

Cultural Relations Between Christianity and Shi'i Islam

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?">

This paper was presented at the conferences of Islam and Orthodox Christianity in the month of Sharivar 1373 (September 1994), in Tehran by the Center of International Studies and .Culture

The history of the Shi`ah and Christian cultural relations is comparatively old. Of these relations may be mentioned inter-religious dialogue in the area of Kalam that took place in a spirit of complete mutual understanding. In the works of the Shi`ah this is discussed in detail. Among such dialogues one may refer to discussions between the spiritual leaders of the two creeds, particularly dialectic between the Muslims and Catholicos, preserved in the oldest Shi`i books. The commentators of hadith have explained Catholicos in the following manner: "Catholicos, is the greatest spiritual leader of Christianity of every age." Most probably this word is the same as Catholic in the present sense, though for an author it is difficult to say which term is an alternative of the other.

1) Muhammad bin `Ali bin Babwayh al-Qummi, known as al-Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 280/901 A.D.), has recorded four polemical discussions between the highest spiritual leader of Christians and Shi`ah scholars of eminence and Mutakallimun in his works. It is probable that dialogue of Cathilicos with Imam `Ali (`a) took place during 657 A.D.¹ But the culminating point of these controversies has been during the early 10th century A.D.,² i.e., in the 2nd century Hijrah, during the periods of Imam al-Sadiq (`a) and Imam al-Rida (`a),³ the 6th and 8th Imams of the Shi`ah.

2) Another point that is indicative of the close cultural relations between the Shi`ah and Christianity is recording of the sayings, character and biographical accounts of Christ in the books of the Shi`ah, which surpasses all such accounts of Christ in the works of all other sects of Islam.

It is noteworthy that the name of `Isa has occurred in the Qur'an 25 times and the name of Masih (`a) recurs 36 times in the Qur'an. And the circumstances of his birth and his way of preaching and his ascension are repeatedly narrated in the Qur'an. But despite this emphasis the books of non-Shi`i authors do not contain detailed accounts of Christ's sayings and character.

For instance, in Sihah al-Sittah, i.e., six authentic compendia of hadith of Ahl al-Sunnah we do not come across even a single utterance of Christ. On the other hand in the books of the Shi'ah, even some of the oldest, utterances of him are found in abundance.

Imam `Ali (`a), the first Imam of the Shi'ah, has narrated the ascetic style of the life of Christ in one of his sermons, given under No. 160, in Nahj al-Balaghah. After him, in the 2nd century A.H., Imam al-Sadiq has quoted the preaching of Christ, as found exactly in the Bible of Mathew, while delivering his advice to `Abdullah bin Jandab in New Testament, book of Mathew, chapter 6, sentences 2,3,6,7,16 and 18.

During the period from the 2nd to the 4th century A.H., al-Jahiz, in al-Bayan wa al-Tab'in, nine short sayings and one detailed speech of Christ were recorded. During the middle of the 4th century an eminent Shi'i author, Abu Muhammad Hasan bin `Ali bin al-Husayn bin Shu`bah al-Harani (d. 38 A.H. = 1001 A.D.) in his book, Tuhf al-`Uqul `an Al al-Rasul, had devoted about 16 pages to record the sayings of Christ. These utterances consist of two parts: the first, which is briefer, second, which is comparatively detailed, quote parts of Christ's sermons. According to the researches done in this regard, same words are accessible to us at present, in some of anajil (i.e., Book of New Testaments). For example, one may refer to the following:

Book of Mathew, sentences 1-7, 14-17 and 44-45 in chapter 5, sentences 12-19, 24, 30 in chapter 6, sentence 16 in the chapter 7, and 29-36 in chapter 22; Book of Luke, sentences 17-49 in chapter 6; 44-45 in chapter 6, 4-17 in chapter 8 and 37-53 in chapter 11; Book of Mark, sentence 30 in chapter 12.

Ibn Shu`bah was a resident of Harran and since Harran was a center of learning for the Christians, he had access to a majority of the Christian primary source. Of course, most of the sentences that Ibn Shu`bah has quoted are specifically from the books of Mathew, Luke and

Mark. It remains unknown why he has not quoted from all the books of New Testament. However, it is a distinct feature of the Shi'i works that they have been forerunners in the matter of referring to and quoting profusely from the sayings and sermons of Christ as compared to all other Muslim sects.

3) In the books of the Shi'ah special attempt has been made to deal with the life and character of Christ [Masih (`a)]. In the sermon 159 in Nahj al-Balaghah, `Ali (`a), while highlighting the piety of great prophets, writes about Christ:

"Hadrat Masih (`a) laid his head on a stone, put on dress made of coarse material, took tough food. His main diet was hunger, at night the moon provided him only light; during winter he slept under the sun at times when it shone or set down; his fruit and vegetable was none other than what the earth grows for animals. He neither had wife that could instigate him to do

folly nor did he have a child that could make him sorrowful with concern; nor had any property which might have taken away from him; nor had he any kind of greed (for worldly things) that could cause him humiliation. He had no means of moving except his own feet, his servants were his own hands."

On another occasion, addressing one of his companions, Nuf Bukali, Hadrat `Ali (`a), says: "Blessing be on those pious persons who have turned away from the worldly attachments like Christ."

4) Mutual Influences in Kalami (Theological) Polemics. As it is generally accepted by researchers and scholars that Islamic Kalam has exercised influence on Jewish and Christian Scholasticism. In a similar way, it is also incontrovertible that on the land the views of Muslim Mutakallimun, with regard to the Divine Attributes, in the course of their polemics and discussions with the Christian scholastics, particularly in the issue of trinity have developed and attained maturity of thought.⁴

Undoubtedly, the use of the term Attribute (sifat) and emergence of the concept of universal (kulliyat), during the medieval period of Christianity, through the Latin translation of the work of Ibn Hayman, Hidayat al-Mudallin (A Guide for Wayward) (530-601 A.H./1135-1204 A.D.),⁵ were influenced immensely by Islamic `ilm al-Kalam. He and before him Sa`diya Gawun (Sa`id al-Fayumi - 271-331 A.H./892-922 A.D.), had acquired their knowledge of the Greek philosophy indirectly from `Arabic translations and their Islamic commentaries. They themselves wrote in `Arabic (which was the academic language of that period). The ground conducive for the acceptance of the teachings of Muslim Mutakallimun, particularly al-Ghazzali, through Sa`diya, who might be justifiably regarded as Ash`airah of Judaism, for he not only adopts the method of Ash`ariyyah but also in specific issues, makes use of their arguments.

Yahud Ahlawi from Totedo, born in 479 A.H., who was a contemporary of al-Ghazzali, like him felt that philosophy in questioning the fundamentals of faith by interpreting them on the basis of logical argument results in weakening of the creed. With this view he embarked upon writing a book on refutation of philosophers, entitled al-Khazari,⁶ briefly called Khazri. Yahud-e Ahlawi, in his book, Logical and Philosophical Jargons, followed the same method and arguments that were advanced by al-Ghazzali against philosophers.

Much more than him another scholastic thinker of the Jewish creed, Hasda'i Karaska was undoubtedly influenced by Tahafut al-Falasifah of al-Ghazzali though Wolfson, the Professor of Harvard University, rejects this view, arguing that Tahafut al-Falasifah was translated into Hebrew after the death of Karaska.⁷

His argument seems to be baseless, for Tahafut al-Tahafut by Ibn Rushd was translated before 729/1328 by Qalunimus bin Dawud and was published under the title Hapatlat Hapala, while Karaska died in 814/1210. Even on this ground if we accept that there was no possibility of his direct access to the arguments of al-Ghazzali, forwarded in Tahafut al-Falasifah, it may be conjectured that undoubtedly, he could have possibly referred to al-Ghazzali's arguments by means of the translation of Al-Ghazzali's Tahafut al-Falasifah.

Raymond Martin, one of the eminent Christian scholastics, who died in 1285 A.D., is the person who worked as a link between European Christianity and al-Ghazzali, because in his works, Interpretation of the Secrets of the Disciples of Jesus, and The Sword of Faith, he has evidently borrowed ideas from al-Ghazzali. The influence of Ibn Sina on B. Spinoza's various views, particularly his doctrine of emanation (ifadah), serves as irrefutable in the view of the thinkers of the East and the West.⁸

From these examples it may be inferred that the scholastics of other religions, particularly the Christianity, have benefited from Muslim mutakallimun in the middle ages without doubt. But the question arises as to whether non-Muslim scholastic thinkers have also influenced in a similar way of the Muslim scholastics.

5) The Mu`tazilah claimed<sup>9</sup> that the Asha`irah in preaching uncreatedness of the Qur'an, were advocating the Christian doctrine about Logos, and as a result have fallen prey to a kind of pluralistic heresy (shirk). The Mu`tazilah argued that the emphasis of the Asha`irah on the uncreatedness of the Qur'an cause them in believing the doctrine of the eternity of the Qur'an and its coexistence in pre-eternity with Allah. Thus, they attributed eternity to the Qur'an along with the Eternity of Divine Essence. Shaykh al-Mufid says:

"A man from Basra was talking about one of Ash`ariah beliefs which was against monotheism. He was of the view that God's Eternal Attributes are not the Divine Essence and not otherwise as well. That is why God is ascribed to be All-Knowing, the Living, the Omnipotent, the Hearing, the Seeing and the Speaker. That man was of the view that God possesses eternal face, eternal hearing, eternal seeing and eternal hands, such ideas are against the ideas of the monotheists what to talk of Islam."¹⁰

This is interesting to note that the Asha`irah made a similar allegation against the Mu`tazilah and dubbed them as the greatest of atheists (kafirun). They argued that whosoever maintains emphatically that the Qur'an is created comes closer to the views of the atheists, since the atheists said that the Qur'an was a creation of the Prophet's mind. To support their argument, they site a verse from the Qur'an, in which Allah Himself explains the unbelievers' faith by saying:

"This (the Qur'an) is saying of man." (25:74)

Al-Ash`ari writes:

"Anybody who maintains that Qur'an is created, verily believes that Qur'an is man's words. Such idea is like the ideas of unbelievers."

The criticism of the Mu`tazilah seems to be a criticism far from truth. They say that the Asha`irah, supported by some orientalist, borrowed this doctrine of the eternity of the Qur'an and its uncreatedness from Jewish or Christian interpretation of the term "Logos".

As the Asha`irah have based their doctrine on the apparent meanings of some of the Qur'anic verses per se, they may not be blamed for adopting this view from alien sources and then reconcile it with the Qur'anic verses.

But we have to concede to some extent that the issues concerning the Divine Attributes in general, and the controversy regarding the Qur'an in particular, have emerged and developed in the course of controversies and discourses among mutakallimun of Islam and the use of other religions, during which they came in contact with the works of each other.

The same is applicable in the context of the medieval Christian scholasticism and the role of Descartes, and in the context of Medieval philosophy of Judaism and its impact on the modern philosophy of Europe through Spinoza.

6) The word of God (Kalimat Allah): It may be said that the image of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (S) bin `Abdullah in Muslims' view and the Christian view of the personality of Christ (`a) may not be compared reasonably, since the concept of prophethood of `Isa bin Maryam (`a) in the Christian milieu and the concept of the Prophet (S) in Islam is also different. Whenever we want to compare and contrast some sacred things in Islam and Christianity, we should try to compare the image of Christ in the Christian view with the words of the Qur'an and their nature, because both the Qur'an and `Isa Masih are called Kalimat Allah (The Word of Allah). It occurs in the Qur'an:

"When the angels said: O Mariam surely Allah gives you good news with a word from him (of one) whose name is the Messiah `Isa son of Mariam, worthy of regard in this world and the hereafter and of those who are made near (to Allah)." (3:44)

In Christianity `Isa Masih is the embodiment and incarnation of the "Word of God" (Kalimat Allah). His embodiment and anthropomorphisation is similar to what is meant by the revelation and descent and consequently written form of the Qur'an.

This matter is discussed in the history of `Ilm al-Kalam in the same way and sense.¹¹ The Qur'an described itself as having the attributes according to which it is indicated that the existence of the Qur'an precedes its revelation in historical time to the Prophet (S). For

instance:

"Most surely it is an honored Qur'an, in a book that is protected." (56:77-78)

"Most of it is a glorious Qur'an, in a guarded tablet." (85:22)

"And surely it is in the original of the Book with us, truly elevated, full of wisdom." (43:3)

A number of verses in the Qur'an throw light on this issue, that is, the Qur'an has been revealed (in time), and despite this its existence precedes its revelation.

7) Accordingly, "The Preserved Tablet" is considered as contingent and created. The problem of revelation and written form of the Qur'an, that is, the issue of the relationship of the revealed word to the Mother Book (Umm al-Kitab), does not give rise to any philosophical difficulty. The philosophical difficulty arises when in the light of some Qur'anic verses. The Qur'an is referred to as existing in the realm of Divine Knowledge.

"And if you follow their low desires after what has come to you of knowledge, you shall not have against Allah any guardian or a protector." (13:37)

"And if you follow their desires after the knowledge that has come to you, you shall have no guardian from Allah, nor any helper." (2:120)

These verses led some Mutakallimun to confuse the Qur'an with the Divine Attributes of Knowledge, and they were compelled to believe that the Qur'an as created in time, revealed and written, is an accident of the Attribute of Eternal Divine Knowledge that preceded the written revelation.

This confusion is like the problem that arose in Christianity particularly regarding the embodiment and incarnation of Christ. It is interesting that this issue too was interpreted in a similar way, since the Christian scholastics considered Christ as embodiment of Divinity in the person of a human being and called the second member of the Trinity.

When the Shi'i Mutakallimun came to know that the use of the term "created" (makhluq) created difficulties, so in accordance with the way the Holy Family (Ahl al-Bayt) of the Prophet (S), they avoided to make use of the word Muhaddith and instead of it used the word muhdat.

This term is used in the Qur'an for itself:

"Never comes there unto them a new reminder from their Lord but they listen to it while they play." (21:2)

"Never comes there into them a fresh reminder from the Beneficent One but they turn away from it." (26:5)

Al Shaykh al-Mufid, says:

"In my view, Qur'an is the God's word and revelation. It is created in time (hadith), as is described by God, I do not wish to call it Mukhluq. There are certain hadith from Imam Baqir

(`a) and Imam Sadiq (`a) supporting such meaning.”

8) Divine Attributes: Some of the Mutakallimun (Ash`ariah) are of the view that Divine Attributes are like the persons in Christian doctrine of Trinity. For they believe that Divine Attributes are distinct beings separate from the Divine Essence and are eternal as well. Yet, other Mutakallimun (M`utazilah) and those who followed the School of Ahl al-Bayt denying the eternity of the Qur'an and by meticulous philosophical arguments, so that not to be entrapped into the embodiment and incarnation of Christianity.

Of course, they believe in eternity of Divine Attributes, not as distinct beings, but as identical with Divine Essence and deny any polytheism. Thus, they are free from any shirk. These scholars of Kalam are of the view that to believe in eternal distinct Divine Attributes would lead to certain dilemma that Christian face it by believing in Trinity. For to be eternal and at the same time to be distinct from the Divine Essence would result in belief in many eternal beings which impair Divine Unity (Tawhid), as al- Shaykh al-Mufid held that such idea would lead to believe in many eternal beings.¹²

9) In order to believe in eternal and distinct Divine Attributes and at the same time keep on believing in Divine Unity and discard the ascription of any unreal attributes to God, al-Shaykh al-Mufid propounded the following rational matters:

“If God is ascribed to the attributes of the living, the powerful, the knowing. The such attributes contain rational matters that is, they are not identical with Divine Essence.”¹³

By the meanings of such matters, he means that attributes are not distinct from ontological point of view but are distinct from epistemological view point, as he says:

“By rational matters I mean those matters which are rational in mind not concrete and objective.”¹⁴

With a deep insight into al-Mufid's views, one can infer that by M`aql, he means something that later on was called by Sabziwari as the primacy of being over quiddity. In this regard Sabziwari says: being and quiddity are, however, distinct in mind but are identical in the external world.¹⁵

Similarly, al-Shaykh al-Mufid also held that though attributes are distinct in mind but are identical in outside. Apparently, Martin McDermott also maintains that al-Mufid's approach was conceptualism.¹⁶

10) The issue of distinct Divine Attributes while holding the Unity of God was discussed by later Islamic thinkers. Ibn `Arabi and Mulla Sadra also like al-Shaykh al-Mufid had a kind of conceptualistic approach toward the Divine Names.

Ibn `Arabi explicitly denies the existential status of attributes and says: “What we believe is as

relations which in Shari`ah is called name. Every name bears a meaning different from others. That meaning is predicated to God. Nazzar who follows Kalam, considers it as attribute not relation... Do names possess existential status? In this regard there is a debate between Nuzzar. In our views, everything is clear. They are only relations and names and are conceptual, not objective and concrete. Thus, substance can be divided only by being, not by accidents, attributes and relations.”¹⁷

He further says: “Relations are neither essences nor things. Regarding the reality of relations, one should say that they are nothingness in nature.”¹⁸

Mulla Sadra commented the following points on the levels of being: “Nothing can be found which is not available among the Divine Names. Names come into being by Divine Being. They come into being in a best manner, and owing to His necessary Essence they would be necessary.”¹⁹

... These names are conceptual and simple beings which depend on Necessary Being. And such multiplicity in unity is one of the secrets of the Divine Being.²⁰

In some other place, he said: “Divine Attributes are identical with His Divine Essence, not as Ash`ariah believe in it. For they believe in multiplicity of His Attributes which entails multiplicity of two eternal beings, not as M`utazilah creed also who denied the reality of the attributes. Yet, while believing in its effects, he considers essence as second to the attributes.”²¹

Concluding that Ibn `Arabi and Mulla Sadra admit the basis of al-Mufid ideas though they developed it in a broad area, they believe that all created beings are conceptual, and, all creatures possess conceptual entities and like Divine Names they can be called Divine Word.

11) Difference between the development of Islamic Thought and that of the Christian doctrine of Trinity is considerable. In Islamic philosophy, inclination was directed towards multiplying of the Divine Attributes in a sense to consider all creatures as Divine Attributes. At the same time such attributes do not impair Divine Unity. ²²

The early Islamic scholars of Kalam were aware of modalism in Trinity and believe that common people's perception is nothing but innovation. The theory of modalism is attributed to Sibelius²³, who consider God as a person with three attributes which certain Muslim Sufis also used in their poems.

Modalism approach of Trinity was strongly discarded in the Christian theology. For they believe in a vertical Trinity, that is, father and son, according to which son does not possess perfect divinity.

In refuting the modalism approach towards Trinity, they believe that God not only is three in term of meaning, but is a Triad personality.²⁴ According to Mutakallimun this idea is a kind of

polytheism as the Qur'an says:

"Believe therefore in Allah and His Apostle, and say not, three. Desist, it is better for you; Allah is only One God...." (4:171)

Kendi argued against the doctrine of Trinity and Christians tried to reply it. Kendi said: "Three-fold personality cannot be included in the categories of porphyry."

Yahya bin `Adi, the well-known Christian learned-man in return replied as: "Such beings are individual substances."²⁵

Mutakallimun of Islam like Ghazzali used the argument of Tamama (an argument in kalam), derived from the Qur'an to prove the Divine Unity. Ghazzali says that if there were two gods than if one of them wanted to act, the other one had to favor it or oppose it. In the former case, he would have been a follower which impair his omnipotent and in later case one of them would have been weaker which again impair their omnipotent.

The same argument was applied by Scotus against a kind of Trinity namely social Trinity. In such Trinity God has three distinct personalities. Everyone of which possesses certain attributes which suffice for being a god. The argument of Tamano applied by new Christian scholastics as a logical reasoning.²⁶

Notes

1. Al-Shaykh al-Saduq, Tawhid, pp.182, 286, 361.
2. Ibid., pp.270, 417, 420.
3. Ibid., p.422.
4. Harrani Ibn Sh`ubah, Tuhfat al-`Uqul, Tehran, 01.
5. For more information, please refer to the book: History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy, by Howzile, New York, 1930. p.24.
6. The original title of the book is: Al-Hujjat wal-Dalil fi Nasr al-Din. Please refer to Hartwig Mirschefeld, Kitab al-Khazri, London, 1931, p.6.
7. Wolfson, Crasxa's Critique of Aristotle, Harvard, 1929, p.12.
8. On influence of Ibn Sina on Jewish Thinkers particularly spinoza refer to the following books: E.I.J. Rosenthal, Avicenna's Influence on Jewish Thought, "Avicenna: Scientist and Philosopher", ed., G.M. Wiefens, London, 1952, Ch. IV. Encyclopedia Britanica, "Studies in Muslim Philosophy", by Saeed Shaikh.
9. Refer to "Comparative Studies in Islamic Philosophy", translated by Sayyid Mustafa Muhaqqiq Damad, Kharazmi Publication, 1369, Tehran, p.48.
10. Al-Abanah, p.56.

11. Wolfson, Philosophy of Kalam. The term 'inlibration' is used for this matter.
12. Awail al-Maqalat, p.50.
13. Ibid., p.58.
14. Awail al-Maqalat, p.58.
15. Sabzawari, Manzumah.
16. McDermott, 1978, p. 134ff.
17. Ibn `Arabi, Futuhat Makkiyah, vol.4, p.294.
18. Ibid., vol.2, p.516.
19. Al-Hikmat al-`Ushi`ah, p.229.
20. Ibid., p.230.
21. Ibid., p.223.
22. Refer to the article: "Influence of Ghazzali on Western Thought", by Sayyid Mustafa Muhaqqiq Damad, Maqalat wa Barrasiha, Number Dai, pp. 45-46.
23. Sabellius.
24. David F., The Modern Theologians, volume Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989, pp. 195-198.
25. Op. cit, Wolfson, p.32.
26. Quoted from the book: Rationality, Religious and Moral Commitment, by J.W. Right, 1986, pp.2-301. In this book the over-mentioned text is quoted from the book Tract on Dogmatic Theology, which is the translation of, Fi `Usul al-Aqa`id, by Ghazzali