Faith, Reason and Revealed Knowledge
in the View of Shi'a Scholars

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Abstract

The relationship between faith and reason can be discussed at two different levels. One is called Rreligious Eepistemology which deals with the rationality of faith, and while the second level deals with the relation of a set of data available to the human mind because of revelation and what is available to human mind throthough his reason.. In this paper I argue that the prominent way of justifying faith in contemporary Shi'ite t Thought is the argument from the data of reason. Regarding to the relation of the data of revelation and the data of reason, we must consider three forms of it separaetely. In the case of a contradiction of revelation and the reason, they usually give the priority to reason and use the method of interpretation (ta'vil) for making them cohernt with each other.. In such cases whereich reason and revelation have the same assertion or revelation says and reveals what is beyond reason without the contradiction between the two, they usally accept revelation as the source of knowledge.

Keywords

Faith, revelation, reason, religious epistemology, and Shia'aShi'ite Ttheology.

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Faith

According to some contemporary philosophers of religion faith has two rather different meanings:

> In discourse. concerning religion, "faith" has two rather different meanings. As a trusting and confident attitude toward God, faith (fiducia) may be compared with trust in one's fellow human beings. As a cognitive act or state whereby men are said to know God or to have knowledge about him, faith (fides) may be compared with our perceptual awareness of our material environment or our knowledge of the existence of other persons" (see Hick, 1972, p. 529).

This seems to mean that principally faith can be separated from a truth-claim about its object and be confined only to the realm of attitude and action.

> On this view, faith is an affective or emotional matter or a matter of the will; it is not a cognitive or intellectual affair. For Tillich, in some sense, the question of the rationality of faith cannot properly arise, because faith is an ultimate commitment that cannot be adjudicated by anything prior or external to itself. And, for Pojman, it can be rational to have faith even if it is not rational to believe in God's existence (Golding, 1972, p. 535).

Contrary to the possibility and publicity of non- cognitive interpretation of faith in the West, in Islamic philosophy and theology, faith always has a cognitive content showing a Being who transcends our sensory access and is omnipotent, omniscient and absolute good.

Although, discovering the highest reality and even seeing it is not sufficient for faith. Faith is not just the belief that there is God but also requires us to have certain attitudes towards God and our fellow humans and to be ready to act in a certain way.[1]

Although, it seems that most Shi'a theologians define faith as the cognitive acceptance of God's existence (Javadi, 1998, Pp. 119-140) but really they use the term *Tasdiq* (acceptance) in a more powerful meaning and as the wholehearted acceptance of God. Tabatabai defines faith as cognitive acceptance of God's existence alongside the readiness to follow His will in life and his student Morteza Muttahari says: faith means belife by

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1. There is a very sharp difference between two conceptions of the relation of faith and action; some take the action in accordance to the demands of faith as its counterpart but some take only to be ready to act in accordance to its demands and not being in a state of denial of God's law. The first definition takes faith to be something that can be judged from the outside but the second definition takes it as internal. Tabatabai, among many other Shi'a scholars, denies the inclusion of the external act in the content of faith.

reason and inclination by the heart (Muttahari, V. 20, 1384, p. 247) In other words, they differentiate between cognitive acceptance and acceptance of heart and consider the last one in their definition of faith. This distinction is in coherence with some verses of the Noble Qoran, which talk of the possibility of acceptance of God while denying him at the same time (Majlesi, 1403, Vol. 96, p. 129).

> Yet when Our enlightening signs came to them, they said, "This is obvious witchcraft." And they rejected them, although they were certain of them, out of wickedness and pride (Qoran, 27, 14).

If we take faith as something related to our will in addition to our cognition then it's easier to explain it being man's free will (Abd al-Jabbar, 2006, 16).

Most Ash'ari theologians accept this definition. Al-Bāqillānī (c. 940 - 1013) takes it as knowing and accepting God's existence. He takes godlessness or atheism to mean not to know and the denial of God's existence (Badavi, 1994, 626).

However, there were and still are some other definitions of faith in Islamic theology. On one hand, some take it as equivalent only to knowledge. Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 746) as a leading theologian of jahamiah is an example of the proponents of this definition. On the other hand, some include action in accordance with the demands of knowing God in the essence of faith. According to this definition, sin is a sign of atheism. The Mu'tazilite school of thought, as one of the most important branches of Muslim theology, defend this concept of faith (Abd al-Jabbar, 2006, p. 698).

With these two elements – cognitive claims about God and specific attitudes toward Him – faith can be assessed by both theoretical and practical rationality.

Because of the emphasis on the practical and emotional side of faith and the idea of the mystery of God in Christianity, we find more instances of justifying trust in God by way of faith itself[1] or by the way of prudential accounts. Modern philosophy of religion in particular, which is under the influence of the Christian protestant tradition, is full of attitudes like fideism or prudential and practical reasoning for justifying faith.

But in Islamic philosophy and theology, because of the importance of the cognitive element of faith, justification of faith has always been based on theoretical reason and truth.[2] In this respect, we have some beliefs, which are

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1. Shia scholars like Ibn Maysam Bahrani take this form of belief in God as a vicious circle (see: Javadi,1998, p.147)
2. The idea of the impossibility of having faith without already believing in the existence of God can be seen in Nicholas Wolterstorff's introduction to the book *Faith and Rationality*. He says "Genuine, full-fledged faith always requires belief; and belief always has a "what's believed," a quae creditur, a propositional content" (see Wolterstorff, 1983, p. 13).

the main content of faith and for having a true and justified faith we need to prove or justify these beliefs. According to many Muslim theologians, the first task of a human being, when he becomes mature is to think and contemplate the existence of God and to find it's truth by reasoning.

This is the task of what is known in contemporary philosophy of religion as religious epistemology. This can be regarded as discussing the first level of contact between reason and faith. Our question in this field is about the rational status of the basic claims of faith. Faith is not only a truth claim about God but is also a source for further truth claims that result from submission to revelation after the primary truth claims have been accepted.

Hence, we may distinguish two levels of discourse about religious beliefs: first, those that are involved with the acceptance of a religious worldview; and those that are internal to this worldview and depend upon its acceptance.

Reason

Epistemologists use the term "reason" in contrast to "perception or testimony" to describe a source of knowledge that does not depend on the data provided by the senses or the testimony of the other people (Audi, 2003, p. 94). In discussions of Islamic theology, however, we may contrast reason with revelation in such a way that the term "reason" is understood to include all reasoning and thinking based on both reason and experience or testimony of the other people in the epistemological sense, as long as these are independent of revelation. Accordingly, we will use the term "reason" for the content, whether theoretical or practical, obtained through the faculty of reason and some information we gained through experiences independently of revelation. It principally refers to some gifted knowledge that human beings possess without knowing how and where it has been acquired from. According to Al-Baghdadi these knowledge occure in the mind witout man's having power to pruduce and prove it or to prevent it from taking place in the mind (see Abrahamov, 1993, Vol. 20, pp. 20-32). Similar to the Christian concept of natural or general revelation. This original and primary knowledge of humanity is the basis of its secondary and derivative knowledge (through inference or induction, for example). Therefore, what is counted as rational includes both general revelation and what is known through the acquisition of other knowledge gained through theory construction, inference, etc., and its development.

What is the Issue?

Typically the issue of the relation of reason to faith has been discussed in

two different ways, which correspond to the two levels of religious truth-claims mentioned above.

First, what is the status of basic claims of faith that are cognitive—like the existence of God – in relation to the beliefs of reason? Are they among the first principles of reason or must they be known derivatively with the help of basic beliefs? Or is there another source of knowledge aside from reason, in which claims of faith are rooted?

Second, some of the claims of faith about the world, nature and human happiness and wretchedness that are rooted in revelation go beyond the boundaries of reason and may even conflict with reason. The question is: What can we, as believers, do in cases of non-rational or irrational claims of faith?

Religious Epistemology of Contemporary Shi'a Scholars

Religious epistemology, as a topical epistemology (epistemology restricted to discussions of knowledge of a specific field), discusses the question of justification of basic claims of faith.

> Religious epistemology is concerned with what has always been one of the central issues in the philosophy of religion, the rational justification of religious belief. Until recent years in the philosophy of religion, one particular approach in religious epistemology has dominated, namely, natural theology. This traditional approach to religious epistemology basically involved examining any evidence for the existence of God that could be found in the world of nature, and then attempting to draw some conclusion about whether or not God's existence could be inferred based on the evidence found (Geivett, & Sweetman, 1992, pp. 3-4).

The proponents of this approach who can be properly named as the Rationalists hold that they are acceptable only if they are proved based on beliefs already justified.

On the contrary, Fideists hold that faith can be justified by its own standards and need not be valued based on rational norms. Faith is rooted in subjectivity[1] or in a form of life different from the form which is displayed in rationality (Malcolm, 1992, pp. 92-104).

There are many ways, which may be included among the rationalistic account of faith.. The reformed epistemology considers proof and reason not necessary for the acceptance of the existence of God but use it as a criterion for possible denial of it. According to reformed epistemology, basic claims

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1. See Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion, in Adams, R. M. (1987). *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 25-42.

of religion are among the first principles or properly basic beliefs of reason and need not be proved by other beliefs (Plantinga, 2000, p. 173) There is some practical or prudential reasoning for justifying faith in accordance to its merits for a human being (See for example, Morris, 1992, pp. 257-270).

Another form of justifying religious belief is to consider it dependent based on personal experiences of the individuals (Aleston, 1992, pp. 295-304).

Nearly all Shi'a thinkers are rationalists in that they reject believing in God on the basis of faith alone. They hold that the basic claims of faith must be accepted by reason and if they lack this rationality, faith will be threatened.

Although some of them hold that belief in God is innate and is accepted by reason as basic knowledge and need not be proved, (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1970, Vol. 1, 395 & Vol. 16, p. 178). the common idea in contemporary literature, as in the past, is that most scholars continue to hold that belief in God is justified only by proof (Javadi, 1375/1996). Despite the agreement on the importance of argumentation about the basic claims of faith, there is controversy about the structure of the argument which is supposedly necessary for faith.

Tabatabai and Mutahhari have a restricted conception of proof as a demonstration, but some other contemporary Shi'a scholars, like Muhammad Baqir Sadr take it to include induction in addition to deduction (Sadr, 1422, pp. 31-51. This is the reason that we cannot find any sign of the inductive scientific argument from design in the works of many Muslim philosophers and theologians like Tabatabai, and we even see that it is explicitly rejected by Mutahhari as an inductive argument for God's existence (Mutahhari, 1387. p. 31). Although the different forms of the argument from design were popular in Islamic literature, butit used to be a proof for the knowledge and wisdom of God, not as a proof of His existence.

We can see the influence of the paradigm of modern science on Sadr; (Sadr, 1422, pp. 31-51) while the other thinkers still take Islamic philosophy or mathematics as their paradigm for religious beliefs so that they are looking exclusively for necessary truths. This means that for Sadr, belief in God's existence does not need to be as certain as philosophy or mathematics demand, rather, it is sufficient to be like a scientific truth. In this conception, certainty has different degrees, and the degree found in the sciences is sufficient for faith. Probability can provide us with a kind of certainty sufficient for faith.

Relationship between Revealed Knowledge and Reasoned Knowledge

The second aspect of the issue is that theistic faith implies a commitment to revelation as a source of knowledge, and this means that we, as believers, have theoretical and practical beliefs that we otherwise wouldn't have.

Although "revelation is regarded by some, like John Locke (632-1704) as a republication or popularization of the conclusions of reason about morality, others regard revelation as disclosing truths, including moral truths, not otherwise known" (Helm, 2001, pp. 1475).

In Islamic Theology, beliefs of faith are divided into two forms: *ta'sisi* and *irshadi*. *Irshadi* (guiding us to the deliverances of reason) refers to beliefs that are known by reason but are endorsed by revelation, while *ta'sisi* (are discovered or constructed by revelation) refers to those beliefs that cannot be found through reason and can only be known by revelation.

This gives rise to the question (which is ascribed to Zakariyah Razi) about how *irshadi* beliefs can be considered religious, since they are known through reason. What merit could there be in sending them down? Assuming that the gifted knowledge of revelation is in accordance with reason, why the need for faith? (Tusi, 1405, p. 640).

Muslim theologians try to articulate different points for this sort of data of revelation like increasing motivation for action in practical affairs or making our knowledge more certain and publicizing it (Tusi, 1405, pp. 645-651).

The second kind (ta'sisi) are of two sorts: those beyond reason but not contrary to it (i.e., non-rational beliefs); and those that contradict reason (irrational beliefs), or those that we judge to be merely prima facie in contradiction with reason.

Then the main problem is how to treat non-rational beliefs or what seem to be irrational claims of faith so they do not lead us to a denial of faith. It must be noted that there is a difference between Islamic literature and the contemporary philosophy of religion in the West because the main problem there is religious epistemology but in Islamic literature, it is the relationship of gifted knowledge of faith with the one acquired through reason. We can find many books and papers in contemporary Christian faith devoted to the explanation of different approaches to the justification of faith but we can hardly find some books for the discussion regarding the relationship of the output of reason in different areas including metaphysics, science, and ethics and the gifted knowledge of revelation. This difference may be explained regarding the different role of revelation in our beliefs and among them. The acceptance of the epistemic authority of revelation in Islamic tradition is the essential and necessary part of faith but there are some controversies about the domain of revelation and its priority in all cases of conflict with reason.

Religion beyond Reason

All contemporary Shi'a scholars accept some special domain for revelation,

the claims of which are accepted even without any independent evidence of reason. This is a condition for being a theistic believer rather than a deistic believer (Helm, 2001, Vol. 3, pp. 1472). So, what is important is the extent of the domain beyond reason.

Although the scholars agree that there are beliefs that cannot be discovered through reason alone, there is disagreement over the extent of such beliefs, that is, the bounds and limitations of this domain of beliefs that go beyond reason. While some modern thinkers try to restrict this domain to beliefs pertaining to rituals and worship alone, most scholars, however, take this domain to be much broader. Indeed, the determination of the domain of religion was and still is itself, among the most controversial issues of Islamic thought (see Fanaei, 1389, pp. 472-475).

The study of the claims of a religion can be undertaken from what is known as an "insider" perspective, or from an "outsider" perspective. The insider position is one that assumes that all of the precepts and doctrines in religious texts are authoritative and must be accepted in a rather literal way. From this perspective, a literalistic reading of what religion says about the heavens and medical topics must be accepted as essential elements of religion. From the outsider perspective, on the contrary, one must use one's own reason to determine the boundary between what is to be accepted based on textual authority and what is to be considered as accidents of history that have no essential bearing on religious truth. So, from the insider position, details of the *sunna* (conduct) of the Prophet, for example, how he slept and brushed his teeth, are considered essential aspects of religion, while those who take the outsider approach consider such issues as irrelevant to the essence of religion, and to be dispensable. Accordingly, those who advocate the insider perspective rely on texts *a posteriori,* while from the outsider approach, there is an *a priori* reliance on reason.

According to the proponents of the outsider approach, only reason has a right to decide the extent of religious authority, whether it is to include, for example, medicine or mathematics or ethics.(Soroush, 1377, 390) They hold that human beings can know the cures for all the diseases in the body (medicine) or even in the soul (ethics) by their own natural intelligence and have no need for religion in such matters and that, therefore, religion has no authority in such areas.

The defenders of the insider approach hold that we only can know the domain of religion by reference to the text and by way of induction. We must hear the voice of revelation in all the domains it has entered, not that we should only listen to revelation when it suits us. Some commentators of the noble Qoran interpret the following verse as including the explanation of everything in the domain of revelation.

We have sent down the Book to you as a clarification of all things and as a

guidance and mercy and good news for the Muslims [16:88]

Tabatabai also took an insider approach, but he did not accept revelation to have an all-inclusive domain and limited it only to things related to human guidance to salvation (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1972, Vol. 12, p. 325). However, unlike those who advocate an outsider approach, he did not limit the domain of religion by an a priori appeal to human reason, but by appeal to religious texts themselves. But the question is: how we can distinguish the things that are related to salvation from those that are not? Is this possible by way of inducing the cases from the text and the insider perspective or must we come back to reason and the outsider perspective.

Javadi Amoli who teaches philosophy in the seminaries of Qom, has a complex idea on this issue since he holds that although the domain of revelation as a narration may be limited, because reason is another source of religious knowledge, religion has a broader domain than revelation. He concludes that the insider/outsider distinction is spurious This view has a strange consequence because according to it we must take all achievements of reason, like philosophy and mathematics and even science, as religion.

Religion Contrary to Reason

Metaphysics, ethics, mysticism (*'irfān*), and science are four important articulations of reason's achievements, which may have some conflict with religious claims. Historically, in the Islamic traditions, the issue of the relation of philosophy (metaphysics) with religion has priority, as in the debate over the eternity of the world.

There was the conflict between mysticism and religion, as with the debates over the claims by such figures as Hallaj who claimed to have achieved unity with God; later came the issue of the relationship between ethics and religion, as in the debate over whether reason can determine the nature of the good. Finally, came the issue of science and religion, which came to be debated with the development of modernity. The relationship between philosophy, ethics, and mysticism with religion has a rich history in our culture. But science in Muslim countries did not find the status it took in the West, as being separate from philosophy and as the main indication of progress; therefore, the issue of its relation to religion has been completely influenced by Western discussions.

The conflict of each with religion may have different answers and must be discussed separately. Here we will review just two of them: philosophy and religion, and ethics and religion.

Philosophy and Religion

Metaphysics in Islamic interpretation consists of self-evident or primary propositions in addition to those proved by logical demonstrations from them. These propositions are necessary and universal. Mulla Sadra, in his important book al-*Asfar,* states: religion cannot contradict necessary truths of reason and philosophy also cannot contradict what is explicitly revealed (shari'a)

However, what about some apparent contradictions between them? The answer was and still is that religious sentences have different layers of meaning and by using interpretation (*Ta'wil)* we can reconcile them with the truth of metaphysics. This way of reconciliation between revelation and reason has a deep and rich history and we can find many books devoted to the explanation of its rules, for example,: Ibn Rushd's *Fasl al-Maqal*and Mulla Sadra's *Resaleh fel-Motashabbehat al-Qoran*. Mulla Sadra, although, contrary to Ibn Rushd,gives more importance to mystical experience (*Kashf-i Tam)* than philosophical truth as the basis of *ta'wil* and in many cases, uses *ta'wil* based on reasoning.

Many contemporary Iranian scholars use the method of interpretation (*Ta'wil)* to form a coherence between religious claims and the assents of reason. Indeed, they interpret the texts in light of their philosophical knowledge.

Mirza Mahdi Esfahani represents an attitude called *Maktab-i Tafkik*, which denied the interpretation of text in light of philosophy or mysticism (Esfahani, 1398, pp. 87-103). They try to have an interpretation rooted in Religious Based Reason which has its rules and standards. They repeatedly affirm that they are not going to deny philosophy but only to separate it from religion (Esfahani, 1398, pp. 87-103). But the question is that if philosophy supposedly has the ontological claims about reality and religious claims also are real, then what is the meaning of acceptance of philosophy while separating it from religion? This issue in Islamic literature arose in theological works rather than in philosophical ones.

Ethics and Religion

Muslim philosophers, even the contemporary ones like Tabatabai, are accused of denying the possibility of rational discussion in ethics. It is alleged that they accept some form of voluntarism and prefer the will of God to others. They used interpretation for reconciling the claims of metaphysics and revelation but here they didn't take ethics as having claims regarding reality. This is the common understanding of history; however, I have some comments regarding this, some of which are discussed in my paper on

Avicenna. I think that they are not defenders of voluntarism, but because they believe that in the realm of moral issues, reason is in danger of error more than in metaphysics; therefore, they are more cautious in the interpretation of text in light of reason. The relationship between ethics and religion was not only an important issue of theology but it is still one of the most important contemporary problems. I think the main cause of some views on the nature of revelation, like what we find in late Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid or Abdolkarim Soroush or Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, is taken based on their interest in the reconciliation of revelation and rational ethics. They deny the propositional nature or eternal character of revelation to make room for ethical interpretation of revelation. Some of these thinkers present human rights or the rights of the women as examples of the contradiction of revelation with rational ethics. But the opponents regard this way of dealing with the text as contrary to its being guidance for human happiness.

Conclusion

I think the main problem for Islamic scholars in the future is the relationship between ethics and religion. We must find a fair way out for this problem. It seems like a dilemma because if we give the priority to reason in all cases, it means that reason knows the way of salvation better than revelation; but on the other hand, if we give the priority to revelation and our conception of it out of rational criticism, it may lead us to some form of dogmatism which is in contradiction with the prescriptions of religion concerning reason as an internal messenger of God. We must at first then find the allegedly contradictory cases of ethics and religion by way of induction and then come back to a rule in jurisprudence which is called *al-Jam'* and gather both of them by sometimes restricting revelation to some cases and sometimes by checking the claim of reason.

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