

THE ROLE OF REASON AND REVELATION IN ISLAM
ACCORDING TO
JAMAL AL-DIN AL-AFGHANI
AND
MUHAMMAD ABDUH
AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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A B S T R A C T

Islam is a religion both of revelation and of reason. Beginning from such a statement, I have chosen as the title for my thesis, "The role of reason and revelation in Islam". But because this is a very big subject, I have chosen to look at the role of reason and revelation in Islam according to the opinion of two people, known among the Muslims as islamic rationalists and reformers, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), as an historical analysis.

These two islamic rationalists and reformers were not the first among the Muslims to emphasize and give freedom to reason in their thinking. In its history Islam produced the Mu'tazilites (8th-11th century), who developed in Baghdad and Basrah, as the first group of islamic rationalists (or rational theologians). They gave the primary place to the capability of reason. For them reason could know the existence of God, the obligation of mankind to worship God as giving thanks to Him, good and evil, the obligation to do good and depart from evil. So strongly did they emphasize the capability of reason that they were accused by orthodox and traditional Muslims as introducing errors into Islam. For example, Ahmad bin Hanbal (780-855), opposed the very severely as people out to destroy Islam.

In the nineteenth century Muslims felt pressures from the modern world and its civilization. As a result of the scientific revolution in Western Europe, developments took place quickly amongst the western European nations in technology, politics, economics, military science and civilization. The result of European soldiers piercing the heart

of the Muslim countries was that they made them victims of European progress. France occupied Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881, Britain occupied Egypt in 1882. These events were indeed a political and social threat, but for Muslim society they were a religious one as well.

In the midst of this situation there appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth two Muslim figures who had thoughts of waking Muslim society from its lethargic and static state. These two figures were Afghani and Abduh. Afghani was a Persian, who spent his life wandering from one country to another in the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. But Abduh was an Egyptian who dedicated himself to Egypt and Islam. Both of them, each with his own talents and ability, tried to renew Muslim society, which they knew was at the time in a state of retreat and stagnation (jumūd - جمود).

Afghani spoke fluently but wrote little in setting forth his ideas. He exposed the danger and results of European colonialism in Muslim countries; he reminded people of the dangers of materialistic religion (materialism) which was raging in Europe; he sharply criticized Muslim governments who were only being made foolish by European nations and did not take steps to improve and secure the welfare of Muslim society; he called for the unity of all the Muslim people from the various countries and nations; he called all the Muslim people to use the principle of reason because the Quran stated that blessedness came only from the true use of reason; he called the Muslim people again to understand the religion of Islam truly through the Quran (revelation) and Hadith. The role of reason here is to interpret revelation.

Abduh was more systematic in his thinking than his

teacher, Afghani, and he wrote more. He aimed to renew Islam by freeing reason from the chains of taqlid (custom which leads people blind obedience) and to open the door of ijtihad (the resource of private thinking), by returning to Islam's first sources, i.e. the Quran and Hadith and weighing them in the balance of human reason, and by proving that the religion of Islam is friendly to science and encourages the examination of the secrets of existence. He also intended to renew the way the Arabic language was written and called the people of Egypt to know their rights vis-a-vis their government. He wanted too to renew Egyptian national education along with a renewal of Islamic law.

To renew Muslim society, Afghani and Abduh clearly called the Muslim people to return to true Islam, as it was in the Quran (revelation) and Hadith. And to understand the role of revelation in the life of Muslim society, reason must be used to interpret that revelation. Islam has all the possibilities for making the welfare of the people of Islam secure, provided that Islam is again understood truly. Here is the importance of the role of reason and revelation in Islam according to Afghani and Abduh: "Truly, God does not change the condition of a people, if they do not change it themselves" (Quran, Surah 13, 11). All that is necessary for the life of mankind is written and included in the Quran (revelation), but the reason of mankind must seek to know it. Therefore, if reason is not used, the riches of the Quran (revelation) will not come by themselves.

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