Struggle Between Reason and Revelation in Islam

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The struggle between ‘aql and naql has been going on in Muslim history almost since the very beginning.

The fact is that “religion,” in its essence, is a form of naql, for it was first transmitted from God to the Angel of Revelation to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and then from the exalted personality of the Prophet to his Companions and subsequently from one generation of Muslims to the next till it reached us. Thus, the foundation of religion is naql — and not ‘aql.

However, it is obvious that religion is addressed to human beings! The fact of the matter is that human beings—even if all of them may not be “rational”—do indeed follow a small minority of people who are “rational.” Consequently, it is not altogether wrong to call the human being as such a “rational animal.”

Based on the above premises, it is a completely natural and expected outcome that, from the very beginning, human beings have been trying to evaluate and judge naql on the standards of aql, as well as to come up with rational justifications of its teachings. As a result of this effort, a body of knowledge called theology kept appearing at every stage of human history, striving to match the intellectual and philosophical level of that period.

As far as the Companions of the Prophet were concerned (may God be pleased with them), their situation was entirely different. They had acquired their faith through direct participation in the companionship of Prophet (peace be upon him). This kind of faith is qualitatively unique; consequently, to compare the faith of a Companion to the faith of anyone else in the Muslim Ummah is a logical absurdity.

Not only were these Companions blessed with the experience of ‘ilm-alyaqin [certainty coming from knowledge], but they actually had access to the experience of haq-alyaqin [certainty coming from realization]. First of all, the element of intellectual reasoning was very minimal in their faith, and, secondly, whatever intellectual reasoning did exist was based entirely upon very strong but simple and straightforward premises inherent in human nature; in other words, their faith was based on the kind of natural reasoning that was completely free of complicated logical argumentations or mental gymnastics.

It is precisely for this qualitative difference that our tradition has unambiguously established the following axiom: The faith of even the topmost person in the Ummah cannot match the faith of a Companion—not even that of a person who had the lowest rank among the Companions!

The hearts of the Companions were illuminated with a light of faith that cannot be compared with what might shine in the heart of anyone else; the sublime warmth of their souls were unique to their personalities. It is for this very reason that the faith of the Companions had taken the form of an irrepressible fervor and a passionate zeal that was forever ready to face any struggle or trial, irrespective of how grueling or excruciating it might appear to others. In the face of such an ardent passion and burning faith, what can the “normal” and self preserving rationality do except stare in total amazement?

As time passed, the Companions started to pass away. It was again a natural and expected outcome that with the departure of this generation the overall level of faith started to dwindle slowly, and the remnants of their passionate faith started to cool off. Consequently, it became increasingly difficult for subsequent generations of Muslims to unconditionally accept the dictates of naql, and a process of rational inquiry into the nature and teachings of revelation started that has continued
There is one obvious truth regarding the struggle between reason and revelation, and it is this: A complete and perfect rational interpretation of revelation has never been achieved in history, nor will it ever be achieved. In principle, it is impossible to perfectly express the truths of naql in the language of aql, and any hope to reach that utopia is completely unfounded. The reason for this is obvious too: Human intellect is finite and relative; furthermore, it is imprisoned in the heavy chains of time and space on the one hand, and of contexts and situations on the other. As for religion, it is based on transcendental truths that are infinite and absolute as well as extremely subtle. This, of course, is not true for the injunctions of the Shari‘ah; as far as the reasons underlying particular divine laws are concerned, human intellect is completely free to demonstrate all of its capabilities in revealing their secrets. However, as soon as we cross the boundary of the Shari‘ah and enter into the realm of faith and belief, the very terms of the conversation undergo a drastic change. Here is why.

Religious faith consists of believing in certain supersensory and metaphysical truths that are subtle and transcendental. To grasp and express these truths by means of our logical-linguistic apparatus is tremendously difficult, rather it is virtually impossible. This limitation of human logic and language is precisely what explains the extensive use of allusions, analogies, and metaphors in divine scriptures. If human languages are so utterly inadequate for the purpose of accurately and comprehensively expressing these subtle and transcendental truths, and if human beings are so hopeless when it comes to mentally grasping them, then imagine how hard it is to force these sublime truths to fit into the constricted molds offered in every age by the logic and philosophy of the time—without doing violence to the tenets of faith!

It is an indisputable historical fact that, in the course of Muslim history, there have been occasions when efforts to explain, defend, and justify the articles of faith through human reason actually resulted in negative consequences and caused serious damage. In an effort to evaluate the transcendental truths of religion according to the criteria offered by whatever happened to be the current philosophy, critical mistakes were made in distinguishing the real from the fake. Sometimes the kernel was sacrificed at the cost of the husk, and at other times valuable aspects of religion were gravely injured.

Compared to these risky endeavors, the “safest” path for a believer has always been defined by a constant and firm attachment to naql. This is the path of those faithful individuals who dedicated their lives to the learning and preserving of naql, and to make sure that this legacy is securely transferred to the next generation.

Having recognized that the “safest” way of maintaining one’s faith is to avoid theological debates altogether, however, the fact remains that rational interpretation of religion is an inevitable human need, and that some individuals must fulfill this need on behalf of their religion. Consequently, we see in every phase of Muslim history that sincere devotees of divine revelation have frequently exerted themselves to their maximum in order to fulfill the dangerous requirements of this mission—they did so even by putting their own faith at risk.

The fact should always be kept in mind that the real motive of early Muslim theologians was nothing but the desire to support, preserve, defend, and strengthen the teachings of their religion—notwithstanding any mistakes they might have committed in their endeavors. It would be a grave injustice to imagine that they were enemies of Islam or that their intention was to damage the religion.

Quite naturally, in every phase of history we witness that the defenders of naql have criticized the proponents of ‘aql. This has taken place at two different levels. At the popular level of the masses, the trend had been to simply reject, deny, negate, and express disapproval for those who would prefer reason over revelation. At the level of scholars and intellectuals, however, simple rejection does not work; instead, one must treat the opponents with their own medicine.

There have been many great personalities in Muslim history who educated themselves in the most influential philosophies of their time, and who proved that they were fully knowledgeable and skilled in using the techniques and methods of those they wished to refute. These individuals first developed complete intellectual and spiritual harmony, agreement, and contentment with the truths of revelation that they had received through naql; subsequently, they produced criticisms of the influential but misleading philosophies of their times in the most rational and coherent manner possible. In doing so, the defenders of naql used the same methods and techniques that their opponents held as valid and which they had earlier used to make their own arguments.

The fact of the matter is that the real defense of religion and revelation has always been performed by precisely this kind of individual. It is said in Arabic: Iron is cut by iron. Indeed, one set of arguments can be effectively challenged only by another set of arguments, and the appropriate response to one kind of weapon comes from a weapon that is similar to it.