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ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

Muslims are divided to three camps: the moderate, the fundamentalist and the liberal. Yet these three current political movements are shaped by Islamic philosophy. The Muslim philosopher Al-Ghazali articulated the moderate stance of most of the Muslims through accepting both religion, namely Islam, and reason as genuine criteria of knowledge and truth. And the Muslim philosopher Ibn Taymiyyah laid down the foundations of the dominant Islamic fundamentalism through endorsing the doctrine that Islam is the ultimate criterion of knowledge and truth. But the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd developed and defended rationalism in Islam, according to which, independent reasoning is the criterion of truth and knowledge. And hence, he built the foundations of Islamic liberalism and secularism. It is impossible to understand the contemporary political scene of the Arab-Islamic world without presenting and analyzing its philosophical roots. This is so because Islamic philosophy plays an important role in forming the Arab-Islamic political ideologies

INTRODUCTION

There are many dimensions of the current conflicts in the Arab-Islamic world. A main dimension resides in the fact that Muslims are divided into three basic camps: the moderate, the fundamentalist and the liberal camp. But these three social and political movements are based on and formed in light of the theological and philosophical doctrines of some influential Muslim philosophers, such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Rushd. Nothing dies in the Arab-Islamic culture. This is why the Medieval Islamic philosophical theories are still shaping the current Arab-Islamic world.

Al-Ghazali and the Moderate Muslims

Most of the Muslims are traditionalists yet moderate. And they are influenced by the eleventh century Muslim theologian and philosopher Al-Ghazali. According to Al-Ghazali, both religion namely Islam and reason are the criteria of knowledge and truth. One essential reason for maintaining this position by Al-Ghazali is that both religion and reason are created by God, and hence both of them are reliable for obtaining knowledge. From this perspective, Al-Ghazali accepted both the literal and the non-literal interpretation of Islam.

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He defended the interpretation of the Quranic verses in light of the context of the Quran, which led him to accept the literal interpretation of Islam, such as endorsing the Islamic conception that God created the world from nothing. But, at the same time, he defended the reinterpretation of many Quranic verses through relying on certain philosophical conclusions and Sufism, i.e. Islamic mysticism. In doing so, he endorsed both Islam, as it is literally understood, and independent reasoning based on philosophy and mystical insights and experiences. In this sense, Al-Ghazali's position is that both Islam and reason are the criteria of knowledge and truth.

In addition, when he rejected the philosophical theories of his predecessors, he relied on many philosophical arguments, which were constructed independently from any religious content. This also indicates that, from the viewpoint of Al-Ghazali, independent reasoning is a reliable source of knowledge, exactly as Islam is. Al-Ghazali expressed his views in different ways, one of which is the following: when the conditions of knowledge are satisfied for us, such as our beliefs are in fact true and we are justified in believing in our beliefs, God creates knowledge in us. In this manner, knowledge is obtained through one's independent reasoning and through God's intervention and revelation at the same time. This is how, for Al-Ghazali, Islam and reason are equally necessary and sufficient for acquiring knowledge. And thus, in his philosophical paradigm, both reason and Islam are reliable

sources of knowledge and truth. Accepting reason as the sole criterion of knowledge and truth leads to secularism and liberalism because it implies the rejection of religion and/or it amounts to not conceiving religion as the highest priority. And accepting religion as the only criterion of knowledge and truth leads to fundamentalism because it entails the rejection of independent reasoning and/or it amounts to not perceiving independent reasoning as a priority.

In light of these considerations, endorsing both reason and religion as the criteria of knowledge and truth, as Al-Ghazali did, paves the way for being moderate and traditionalist at the same time. Being moderate follows from considering reason as a criterion of knowledge, while being traditionalist follows from accepting religion as a genuine criterion of knowledge. And Al-Ghazali was successful in maintaining that both Islam and reason are the criteria of knowledge and truth. This is why the moderate Muslims are influenced by his theological and philosophical theories. All of this shows that Al-Ghazali's philosophy is still shaping the dominant social and political scene in the Arab-Islamic world, given that most of the Muslims are moderate. Being a traditionalist and moderate Muslim means that a Muslim accepts both Islam and independent reasoning, leading to practicing Islam and following its teachings, while not rejecting modernity, science and democracy. Moderate Muslims tend to accept the new Western innovations, such as modernity and democracy, as being useful tools for survival and advancement, and at the same time they endorse Islam as a genuine divine religion.

Ibn Taymiyyah and Islamic Fundamentalism

According to the thirteenth century Muslim philosopher and theologian Ibn Taymiyyah, Islam is the ultimate criterion of knowledge and truth. This means that if there is a conflict between Islam and the conclusions of reason, then the latter should be reinterpreted and/or modified in order to cohere with the contents of Islam. In this sense, Ibn Taymiyyah was developing and defending Islamic fundamentalism. In his paradigm, the priority goes to Islam, which is preferred over independent reasoning. This forms a strong foundation for Islamic fundamentalism, which maintains that only Islam should rule the Muslims, i.e. Muslims should live under the dictates of Islam and within an Islamic state.

Islamic fundamentalism is characterized by holding that there should be no distinction and/or separation between Islam as a religion on one hand, and the political system and human affairs on the other hand. Rather, Islam should interfere, organize and control all of the aspects of human existence. Islamic fundamentalism follows from Ibn Taymiyyah's theological and philosophical paradigm. Since, from the viewpoint of Ibn Taymiyyah, Islam is the true criterion of knowledge and truth, it follows that Islam should rule all of the human affairs. This reveals that most of the current Muslim fundamentalists are influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah's doctrine. The majority of Muslim fundamentalists follow the main theological and philosophical theories of Ibn Taymiyyah, and they reject modernity and democracy because they believe that Islam is the reliable criterion of knowledge and truth. Another important example of how Ibn Taymiyyah laid down the foundation of Islamic fundamentalism is the following:

according to him, Muslims should only accept the literal interpretation of the Quran, and reject reinterpreting it in light of philosophy and Sufism.

This is so because, from his perspective, the context fixes the true meanings of words and sentences, and hence the context of the Quran determines the genuine meanings of its verses. This led him to accept the literal interpretation of the Quran, which is based on the whole context of the Quran, and reject any reinterpretation of Islam, which is usually based on philosophy or Sufism. And this is one main characteristic of fundamentalism. On the other hand, Ibn Taymiyyah aimed to establish a compromise between Islam and reason. For instance, he held that knowledge is justified true belief or a set of beliefs transmitted by an infallible prophet, such as Muhammad. In this way, he accounted for the acceptance of reason, which aims to justify true beliefs, and he accounted as well for the endorsement of religion, namely Islam, which is delivered by an infallible messenger of God. Yet, for Ibn Taymiyyah, Islam takes priority over reason because it is divine and hence infallible, while reason sometimes fails in enabling us to acquire knowledge, given that it is not divine.

Ibn Rushd and the Liberal Muslims

The twelfth century Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (also known as Averroes in the West) articulated the doctrine of rationalism within the Islamic civilization. He held that reason is the criterion of knowledge and truth. This means that if there is a conflict between religion and reason, then religion should be reinterpreted in order to cohere with the conclusions of reason. This entails that reason is the ultimate source of knowledge. Ibn Rushd didn't reject religion, namely Islam, but rather he stated that both religion and reason are coherent. Yet, he maintained a specific kind of coherence between religion and reason through insisting on the plausibility of the philosophical principle that reason is the criterion of truth and knowledge. Hence, in case there is a contradiction between religion and reason, religion should be reinterpreted in light of the independent and objective conclusions of reason, and not vice versa.

Thus, for him, the priority goes to reason and not to religion. Now, liberal and secular Muslims, who accept Western modernity, democracy and human rights, are influenced by Ibn Rushd's philosophy, and use his doctrine of rationalism in order to defend their ideology. This is so because Western modernity, democracy, and human rights are derived from independent reasoning and not directly   based on any specific religion. Ibn Rushd is an Aristotelian. For example, he endorsed Aristotle's conception of knowledge, according to which, knowledge is perception in conformity with nature. And thus, from the perspective of Ibn Rushd, there should be causal relationships connecting us to the facts of the world in order for knowledge to be obtained, such that we know a certain fact only if that fact itself causes us to believe that it is indeed a fact.

In this sense, Ibn Rushd's philosophy implies that there is no need for God's intervention or revelation in order to have knowledge. Rather, knowledge could be acquired without relying on any religious text. All of this speaks against the

Muslim traditionalists and fundamentalists, paving the way for the formation of Islamic secularism and liberalism. In conclusion, the Medieval Islamic philosophical theories are still very influential and shaping the political scene in the current Arab-Islamic culture. Today, the conflicts in the Arab-Islamic world are among the moderate Muslims, the Muslim fundamentalists and the secular or liberal Muslims. But these social and political camps are based on the competing theological and philosophical theories developed by some Muslim philosophers, such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Rushd.

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