

Greek Philosophy: Christian and Muslim Philosophers' Apologia for its Enquiry

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Abstract: In the East, Greek sciences and philosophy was studied as early as the 4th century, not however by the Arab Muslims but by the Arab Syrian Christians. Numerous Greek treatises on theology, philosophy and logic were definitely part of their syllabus of learning. Thus, borrowing the words of De Boer in 1970, the Syrians, it is true, produced nothing original but their activity as translators was of advantage to Arab-Persian science. It was Syrian Christians who brought wine, silk and other precious items to the West. But, it was the Syrians also who cultivated Greek sciences for many centuries before they eventually transmitted them to the Muslim philosophers, especially in the 10th and 11th century Baghdad. Among great philosophers who flourished in Baghdad at such times were such men as Yahya Ibn 'Adi (d. 974) and Miskawayh (d. 1030). The 1st was Christian while the 2nd was the Muslim. This study, thus seeks to investigate their responses to Greek sciences and philosophy which eventually led them towards the acceptance of Greek thought and also towards the need for an apologetic on behalf of philosophical study and on the relations between philosophy and the divine revelation.

Key words: Miskawayh, Yahya Ibn 'Adi, Greek philosophy, apologia, Christian, Muslim

INTRODUCTION

Neither Yahya nor Miskawayh wrote books or fragments on the question of the harmony between religion and philosophy. Nevertheless, the numerous references to Greek scholars and Greek books in their writings may suggest that they basically shared the positive attitude towards Greek philosophy as held by the majority of the philosophers. The precise reason for their refusal to write on the subject is unknown. On the other hand, perhaps it was due to the very positive policy of most of the Buwayhid rulers (945-1055 AD) towards learning who patronised numerous groups of scholars of the time, especially the philosophers including Yahya and Miskawayh (Kabir, 1964; Hasan, 1948; Kraemer, 1986).

The existence of a few works on the subject, though mostly very brief such as those by their predecessor Al-Kindi (1974) and their contemporaries, Ibn al-Khammar (Al-Qifti, 1903) and Ibn Zur 'a (Rescher, 1966) on the other hand, may have caused Yahya and Miskawayh alike to feel at home with philosophy and hence, to leave this debatable subject undeveloped but instead to devote themselves actively to the study of the essence and history of philosophy. We are convinced, however that Yahya and Miskawayh were first of all a Christian and a Muslim philosopher, respectively and if a

priority must be established between Greek philosophy and their religious beliefs, the supremacy always belongs to the latter, though they appeared to have accepted the general view that religion and philosophy or revelation and reason are complementary.

YAHYA AND MISKAWAYH

Baghdad in Yahya's and Miskawayh's time stands out among the most eminent intellectual centres of the world. Its rulers, the Buwayhids and their viziers who maintained their supremacy over Baghdad for >100 years, from 945-1055 A.D. were not only famous as patrons of art and culture but in many cases were themselves scholars in their own right (Nasr, 1978). They extended patronage to scholars of the time, accommodated their learned associates in their majalis (circles) and often made them their courtiers, secretaries, advisors, historians, physicians, astronomers and the like (Kabir, 1964; Kraemer, 1986).

When one of the Buwayhids' viziers, Sahib Ibn 'Abbad (d. 995), who was himself a celebrated scholar was once asked about the centre he replied: Baghdad among towns is like ustadh (a professor) among men. A mediaeval Muslim historian, Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 1071), the younger contemporary of Miskawayh, took almost the same view, depicting Baghdad as follows:

In the entire world, there has not been a city which could compare with Baghdad in size and splendour or in the number of scholars and great personalities. The distinction of the notable and general populace serves to distinguish Baghdad from other cities as does the vastness of its districts, the extent of its borders and the great number of residences and palaces (Lassner, 1970; Kraemer, 1986)

Hence, Yahya and Miskawayh were extremely fortunate to have been well placed in the heart of Islamic civilisation which provided them with the opportunity to develop their own respective skills and interests as well as to participate in contemporary events, both political and intellectual and then to make their contribution in their own right and their own way.

It was through these mediums, i.e., political and intellectual that the connection between Yahya and Miskawayh becomes possible and it was in Baghdad that they actually had met one another, though little information is known in detail of such a relation. The main source of information in this respect is basically through the eyewitness accounts of al-Tawhidi who was for some time a close associate and student of Yahya. Al-Tawhidi was also a contemporary and friend of Miskawayh as he himself mentions in some of his writings. Both he and Miskawayh were among the companions of the Buwayhids vizier Abu al-Fadl (d. 971). They both attended his court together in 971 and the court of Ibn Sa'dan (d. 986) the vizier of Samsam al-Dawla (d. 998). They also appeared to have corresponded with each other and became the joint authors of *al-Hawamil wa'l-Shawamil* and *Risala Fi Mahiyat al-'Adl*.

We are told by numerous sources that Yahya was born in Takrit (Northern Iraq) in 893 AD and Miskawayh in al-Rayy (today Teheran) approximately 39 years later in 932 AD. Both of them seemed to have completed their early education in their own home towns and subsequently migrated to Baghdad not long after reaching 20 years of age. Again they shared the same purpose in moving-taking up employment-Yahya as a copyist and book seller while Miskawayh worked as a secretary to al-Muhallabi (d. 967), the vizier of the Buwayhid prince, Mu'izz al-Dawla (d. 969). Both of them were also apparently moved by the spurt of cultural growth, which took place in Baghdad at that time.

When Miskawayh came into contact with al-Muhallabi (d. 967) and arrived in Baghdad probably for the first time in 953, Yahya had already been there for about 4 decades and was by then the leader of one of the important schools of philosophy in Baghdad (Al-Sijistani, 1979). Miskawayh served al-Muhallabi for 12 years as he

mentions himself from 953-964. During this time, he resided mainly in Baghdad and so did Yahya. Considering that his concern with philosophy is no less evident, it was some time during this period when he was in charge as the secretary to al-Muhallabi that he met Yahya personally. This is verified by the information given by al-Tawhidi (d. 1023) to the effect that both Yahya and Miskawayh were among the associated members of al-Tawhidi's group discussion including Al-Sijistani (d. 1001), Ibn Zur'a (d. 1008), Ibn al-Khammar (d. 1017), Abu 'Ali al-Samh (d. 1027) and others. This statement clearly suggests that Miskawayh was in close contact with Yahya and other members of the group and hence, so was al-Tawhidi.

We have little knowledge, however of the precise nature of their relationship but all the sources tend to indicate that the connection was that of one scholar with another, rather than that of pupil and teacher. They appear to have belonged to the same group of philosophers, attended the court of Ibn Sa'dan (d. 985) together and to have exchanged expertise with one another.

Al-Tawhidi further asserts that most of the members of his association whom he called our colleagues (ashabuna) were prominent in the school of Yahya who was in al-Tawhidi's own words, the *ustadh* (professor) of the group. This is significant for our interest. Although, al-Tawhidi did not specifically name which of his friends who actually attended the school of Yahya but instead used the general expression, most of the members of this group (*akthara hadhihi 'l-jama'a*) were at the school. That Miskawayh could have been one of them is most probable, for both Yahya and Miskawayh were friends and together belonged to this group of philosophers.

In addition to this fact, Al-Tawhidi also complains that although, al-'Amiri (d. 982), another gifted 10th century philosopher, delivered lectures on philosophical subjects for 5 years at al-Rayy, Miskawayh failed to attend and learned not even one word from him. Such a claim may indirectly indicate that Miskawayh must have been present at other important philosophical lectures of that time such as those of Yahya (d. 974) and Al-Sijistani (d. 1001). Otherwise al-Tawhidi might have made the same accusation as it is his habit to complain against almost every one he knew. It is perhaps on the basis of these sources that modern scholars including Kraemer (1986), Samir (1980), Sweetman (1947) and others simply listed Miskawayh among the pupils of Yahya, although in most instances, they do so without evidence.

Following the death of al-Muhallabi in 964, Miskawayh left Baghdad and returned to his birthplace al-Rayy, to attend on the Buwayhid viziers,

Ibn al- 'Amid (d. 971) and his son and successor, Abu al-Fath (d. 977). He remained there for about 13 years until 977 while Yahya in contrast, lived in Baghdad. During this time, he visited Baghdad once in 975 with his patron, Abu al-Fath (d. 977) but Yahya was no longer alive then. He had died 1 year before in 974. His well-known pupil, Abu Sulayman Al-Sijistani (d. 1001) was alone now left as the head of the Baghdad philosophical school. In the course of this visit, it was also possible that Miskawayh could have attended Al-Sijistani's school as he also seemed to have been at the school of Yahya, even though Max Meyerhof observed that he never studied as a pupil under either one of them. This is once again verified by al-Tawhidi who listed both Miskawayh and Al-Sijistani among his associates. He called the latter, Al-Sijistani, our master (shaykhuna) or the professor of such an association while the former, Miskawayh our friend (ashabuna) or a member of the group.

This is also in agreement with the statement of Al-Sijistani (1979) himself who described his relation with Miskawayh by using expressions such as haddathani al-ustadh Abu 'Ali Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Miskawayh (the professor Abu 'Ali Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Miskawayh narrated to me) which goes to prove that they were not only familiar with one another but were also close companions. They appeared to admire each other's profession and creativity, for Al-Sijistani, in this point, openly recognised Miskawayh as a professor, the title which he himself seemed to enjoy. Consequently, he also reproduced some fragments of Miskawayh's literary works in his own writings.

Logic was probably the major subject which Miskawayh may have learned from Yahya. In addition to the fact that Yahya was well-reputed as one of the leading logical teachers of the period, we have also established that most of his Muslim disciples were more interested in the history of philosophy, particularly logic than in textual studies, the field in which his Christian pupils such men as Ibn Zur'ah (d. 1008) and Ibn al-Khammar (d. 1017) were distinguished.

The famous Muslim logician, Al-Sijistani (d. 1001), for example was reported to have studied Greek books, predominantly logic with Yahya. But, since it was not uncommon among the mediaeval Baghdad scholars to be experts in >1 discipline, Al-Sijistani also acquired other specialities from their respective authorities. The same is also true of both Yahya and Miskawayh. Hence, the probability that Yahya could also have learned from or even been the student of his own associates or pupils, in this case, Miskawayh is also highly likely. This is justified in addition by the statement of his intimate friend, Ibn al-Nadim (d. 990) to the effect that Yahya too studied

with a group of scholars of his day. That Miskawayh was one of the active members of such a group is again confirmed by the eyewitness reports of al-Tawhidi.

Another report by al-Tawhidi that Miskawayh was interested (maftunan) in the works of Abu Zakariyya', also appears to be very significant for the subject under discussion. This report was verified by another well-known mediaeval Arabic biographer Yaqut, who thereafter reproduced it in his own pages. It is most likely that al-Tawhidi refers, in this instance to the works of Yahya Ibn 'Adi because he also called him Abu Zakariyya'.

Moreover a similar title, Abu Zakariyya' is likewise attributed as an alternative name to Yahya by two of his boon companions, De Goeje (1893) and Ibn al-Nadim as well as by his later biographers including Al-Qifti (1903). This certain Abu Zakariyya' therefore, probably could not have been the great Muslim medical doctor, al-Razi (d. 925), for the simple reason that he was known as the son of Zakariyya' (Ibn Zakariyya' al-Razi whereas Yahya was the father of Zakariyya' (Abu Zakariyya' Yahya Ibn 'Adi) as specifically mentioned in this particular case by al-Tawhidi and Yaqut alike and whose works were of evident interest to Miskawayh.

MISKAWAYH'S RESPONSE

Miskawayh (1966), as an example identifies the aim of the Islamic law (shari'a) and philosophy (hikma) as one and the same. They both lead man towards the achievement of the end for the sake of which he was brought into existence that is happiness. However in order to guarantee this ultimate aim, man should firstly believe in the law and observe its duties, for it prescribes all virtues and forbids all vices. It reforms man, accustoms him to good deeds and prepares his soul to receive wisdom, seek virtues and finally to attain happiness. He may then undertake the study of philosophy so as to perceive more deeply God's will for human salvation through his revelation embodied in the Shari'a. Hence, the agreement between philosophy and Shari'a is according to Miskawayh, absolute. Here are his words:

It has become clear that man is in need, at the beginning of his life, first of his parent's guidance (Siyasa al-walidayn), then of the divine law (al-shari'a al-Ilahiyya) and the right religion (Wa'l-din al-qayyim) to reform him and set him straight and then to consummate wisdom (hikma) to assume his direction to the end of his life (Miskawayh, 1966)

Miskawayh (1966) further claims that the Prophets were sent by God to instruct both speculative and practical philosophy so that they might cure the people's

diseases of ignorance and refine their bad morals. God is the prescriber of the law (Musharri' al-shari'a); the Prophet is its custodian (Sahib al-shari'a) while the philosopher is the one who confirms the words of God, the words of the prophets and he who obeys that law. Hence, both the sages and philosophers are the first of all creatures to confirm the prophets for both agree in the perception of those matters of reality. While the difference between them, argues Miskawayh is only that the philosopher comes to his contemplation by advancing from the lower to the higher and the Prophet has descended from the higher to the lower to apprehend reality.

Miskawayh like other Muslims, also considered all the scriptures revealed to earlier prophets, primarily those of the Christians and Jews as holy and authentic, for all of them came from the same God. Yet, the Qur'an which was revealed to the last Prophet, Muhammad is the mother of scriptures that consummates all truth-giving revelations based on the same way of faith as was commended to earlier apostles. It is beyond doubt that these ideas were derived by Miskawayh from the verses of the Qur'an (42:13-15) which he quoted in succession in his *Kitab al-'Aql wa'l-Ma'qul* in 1963. The first of these verses reads:

The same religion has he (God) established for you as that which he enjoined on Noah; the which we have sent by inspiration to thee and that which we enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus

Miskawayh (1983) also holds that God alone is the giver of the real wisdom. He gives wisdom to whomever he pleased and he who is granted wisdom is indeed granted great good. This idea is again derived from the Qur'an in which God says:

He (God) granted wisdom to whom he pleaseth and he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth indeed a benefit overflowing but none will grasp the message but men of understanding (al-Qur'an, 2:269)

Accordingly, Miskawayh leaves no room for doubt about studying philosophy from those who have it or who have been granted it. It made no difference whether they are Persians, Indians, Arabs or Greeks. In his *Jawidan Khirad* (the everlasting wisdom) (1983) which he wrote towards the end of his life, he put this ideal into practice where he gathered together the wise sayings of the sages of these communities and consequently concluded that they regardless of the divergences of their religious convictions, geographical backgrounds and

times, yet they treaded the same path towards the truth. It was also due to such a personal conviction that Miskawayh esteems the individual Greek philosophers for example Aristotle-primarily as eminent compilers of philosophy who first discovered the ultimate end for the sake of which man is created that is happiness. Thus, he affirms:

Prior to this sage (hakim, i.e., Aristotle) philosophy (or wisdom: Hikma) was dispersed just like other useful things created by God who entrusted to the natural disposition of human beings and to the strength, he gave them for this purpose the charge of utilising these (things) (such things) for instance as medicaments, dispersed in the country-side and in the mountains when these are put together and combined, a useful medicine is the result. In a similar manner, Aristotle put together the dispersed (parts) of philosophy and combined every (part) with that which was consonant with it and placed it in the appropriate place, so that he produced from them a perfect healing which cures the souls of the diseases of ignorance

Miskawayh (1966) likewise maintains that the Shari'a prescribes virtues (Al-fada'il) in rather a general way and does not get down to every particular. It is then, left to man to interpret it, the Shari'a into the multiplicity of which man is made up. The Shari'a is viewed in this context as providing the essential groundwork for all aspects of life as well as for reasoning and philosophical reflection. Man should, therefore follow all the obligations laid down by the Shari'a while at the same time exercising his reason ('aql) in order to comprehend more deeply its meanings. Reason, Miskawayh continues is God's deputy in man that distinguishes him from animals. So, he who does not use his reason diminishes his human status to that of the beast.

That is why he interprets some tenets of the Shari'a by means of philosophical arguments. For instance, he insists that the name man (insan) is derived from the root word uns (fellowship) not from nisyan (forgetfulness) as some people would think. Every man, he says is endowed with this quality of fellowship. Then, the Shari'a develops it and makes it obligatory upon people by means of religious duties such as prayer (salat) and pilgrimage to the holy place at Mecca (Hajj). Through daily prayers, especially communal prayers, the members of small communities and of households come together 5 times every day; through Friday prayer the inhabitants of the city gather together once every week while through the Hajj people from all over the world meet one another. In

this way, that is to say by observing the Shari‘a, man may, at the outset, experience this inborn fellowship which exists in him in potency and thereafter, realise it in actuality which is the origin of all love that binds them together (Miskawayh, 1966).

YAHYA’S RESPONSE

As for Yahya’s reaction, not with standing the fact that he dedicated his school almost entirely to the study of Greek philosophy, chiefly to the writings of Aristotle, there is very little written evidence left concerning his attitude towards the Greeks (Endress, 1977; Kraemer, 1986). In his short treatise on the four scientific questions regarding the art of logic, 1966 which is regarded as a piece of propoganda and as an apology for the study of philosophy, specifically logic, Yahya likewise tries to establish the need for these subjects of enquiry as the crucial means to happiness. For at the end of that research, he concludes: The existence of the art of logic has become apparent by what we said. The essential need for it has been established for without it there is no arriving at happiness, neither the theoretical nor the practical (Ibn’Adi, 1966).

Nevertheless, Yahya does not make any effort to show how Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine are linked, nor does he endeavour to reconcile or harmonise the two. Hence, little is left for us today to say about the detail of his approach to the subject. We began the discussion in this section with Miskawayh simply because we have a much more detailed account of his ideas on the topic under consideration. Yahya and Miskawayh, to sum up were never servile imitators or blind followers of the Greeks but always kept their independent and critical attitude towards them. They did not leave Greek ideas raw or unmodified but very often impressed their personal stamp on what they received. This attitude is best illustrated by many of their extant writings where they freely adapted and even rejected several philosophical arguments set forth by their predecessors.

While Yahya for example, favours Aristotle’s doctrine of the eternity of the world and sharply criticises his Christian predecessor, John Philoponus (died after 640 AD) for disputing the doctrine (Pines, 1955). Miskawayh in contrast, firmly believes that the world is created by God in time, having been made out of nothing and came into existence from non-existence. The world, then Miskawayh proceeds has both a beginning as well as an end as al-Qur’an has said. On a similar ground, Miskawayh also claims that the view that is attributed to Galen (d. 199), namely that every existence is produced from another existence is utterly wrong and mistaken.

On the problem of God’s providence (‘inaya) to cite another example, Plato and Aristotle (Allan, 1970) appeared to have contradicted each other; the former thinks that Gods supervise all things, both the general and the particular whereas the latter holds that God’s providence watches over all universal things but does not extend into particulars. Despite the fact that Ibn’Adi (1980) believes in the Gods neither of Plato nor of Aristotle but the Trinitarian God of the Bible whereas Miskawayh (Iqbal, 1908) believes in the one God of the Qur’an, they both seemed, to some extent, to share similar views as that of Plato in this case, namely that divine providence reaches all created things. Also, Yahya considers that these two great Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle were essentially in agreement and hence, they could not have opposed one another on this most crucial issue. As he puts it:

I consider that the two sublime philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, do not disagree (as far as) beliefs (they hold) regarding (providence are concerned), though some (people) think that they do. For in my opinion, both of them (had attained) such a high rank (were persons) of such great worth and (were endowed) with such a penetrating understanding and such a strong propensity to follow and to profess the truth that they (could not) disagree with regard to (a matter) of so capital an importance in philosophy and of so great a consequence (literally (having) such greatness of rank) in wisdom (hikma) of which it is one of the sublime foundations (usul) there ought not to be differences (of opinion) when the true reality (haqiqa) (of this foundation) is being investigated (Pines, 1955)

CONCLUSION

As for the question of what and how Yahya and Miskawayh assimilate and develop Greek ethical ideas in their own works, since it falls outside the objective of this study, it therefore needs no elaboration at this stage. However, we must now conclude that it appears to us that the study on the empirical circumstances of both Yahya’s and Miskawayh’s life show them to have been well placed in the heart of Islamic civilization which provided them with the opportunity to develop their own respective skills and interests and to participate in their contemporary events both political and intellectual.

It is evident that they were friends and had some common interests. They lived together in Baghdad for some time. They shared and xchanged their

respective specialities. The fact that they were also both well-grounded in their own traditional learning as well as in Greek philosophy is likewise no less evident. Yahya and Miskawayh were also strongly convinced Christian and Muslim, respectively prior to their acceptance of Greek thought. Hence, the latter is used basically as an instrument to express their personal convictions, clearly the case for both of them. This would also imply that philosophy to each of them, does not appear to contradict with their faith but rather to confirm and supplement it. Consequently, the philosopher is seen as neither God nor a Prophet but rather the true scholar who confirms the words of both. In Miskawayh's case, for example the great Aristotle is viewed primarily as a philosopher who gathered together the dispersed parts of philosophy belonging to many previous nations. Thus, the study of ancient sciences and philosophy was regarded, particularly by him both as a renovation and as an innovation of such an important heritage.

Yahya and Miskawayh seem to us to represent an excellent example of the creative interaction, we may say dialogue between Greek thought on the one hand and Christian and Islamic terms and concepts on the other. Their world, medieval Islamic Baghdad, appears to be comparable with the Western world of today. In the one, the Christians from various parts of that world came to Baghdad to pursue their academic interests and specialities. In the other, the Muslims of today go to the West for very much the same purposes.

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