

## Miskawayh's Apologia for Greek Philosophy

Professor Dr. Mohd Nasir Omar

Department of Theology & Philosophy

National University of Malaysia

43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

[abunasir@ukm.edu.my](mailto:abunasir@ukm.edu.my)

+6013-3322833

### Abstract

In the East, Greek philosophy was studied as early as the fourth century, not however, by the Muslims but by the Arab Syrian Christians. 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 tenth and eleventh century Baghdad. Miskawayh (d.1030), a great Muslim moralist, was among the philosophers who flourished in Baghdad at such times. He was well educated in Islamic studies as well as in philosophy, especially Greek philosophy. The many quotations from Greek sources which are found in Miskawayh's works, especially in his major work on ethics, *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* (The Refinement of Character), provide important evidence for this study to argue that they also have contributed to the formation of his moral philosophy. This paper thus, seeks to investigate Miskawayh's own attraction to Greek ideas, which eventually led him 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.

**Keywords:** Miskawayh, Greek philosophy, apologia, Shari'a (Islamic law)

### Introduction

Miskawayh did not write books or fragments on the question of the harmony between religion and philosophy. Nevertheless, the numerous references to Greek scholars and Greek books in his writings may suggest that Miskawayh basically shared the positive attitude towards Greek philosophy as held by the majority of the philosophers. The precise reason for his 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 A.D. to 1055 A.D.) towards learning, who patronised numerous groups of scholars of the time especially the philosophers, including Miskawayh.

The existence of a few works on the subject, though mostly very brief, such as those by his predecessor al-Kindi, *Fil-Falsafah al-Ula* (On First Philosophy, 1968), and his contemporaries, Ibn al-Khammar, *Kitab al-Wifaq bayn Ra'y al-Falasifah wa'l-Nasara* (Treatise on the Agreement of the Opinions of the Philosophers and the Christians, Ibn al-Nadim 1871-1872:265), and Ibn Zur'a, *Treatise on the Innocence of Those who Inquire into Logic* (1963) on the other hand, may have caused Miskawayh to feel at home with philosophy, and hence, to leave this debatable subject undeveloped, but instead to devote himself actively to the study of the essence and history of philosophy. We are convinced, however, that Miskawayh was first of all a Muslim philosopher, and if a priority must be established between Greek philosophy and his religious beliefs, the supremacy always belongs to the latter, though he appeared to have accepted the general view that religion and philosophy or revelation and reason are complementary.

Baghdad in 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 more than 100 years, from 945 A.D. to 1055 A.D., were not only famous as patrons of art and culture but, in many cases, were themselves scholars in their own right. 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: 168-185).

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" (Al-Tawhidi 1965:445). A

mediaeval Muslim historian, Khatib al-Baghdadi (Lassner 1970:108-109), 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".

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

### Miskawayh's Reaction

Miskawayh (1966: 35, 91-94, 117, 129) 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 1968:90).

Miskawayh (1900:66) 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 (Miskawayh 1966:146). 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 (1900: 103), "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 Muslim philosophers, 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 (1963:199). Those verses read:

"The same Religion has He 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: Namely, that ye should remain steadfast in religion, and make no divisions therein: to those who worship other things than Allah, hard is the (way) to which Thou callest them. Allah chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him). And They became divided only after knowledge reached them, - through selfish envy as between themselves. had it not been for a word that went forth before from Thy Lord, (tending) to a term appointed, the matter would have been settled between them: but truly those who have inherited the Book after them are in suspicious (disquieting) doubt concerning it. Now then, for that (reason), call (them to the faith), and stand steadfast as Thou art commanded, nor follow Thou their vain desires; but say: "I believe In the Book which Allah has sent down; and I am commanded to judge justly between you. Allah is our Lord and your Lord: for us (Is the responsibility for) our deeds, and for you for your deeds, there is no contention between us and you. Allah will bring us together, and to Him is (our) final Goal".

Another verse reads:

"We did send apostles before thee, and appointed for them wives and children: and it was never the part of an apostle to bring a sign (*ayat*) except as God permitted (or commanded). For each period is a Book (revealed). God doth blot out or confirm what He pleaseth: with Him is the Mother of the Book" (al-Qur'an, 13:18-19).

The basic difference between the *Islam* that God has revealed to earlier prophets and that of Muhammad, is that the former is designated to a particular group of peoples for certain periods of times, like Moses and Jesus for the children of Israel (al-Qur'an 5:22, 61:6); whereas the latter is for the whole world and for all time to come. God says: "We have not sent thee but as a universal (messenger) to men" (al-Qur'an, 34:28. See also verses, 4:79, 7:158 and 21:107). That is why every Muslim is obliged to believe and to say:

"Say: we believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in (the Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets, from their Lord: we make no distinction between one and another among them, and to God do we bow our will (in Islam)" (al-Qur'an 3:84).

Miskawayh (1983:285) 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 (2:269), 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".

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), 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 (Miskawayh 1983:25,375-376). It was also due to such a personal conviction, that Miskawayh (1917: 49,58) 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 1917:58. English translation by Pines 1972:123-124).

Miskawayh (1966: 131-132), 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 (1966: 13,47,132) 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. In order to strengthen this view, Miskawayh (1964:83) accordingly quotes the verse of the Qur'an (7:179), which reads:

"Many are the jinns and men We (God) have made for hell: they have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle - nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning)".

That is why Miskawayh (1966:140-142) 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 five 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.

## Conclusion

Miskawayh, to sum up, was never servile imitator or blind follower of the Greeks but always kept his independent and critical attitude towards them. He did not leave Greek ideas raw or unmodified but very often impressed his personal stamp on what he received. This attitude is best illustrated by many of his extant writings where he freely adapted and even rejected several philosophical arguments set forth by his predecessors. The fact that Miskawayh was well-grounded in his own traditional learning as well as in Greek philosophy, is likewise no less evident. Miskawayh was also strongly convinced Muslim prior to his acceptance of Greek thought. Hence, the latter is used basically as an instrument to express his personal convictions, clearly the case for him. This would also imply that "philosophy" to him, does not appear to contradict with his 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.

Thus, in Miskawayh's vision, the great Aristotle is viewed primarily as a philosopher who gathered together the dispersed parts of philosophy belonging to many previous nations. Therefore, the study of ancient sciences and philosophy was regarded by him, both as a renovation and as an innovation of such an important heritage. It appears to us that the study on the empirical circumstances of Miskawayh's life show him to have been well placed in the heart of Islamic civilization which provided him with the opportunity to develop his own respective skills and interests, and to participate in his contemporary events, both political and intellectual. 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 Islamic terms and concepts on the other. His world, medieval Islamic Baghdad, appears to be comparable with the Western world of today. In the one, the westerners 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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