commonly said of 'ilm al-kala'm in general that it is a defensive apologetic, good in the opinion of some Muslims, but not all. Al-Gazza'li thought 'ilm al-kala'm to be a dangerous remedy, useful only for protecting the faith of the people and silencing heretics.[2] Ibn Khaldu'n's definition of 'ilm al-kala'm is well known: "It is a science that involves arguing with rational proofs in defence of articles of faith and refuting innovators who deviate in their dogmas from the doctrines of the early generations and the people of tradition. The core of these dogmas is the oneness of God."[3]

And yet surely the mutakallim, in elaborating his defence of the propositions to be believed, is at the same time making an effort to understand and to illuminate what it is that he believes. This is what interests me in al-Mufid.

Here is the fundamental difference between kala'm and theology. Kala'm aims primarily to defend and secondarily to illuminate; theology aims primarily to illuminate: to come to some understanding of a mystery which the human mind cannot fully grasp, and only secondarily to defend. Both hold that God is one. And we both, I presume, also hold that God is a mystery that cannot be fully understood by the finite human mind. We both hold that nothing in true revelation can contradict reason, for God is the author of both reason and revelation. Yet God can also reveal things about Himself which are beyond our power to understand fully.

My own interest is in the effort at understanding and explaining the datum of revelation which al-Mufid makes in his kala'm. One of the important things al-Mufid did was to provide a rational substratum for the Imamite faith during the absence of the Imam. He had to meet not only the objections of outsiders but also the demands of believing Shi'ites for explanation of how what is proposed for belief does not contradict what they already know. I will try, then, (1) to say something about al-Mufid's own notion of kala'm, and (2) then see how he carried it out, and after that (3) compare it with the theological method.

I. Al-Mufid's Notion of Kala'm

First of all, kala'm is for the specialists. Although ordinary believers were allowed to protect themselves by taqiyyah, still, says al-Mufid, the Imams had commanded another group of the more learned, "to face their adversaries openly in argument and call them to the truth."[4] For, says al-Mufid, from the first there had been in the Imamite community some who "used reason (nazar) and disputed for the truth and repelled falsehood with arguments and proofs, for which the Imams praised them."[5]

In assessing the method of his teacher Ibn Ba'bawayh, al-Mufid made this reproach, that "he followed the method of the traditionists, going by surface. meanings and shying away from the paths of reflection (al-'i'tiba'r). This point of view harms the religion of the one who holds it, and resting in it blocks rational inquiry (al-'istibsa'r)."[6]

From this criticism it is possible to infer al-Mufid's own idea of what a mutakallim should do. He should reflect and try to understand the meaning of the traditions that he has heard. This will improve the quality of his own faith and so enable him more effectively to defend it against the attacks of nonbelievers. Man's first duty, according to al-Mufid, is to know God.[7] Apparently, then, this comes even before the duty to reason to knowledge of His existence. Mere passive acceptance of traditions on the part of those who are capable of reasoning,

brings no reward, for passive acceptance is not faith.[8] This however does not mean to say that all must be skilled in dialectic or capable of expressing their knowledge in debate and disputation.[9] For nazar is not the same as muna'zarah.[10] Many of the common people, says al-Mufid, are able to have the personal knowledge, based on reasoning, that puts them above the passive accepters of another's word, without being themselves mutakallimu'n.

On the other hand, al-Mufid says that "reason (al-'aql)needs revelation (al-sam') both in its premises and in its conclusions, and it does not dispense with revelation for informing the ignorant of how demonstration (al-istidla'l) works. And an apostle is necessary for the initial imposition of moral obligation and its beginning in the world."[11] This interdependence of reason and revelation is basic in al-Mufid's system, and it is a pity that he did not theorize about it further in any of the writings we have from him.

II. Al-Mufid's Kala'm in Practice

It is the contention of this paper that al-Mufid did more than just argue against external opponents and refute adversaries. While doing this, he also met to some extent another vital need of the Imamite believer which had been performed by the Imams when they were available, but which needed continuation in al-Mufid's time and still needs to be done along the lines he laid out or along the lines laid out by his pupils and successors. That task is the rational elaboration of the faith. What does this or that doctrine mean? How can I justify it against the objections of my own mind? It is the task of giving an intellectual substratum to what he believed. For the content of what is to be believed does not stand on reason alone, but also on revelation (sam').

To this end, for example, al-Mufid elaborates in al-'Ifsa'h a fourfold proof of the need for an Imam: from the Qur'an, from tradition, consensus, and from reason and experience. And the last part of the proof, from reason and experience, rests upon two premises: one, that it is impossible to carry out the legal duties of the believer without an Imam, and, second, that God does not oblige what is impossible.[12] So one of the two premises is based on revelation, and the second, that God does not oblige what is above man's strength, is from reason. Al-Mufid also argues agaisnt the Ash'arites that God is just and does not command man beyond what he is capable of.[13] This leads him also to consider whether God acts for man's best interests, and whether God does so because He is obliged in justice, or whether He puts Himself under a kind of moral obligation rising from His nobility and generosity.[14] In deciding for the latter, al-Mufid is in agreement with the Baghdadi Mu'tazilites against the Basran school.

But if God is not held by strict justice, it would seem rather hazardous to claim that we know by reason what He may and may not do. Hence this seems to be another reason why al-Mufid's

thesis fits in well with his other doctrine that reason ('aql) needs revelation (sam') to support it. This would seem to be in line with the prayer of Ibrahim to see how God would raise the dead. God replied, " 'Do you not then believe?' He said, 'Yes! but to satisfy my own heart.' "[15] It is not so much a question of whether it is so, but an effort to understand how it is so. And in kala'm, it is an effort more in the first operation of the mind (the concept and what it means) rather than the second operation (the judgement) which deals with the true and the false. That is, the Imamite already believes what the Imam says.

But still he wants to know how this accords and harmonizes with other things which he knows by reason. So he asks, for example, in al-Masa''il al-Ha'jibiyyah, how this or that Qur'anic verse can be harmonized with the doctrine of the Imamites, e.g. on the purity of the People of the House, with the verse: "And God only wishes to remove all impurity from you, Members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless"[16] This is really asking for an explanation of the meaning of the verse which he can rationally accept along with the doctrine that the Imams were already pure.

Or how certain actions of the prophets or the Imams harmonize with their 'ismah, for example: if Ali knew what would happen, why did he go to the mosque where he was assassinated, and why did al-Husayn go to Kufah?[17] This leads al-Mufid to explain more fully what 'ismah means and what it does not mean. Granted. then, that the main purpose of 'ilm al-kala'm is to defend one's doctrine against deniers and enemies, it remains that it also has a secondary function, which is to explain more fully the meaning of the doctrine in order to meet the need of the believer for a fuller understanding of what he believes. I think this second task of kala'm looms large in al-Mufid's work.

III. Comparison with Theology

All that I have said so far may perhaps seem obvious to you. Why do I elaborate on it? Because before coming to a study of kala'm and al-Mufid, I had been trained in theology, and my own curiousity leads me- to ask what are the similarities and what are the differences between the two sciences. I would like to note three differences: one of emphasis, another of function, and of subject matter. In theology, the function of defensive apologetic is secondary, relegated to a minor ancillary role. For theology is mainly a dialogue between believers rather than with unbelievers. Where the dialogue is with unbelievers, one is in the realm of philosophy or what is called natural theology, which appeals only to what can be proved by unaided reason. And in defending one's religious doctrine against outside attacks, or in seeking to convince a nonbeliever of its truth, one is using the science called apologetics, not theology proper. For the primary aim of theology is "understanding of the faith". Or as Augustine, one of the

formers of the theological tradition said, "I believe in order that I may understand, and I understand in order that I may believe better."[18] It uses reason in order to try to see the harmony between the doctrines among themselves, and also how they lead man to his last end, which is the direct knowledge of God in heaven. In other words, if the parts of a theological system contradict one another or do not fit in with one another, the system falls. But the theologian as such does not make it his business to prove the credibility of what he believes to a nonbeliever. That is the task of the philosopher or the apologist. The theologian seeks not so much to defend as to deepen his faith, and by contemplating with his reason what he believes to be revealed truths, to see connections between them and draw conclusions from them. In doing this he aims to know God better, even though God will remain a mystery to him. And the fruit of this effort should ordinarily be love.

It must be said too that another difference between the subject matter of kala'm and that of theology is that kala'm does not deal expressly with mysteries that surpass our understanding. Of course, every Muslim will admit at once that there are many things about God and what pertains to Him, al-ghayb, beyond the understanding of His creatures. However the task of kala'm is not to treat of those mysteries. The theologian, in fact, treats many of the same subjects as the mutakallim, but under a different light:

that of faith. And theology holds of course that many truths about God (that He exists, that He is One, that He rewards the good and punishes the evil, etc.) can be proved by reason alone, but that revelation is necessary in practice so that these truths can be arrived at by all, more quickly, easily, and certainly and without error being mixed in.

For faith, in the theologian's view, is a gift which God offers and man can accept. When he accepts it, it raises him above his own natural powers and enables him to believe not on the strength of proofs, which may or may not be present, but because God says so. What the theologian is trying to do by using his reason with the aid of this gift of faith is to come to some knowledge of God which stands between the knowledge of a child, who simply believes, and the direct knowledge of God which is experienced in love by those who contemplate Him in heaven.

Notes:

[1] Paris: Vrin, 1948. This was translated by Subhi al-Sa'lih and Farid Jabr, Falsafat al-fikr al-dini bayn al-'Islam wal-masihiyyah" .Beirut, Da'r al-'Ilm lil-Mala'yin, 1969, 3 vols.

[2] Ihya" "ulu'm al-din, 1, 174, cited in Gardet-Anawati, p. 71.

[3] A'l-Muqaddimah, 1164, Gardet-Anawati, p. 309.

[4] Tash ih al-'i'tiqa'da't, p. 66, M. McDermott, The Theology of al-Shaikh al-M'ufid, Beirut: Dar

El-Machreq, 1978, p. 317.

[5] Tashih pp. 26-7, Theology" p. 315.

[6] Tashih, p. 67.

[7] Theology" p. 58, citing al-Kara'jaki, Kanz al-fawa"id.

[8] Al-Fusu'l al-mukhta'rah, p. 78, Theology" p. 243.

[9] Al-Fusu'l, p. 79, Theology, p. 245.

[10] Tashih, p. 28, Theology" p. 316.

[11] Awa"il, pp. 11-12, Theology, p. 60.

[12] Al-'Ifsa'h. fi ima'mat Amir al-Mu'minin, pp. 3-4, Theology, p. 120.

[13] Awa"il, pp. 24-25, Theology, p. 156.

[14] Awa"il, p. 26, Theology, p. 77.

[15] Su'rat al-Baqarah, 2:260.

[16] Su'rat al-'Ahza'b, 33:33; al-Masa"il al-ha'jibiyyah, Q.I.

[17] I bid., Q. 20.

.[18] Sermon 43, 7, 9