

Fazlur Rahman was, first and foremost, a student of philosophy. He drew on the work of the great Muslim philosophers to explore their system of thought to assess how it could contribute to an explanation of the process of revelation to prophets that could make sense of the essential premise of Islam that Prophet Muhammad received a literal verbal revelation of the Qur'an from God that passed without error through the highest element within the prophet, the 'prophetic intellect', illuminated by the lowest emanation of the divine, the Active Intelligence. To unpack this process, we examine in detail part of Fazlur Rahman's seminal book *Prophecy in Islam*.

### **Fazlur Rahman's *Prophecy in Islam*: preliminary points**

*Prophecy in Islam* is divided into three chapters: *The Doctrine of the Intellect, Prophecy, and Philosophical Doctrine and the Orthodoxy*.

The first chapter outlined the doctrine of the intellect as found in the writings of al-Farabi and then those additions which are attributed to Ibn Sina.

The second chapter dealt with the way in which the philosophers understood the process of revelation to take place in the interface between the human (or prophetic) intellect and the Active Intelligence. It proceeded from a consideration of prophetic illumination, through the part played by the prophetic imagination and the place of miracles, to the distinctively prophetic mission of bringing a codex of laws.

In the third chapter, Fazlur Rahman exemplified the way in which the philosophical doctrine of prophecy was received, accepted, modified or rejected by orthodox theologians within the Islamic tradition. Fazlur Rahman here chose five outstanding exemplars of the theological orthodox tradition to show the diversity of this process. He then concluded with some overarching observations.

### **The theory of emanation**

An outline knowledge of the theory of emanation as used by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina is necessary before proceeding to a detailed analysis of Fazlur Rahman's *Prophecy in Islam*. This theory was based on Plato's *Republic* and was modified in turn by Plotinus and Proclus. It begins with God conceived of as the First Being or the One or the First Cause. "This One or 'First', conceived by al-Farabi as the First Cause of all things, is perfect, necessary, self-sufficient, eternal, uncaused, immaterial, without associate or contrary, and is not susceptible of being defined".<sup>1</sup> The First possesses unity, wisdom and life as parts of his very essence. He is essentially an intellect who is eternally engaged in contemplating his essence. Therefore he is thought thinking itself or *intellectus intelligens intellectum*, as conceived by Aristotle and his commentators.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the imperfection of human reason and its 'contamination' by being associated with matter, the First is not open to being perceived directly by the human being. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup>Fakhry, Majid, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Longmans, 2nd edition, 1983, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup>cf. Fakhry, *ibid.*, p. 117.

the First remains 'unknowable'. Knowledge of this ultimate truth is open to the human being only through a series of emanations. These emanations emanate from the First by a 'necessity of nature' rather than by any choice or desire on his part.<sup>3</sup> These emanations account for the existence of the universe of created things. "The universe adds nothing to the perfection of the Supreme Being and does not determine him in any finalistic or teleological way, instead, it is the outcome of a spontaneous act of supererogatory generosity on his part".<sup>4</sup>

Each emanation emanates in sequence. The first emanation emanates from the First Being and is capable of knowing both its author and itself. By virtue of knowing its author, the second emanation is generated. By virtue of knowing itself (the first emanation), the outermost heaven is generated. So the chain of emanations continues with, at each stage, this double action of knowing both its author (and thus the generation of the next emanation) and itself (and thus the generation of another element of the creation, viz., the planets). Finally the tenth emanation is generated and with it comes the earth. Thus the cycle of emanation is complete. It is this final, tenth emanation which is referred to by the philosophers as the Active Intelligence (sometimes also called the Active Intellect but the former term will be used hereafter).<sup>5</sup>

### **Prophecy and the philosophers**

One final preliminary note is required before passing on to the detailed examination. Why did the philosophers concern themselves with prophecy? The answer stems from the fundamental philosophers' questions: what? how? and why? What is unique in the human being? How does that uniqueness manifest itself and come about? Why should or must it be so? Western thinkers are familiar with the famous dictum of Descartes: *cogito ergo sum*. Certainly one uniqueness in humanity, as far as human understanding runs at present, is that human beings are self-aware thinkers capable of thinking about the world and about themselves. Further, they are capable of thinking about their thoughts, and indeed, they are conscious that they are thinking about their thoughts, and so on in the process of intellection.

This capacity for intellection, in as far as it is common to all humanity by definition, is no less present in the theistic human being than it is in the atheist. The natural process of enquiry sets the religious person on the train of asking what? how? and why? to every facet of religious experience. The philosopher is, of course, aware that human thinking is limited by the constraints of time and space but, nevertheless, some intellection about what is truly real is not only possible but natural (i.e. an outflowing of human nature). It is this impulse to question which led the philosophers of the Islamic tradition to turn their thoughts to the question of prophecy.

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<sup>3</sup>cf. Fakhry, *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup>Fakhry, *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>5</sup>The best summary of this is to be found in Fakhry, *ibid.*, pp. 117-119.

Muslims hold that Islam is a religion based on a revelation from God but the enquiring mind is bound to ask how? and why? This is even more vital when the religious tradition comes into contact with the challenge of systematic thought from another culture. There are only two options; to enter into dialogue with it with a view to explaining the truth of religion in a way that will satisfy the challenger, or to quit the field of battle and retreat into obscurity. It was this very challenge which the Muslim philosophers took up when they attempted to express their knowledge of God in Islam in terms which would be intelligible to thinkers trained in Greek thought.

An understanding of prophecy must stand at the heart of any revealed religion. To understand, as far as one is able, the interface between the human and the divine is of the essence of revealed religion.

### **The doctrine of the intellect**

The Muslim philosophers' understanding of prophecy was based on their understanding of the intellect, which in turn owed much to the Greek philosophers' theories about the soul and its powers of cognition. The major Greek sources were Aristotle, especially his *De Anima Bk III*, the Stoics and Neoplatonists, and an eclectic collection of Hellenistic thought as exemplified by the early centuries of the Common Era.<sup>6</sup> The most important Muslim philosophers, as far as prophecy is concerned, were al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.<sup>7</sup>

### **Al-Farabi**

According to al-Farabi (C.256AH/870CE – 339AH/950CE), the human intellect can be divided into three forms which are inter-related hierarchically. The lowest he called the potential intellect, followed by the actual intellect and finally the acquired intellect.

The potential intellect is common to all human beings and is the initial capacity for actual intellectual cognition. It is not an immaterial substance but a kind of power in matter just like the rest of the lower soul. This potentiality is actualised in people who begin to acquire a knowledge of the universals and forms. This actualization is brought about by the action of the Active Intelligence.<sup>8</sup>

To transform the potential intellect into the actual intellect, the Active Intelligence metaphorically sends out a light<sup>9</sup> which illuminates the images of sensible things which have been stored up in human memory. This illumination 'liberates' them so that they can become abstract. Thus they are transformed into intelligibles or universals. Al-Farabi makes it clear that the form which the intellect becomes arises by abstraction

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<sup>6</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958 [reprint: Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979, to which all page numbers refer] p. 11.

<sup>7</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup>This metaphor was originally coined by Aristotle and has been repeated by all his commentators, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 12.

from the sensible objects and not from the Active Intelligence.<sup>10</sup> This is important as it emphasises that the human actual intellect is derived from the created world of matter which has been acted upon by the divine through the Active Intelligence. The action of the Active Intelligence can be likened to the form which is given in such a way as it pervades the material substance. If one took the example of a lump of wax, then the action of the Active Intelligence would not be like a seal which was stamped into it, as in the simple Aristotelian sense, but a force which pervaded the totality of the wax and transformed it in its totality, thus producing, for example, a wax figure.<sup>11</sup>

When the potential intellect is transformed in this way it becomes an actual existent in the world. This al-Farabi called the actual intellect. It has its own ontological existence as a separate entity. It possesses self-knowledge by virtue of its being an intelligible thing and, as every intelligible thing can be contemplated by the actual intellect, it must be able to contemplate itself and therefore has self-knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

When the actual intellect acquires self-knowledge it becomes what al-Farabi called acquired intellect (*'aql mustafad*). For al-Farabi, this acquired intellect is the most developed and final form of the human intellect.<sup>13</sup> It is useful to contrast this highest form of the human intellect (acquired intellect) with the lowest emanation from the divine (the Active Intelligence). Both are self-intellective and self-intelligible but the distinction lies in the fact that the acquired intellect is bound to the body, at least until the human being dies when it is freed from the body by death. By contrast the Active Intelligence never passed through any corporeal period, it has always been separate, i.e. not connected to a body, and is by nature so.<sup>14</sup> In this way al-Farabi kept an essential distinction between the human being and the emanations of the divine.

Fazlur Rahman traced al-Farabi's doctrine of the intellect ultimately to Aristotle, but only after Aristotelian thought had been modified by the Neoplatonic school. In particular Fazlur Rahman identified the Neoplatonist Simplicius (d.533CE) as holding a parallel doctrine of the intellect to al-Farabi.<sup>15</sup>

Having established the genesis of the human intellect and that which distinguishes it from the Active Intelligence, al-Farabi went on to examine how the interaction between the two can be explained in the person of an outstanding human being. The ordinary human mind reaches perfection when it becomes acquired intellect. It is, as has been seen, lower than the Active Intelligence, but it shares with the latter in being pure activity

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Such an example is given by Al-Farabi, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, cf. footnote 8, p.23.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 13.

and no longer needing the faculties of the lower soul for its operation. This is the only facet which it has in common with the Active Intelligence, which it is now capable, to some extent, of contemplating by virtue of the fact that the Active Intelligence is intelligible and every intelligible is open to contemplation by the actual intellect.

“In a few unique cases ... the Active Intelligence becomes the form of the *'aql mustafad* [acquired intellect] and the perfect philosopher, or the Imam (or the Prophet) comes into existence”.<sup>16</sup> Even in this rare form the acquired intellect is capable of contemplating only a part of the Active Intelligence. In this there is no difference between the ordinary human acquired intellect and the extraordinary human acquired intellect. The part of the Active Intelligence which is open to contemplation by the human acquired intellect al-Farabi calls ‘the Holy Ghost’.<sup>17</sup> The other part of the Active Intelligence remains wholly transcendent and beyond human contemplation.

Fazlur Rahman went on to call this extraordinary human acquired intellect by the short form ‘prophetic intellect’. The key to understanding this intellect is that it is in essence entirely human, sharing the same ontological reality with the acquired intellect of every other human being. It can only contemplate the same part of the Active Intelligence, viz., the Holy Ghost, which every other human being can contemplate. However, the Active Intelligence has become the form of the prophetic intellect. Using the metaphor of the light and illumination which goes back through al-Farabi to Aristotle, it can be said that the prophetic intellect has been illuminated to such a degree that it resembles the Active Intelligence in the same way that the wax horse resembles a horse. The wax horse is not a horse and yet it can only be justly described by reference to the form ‘horse’. So, the prophetic intellect is not the Active Intelligence but it can only be justly explained by reference to its form ‘Active Intelligence’, the interactive synapsis between the two being through the medium of the Holy Ghost.

## **Ibn Sina**

Ibn Sina (369AH/979CE - 428AH/1037CE), often called by his Latin name ‘Avicenna’, covered a good deal of the same ground as al-Farabi but developed a system which was slightly different at points and had a significant divergence on the question of the prophetic intellect. Fazlur Rahman sounded a note of caution which should be remembered throughout; “we must take notice of the fact that Avicenna’s terminology is always shifting”.<sup>18</sup> Here, the endeavour will be made to follow the ascent of the human intellect according to Ibn Sina’s system and standardise his terminology wherever possible.

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<sup>16</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup>This term was applied by Al-Farabi as a counterpart to the distinction made by Simplicius. For further reference to the difference between these two parts of the Active Intelligence see Al-Farabi’s *Siyasat*, Hyderabad edition, 1346 A.H., p. 3. cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 19, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 19.

Ibn Sina held that the potential intellect is an immaterial and immortal substance which comes into existence as something personal to each individual.<sup>19</sup> The process of actualization leads first to an intermediate position which Ibn Sina referred to as the *intellectus in habitu* ('*aql bi'l-malaka*). This stage is reached when the potential intellect conceives the primary general truths which can be acquired without induction or deduction, e.g. that two things, equal to the same thing, are equal to each other.<sup>20</sup>

When the *intellectus in habitu* uses these primary truths to acquire secondary ones it becomes actual intellect. The final ascent is completed when the actual intellect operates with these powers and so becomes acquired intellect.<sup>21</sup>

The final process in this chain sees the first significant difference from al-Farabi's system. Al-Farabi held that the intelligible forms which were acquired to transform the actual intellect into the acquired intellect were produced by abstraction from matter,<sup>22</sup> whereas Ibn Sina held that these intelligible forms come directly by emanation from the Active Intelligence.<sup>23</sup> This is in part a reflection of the latter's doctrine of the potential intellect as being immaterial. It also establishes an important link with the Active Intelligence which will be elucidated further when discussing the prophetic intellect.

There were those who criticised Ibn Sina by saying that he held that the mind became the form which it received.<sup>24</sup> Ibn Sina's response to this was to say that the human intellect, while in the body, could only receive one form at a time. If it became absolutely the first form which it received, then it could not know or receive any other. However, after the soul left the body, then it has the possibility of knowing several forms at the same time.<sup>25</sup> Again, the importance of this will become clearer when discussing the prophetic intellect.

The fact that the ordinary human soul is limited by its corporality means that the ordinary human acquired intellect is not intellect proper, which is capable of eternally thinking and becoming its object, rather it is like a mirror in which each form, as it emanates from the Active Intelligence, is imprinted or reflected and then withdrawn as the recipient's attention is turned to something else. "But when the (ordinary) human soul quits the body and its accidents, it is then possible for it to have a perfect contact (or union) with the Active Intelligence".<sup>26</sup> This acorporeal relationship between the human

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<sup>19</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> e.g. Porphyry, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Sina, *Shifa'*, De Anima, V, 6, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 17.

soul and the Active Intelligence is realised, to a certain extent, by the prophetic intellect whilst it is still in its corporeal form. Here the prophetic intellect can receive several intelligibles at once, or almost at once, and therefore its relationship to these intelligibles is more advanced than that of the ordinary human soul.<sup>27</sup>

To understand this, Ibn Sina advanced a notion of three modes of knowledge. Whilst the human intellectual knowledge is not simple and undivided but rather piecemeal and discrete and so it could be described as receptive but not creative, it is nevertheless aware that there is a higher level in which there is a creative intellect. The receptive, piecemeal intellect represents the first two modes of knowledge; the creative intellect represents the third.

The first two modes can be described thus: the human intellect is not able to entertain more than one proposition at a time as it is time-centred; whilst it is entertaining one proposition, the others exist only in a state of second-order potentiality (i.e. *in habitu*). So the proposition being entertained correlates to the actual intellect, whilst those which are held as though in memory correlate to the *intellectus in habitu*.<sup>28</sup>

There is then the third mode of knowledge which can best be described as assurance. Ibn Sina regarded this as the creator of the other two.<sup>29</sup> This assurance consists in the knowledge that the human soul knows something, or will know something, even though the assurance precedes the knowledge of the details. The person who knows something in this third way is sure that the knowledge lies within and so it must already be known in the simple sense. When such a person begins to explain it to someone else, he begins to learn in actuality at the same time, thus the third mode of knowledge brings an intelligible into the domain of the actual intellect where it is known actually. In this way the third mode of knowledge can be seen to be creative of the other two modes: the actual intellect and the *intellectus in habitu*.<sup>30</sup>

The third level of knowledge knows things simply in their entirety. In this way it is akin to the way in which the Active Intelligence knows things, thus it can be regarded as the absolute intellectual power of the soul. It is not a propositional or ordered form of knowing, which takes place at the level of the acquired intellect; rather it is the power to know things ‘in wholes’ and so can be thought of as an intuitive knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

It is at the third level of knowledge that the prophetic intellect can be seen to operate *par excellence*. The prophetic intellect has this higher level of knowledge to such a degree

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<sup>27</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 19.

that it can identify itself with, or receive, the entire Active Intelligence, thus breaking down the barrier between finite and infinite consciousness in certain special cases.<sup>32</sup>

### **The psychology of prophecy**

The development of the human intellect having been traced through the thinking of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, and the subtle differences between the two having been noted, the discussion in *Prophecy in Islam* moved on to consider the prophetic intellect in contact with the Active Intelligence, in order to explore how the illumination which is revelation takes place.

Both al-Farabi and Ibn Sina held that there is a mode of knowledge which is able to receive a multiplicity of forms as a 'whole'. This has been explored above in the case of Ibn Sina, however, Fazlur Rahman was at pains to point out that al-Farabi held the same doctrine, as when the latter wrote,

our knowledge is of two kinds: one multiple, which is called the psychic knowledge, and the other non-multiple which it called noetic and simple. For example, if an intelligent man is holding a discussion with a friend who makes a lengthy discourse [by way of question], the former presents the whole discourse to his mind and, while thus reflecting upon it, he has a certainty that he is going to [is able to] answer it without [yet] having any detailed knowledge of the answers [to be given].<sup>33</sup>

In the case of a prophetic illumination, one can see that this doctrine could support the prophet being illuminated by revelation in a whole and complete way, knowing with the certainty of assurance that this is the case, and still being uncertain of the details which will become external through the process of intellection. This power of assurance is not part of the soul but is itself the product of illumination by the Active Intelligence. By its interaction with the lower modes of knowledge, it creates detailed and discursive knowledge in the soul.<sup>34</sup>

One of the characteristics of the prophet, apart from an extraordinary intellectual endowment, is the ability to learn things without the help of instruction by an external source. This knowledge is direct through the process of illumination. Al-Farabi held that it was necessary for the prophetic intellect to develop in all the usual human ways and only after that could prophetic illumination take place.

This [the attainment of self-taught knowledge] happens only in the case of a man who is endowed with exceptionally great natural capacities when his soul attains contact with the Active Intelligence... Revelation comes to

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<sup>32</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup>Al-Farabi, *al-Ta'liqat*, Hyderabad, 1346AH, p.24, 10 et seqq., as translated and quoted in, Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 1, p. 65. N.B. Fazlur Rahman notes that this treatise is *attributed* to al-Farabi.

<sup>34</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 30.



a man who has reached this rank, i.e. when no intermediary remains between him and the Active Intelligence.<sup>35</sup>

Fazlur Rahman summarised al-Farabi's doctrine in three points: first, that the prophet, unlike an ordinary mind, is endowed with an extraordinary intellectual gift; second, that the prophetic intellect, unlike ordinary philosophical and mystical minds, does not need an external instructor but develops by itself with the aid of divine power, even if, previous to its final illumination, it passed through all the normal stages of actualization; third, that at the end of this development, the prophetic intellect attains contact with the Active Intelligence from which it receives the specifically prophetic faculty.<sup>36</sup>

Ibn Sina developed these ideas by accepting that the prophet needs no external teacher but, rather than insist on the intellectual progression, he developed the Aristotelian theory of intuition which enables the illumination to come as a sudden blow or breakthrough. When this happens, the Active Intelligence deposits the forms of all things past, present and future into the prophet's soul. This is done in such a way that the prophet knows the cause and effect of all things so that his knowledge is rational and not irrational.<sup>37</sup>

Ibn Sina delineated two differences between the prophetic intellect and the ordinary philosophical or mystical intellect. First, the ordinary mind has first to exercise itself on the data of perceptual experience. This is a form of purification or preparation so that it is able to receive illumination from the Active Intelligence. In the case of the prophet this is not necessary, as by nature the prophetic mind is pure and can make direct contact with the Active Intelligence. Second, the ordinary mind is only able to receive one intelligible at a time, and often then only partly. That intelligible has to be cleared from the mirror of the mind to make way for succeeding ones. The prophetic intellect is able to receive all knowledge at once and fully.<sup>38</sup> The problem remains as to why there should be this difference between the prophetic intellect and the ordinary intellect. In Fazlur Rahman's opinion, Ibn Sina made no attempt to solve this problem, but he alluded to it in different ways in his writings.<sup>39</sup>

In summary of Ibn Sina's thought on this question, it could be said that the creative prophetic faculty is not something which is natural to the common run of humanity, but it is an additional capacity which becomes actual when illuminated by the Active Intelligence. In this way it can be seen as normal and indeed essential in a prophet. The

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<sup>35</sup> Al-Farabi, *Siyasat al-Marina*, Hyderabad, 1346AH, p. 49, 4 et seqq., cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> cf. Ibn Sina, *Risala fi Ithbat al-Nubuwwat*, in *Tis' Rasa'il*, Cairo, 1326AH, p. 121-127, p. 124, 3, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 16, p. 68.

degree of identification between the illuminated prophet and the Active Intelligence can be total.

It follows that the Active Intellect, although being a supernal reality to humanity, is a part and parcel of the prophet qua prophet: phenomenally speaking, the prophet as human being, is not the Active Intellect but since in his case the barrier between the phenomenal and the ideal (real) has broken down, he is identical with the Active Intellect.<sup>40</sup>

To understand exactly what Fazlur Rahman meant in the above quotation is not simple. He lapsed into some of the obscurity of Ibn Sina at this point. On this occasion he used capital letters for the Active Intellect and it is not clear if he was using this phrase to connote Active Intelligence, or means to identify it with the active intellect which was a term used by Ibn Sina as synonymous with prophetic intellect. The meaning only becomes clearer when it is placed within the system of the Muslim philosophers who held that the Active Intelligence had become the form of the prophetic intellect, as was seen with al-Farabi above.<sup>41</sup> This total identification with the Active Intelligence led to the philosophers developing the idea of the illumination being accidental but not essential, in the same way that Ibn Sina held that existence was accidental not essential. This meant that not all conceivable essences exist but some do, so the prophetic illumination which renders the prophetic intellect identical to the Active Intelligence is also accidental to humanity although, in the case of the prophet in whom it has occurred, it is a real and essential facet of his being.

Hence the prophet is described as possessing Divine Intellect, Divine Pneuma, and as a Divine Being, deserving of honours and almost to be worshipped (cf. the last words of the *Shifat*) because he ‘accidentally’ (i.e. not qua an ‘ordinary’ human being) receives in himself the Angelic Intellect, the Diamon.<sup>42</sup>

Fazlur Rahman acknowledged himself that Aristotle and the other Greek philosophers were not at all clear as to the precise meanings of these terms.<sup>43</sup> Again they must be understood within their system which clearly differentiated between ‘the divine’ and ‘God’. So Plato could say that the soul resembles God at its highest stage,<sup>44</sup> that the true

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<sup>40</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> see above page 5.

<sup>42</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 35.

<sup>43</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 17, p. 68.

<sup>44</sup>cf. *Phaedo*, 80 a.

philosopher is divine (*theios*),<sup>45</sup> and “according to me, man is never God (*theos*) but Divine (*theios*) and I give this name to all [true] philosophers”.<sup>46</sup>

Fazlur Rahman gave the following clarificatory summary of the situation:

The Muslim philosophical tradition of revelation does not envisage the total ‘otherness’ of the giver of revelation which is characteristic of the Semitic tradition... The Muslim philosophers regard revelation not as a suppression of the prophet’s personality but as its enlargement, an enlargement which already lies potentially in the prophet and which, when actualised, makes him a member of the ideal world.<sup>47</sup>

Now the situation is somewhat clearer. The prophet is that unique human being who has been prepared with the potential to enlarge his intellectual capacity in such a way that he can grasp the ideal world of the forms through illumination by the Active Intelligence to the extent that his intellect takes on the capacity of knowledge which can only come through a total identification with that same capacity as is associated with the lowest of the emanations of the divine.

The central concept here is of a being who has been illuminated with knowledge of the higher realms. Thus, for the philosophers, a prophet is essentially the same as a mystic or a philosopher. All three have penetrated to this knowledge of the divine as it is in itself. The similarity between prophet, mystic and philosopher on the level of illumination is clear, what differentiates them is the end to which this gift of knowledge is to be used.

[The Muslim philosophers] admit a highest flight of the human soul by which it gains a simple, total insight into Reality; with Plotinus they agree that this insight is creative of discursive rational knowledge comprising premises and conclusions which, according to them, correspond with causes and effects since they agree with the Stoics that every event has its fixed place in a stringent and unalterable causal scheme. They would, therefore, not quarrel about names by which such a man is to be called - Prophet, Mystic or Philosopher, for, at the highest point they are all one at the intellectual level, although the prophet is distinguished especially by the Technical Revelation ... and by the moral and legal socio-political mission.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> cf. *Republic*, 500 d.

<sup>46</sup> *Sophist*, 216 b, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 18, p. 69.

<sup>47</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 17, p. 69.

<sup>48</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 35.

Two points should be noted here. First, that both al-Farabi<sup>49</sup> and Ibn Sina<sup>50</sup> accepted Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle as prophets.<sup>51</sup> Second, that there are many grades within the ranks of philosophers and mystics, so that not every one of these groups is worthy of the (capitalised) title of Prophet, Philosopher or Mystic. Those who are worthy of these (capitalised) titles represent the highest pinnacle of wisdom which is a most rare occurrence in the world.<sup>52</sup>

As indicated above, what sets the Prophet apart from the Philosopher or Mystic is not the capacity or development of the intellect but the end to which that gift is intended. In the case of the prophet, this is connoted by the Technical Revelation which must be explored next.

### **The Technical Revelation**

The way in which the prophet's intellect is illuminated by union with the Active Intelligence has been outlined. Now the question must be asked as to the way in which the prophet communicates the fruits of this illumination to the rest of humanity. The Muslim philosophers followed the broad system of their Greek forebears in asserting that a literal reception from the higher world was so inconsistent with their understanding of the working of the intellect as to be meaningless.<sup>53</sup> The prophetic intellect grasped the universal form of truth, but this had to be communicated through the process of intellection as indicated earlier. The final verbal revelation became a form of collaboration between the divine and human agencies.<sup>54</sup>

The central principle on which the Muslim philosophers found their explanation of the inner psychological processes of technical revelation is that the imaginative faculty represents in the form of particular, sensible images and verbal modes, the universal simple truth grasped by the prophet's intellect.<sup>55</sup>

The central thrust of this explanation is to maintain the reality of prophetic illumination, the assurance that this has occurred, and, at the same time, to allow for the presentation of that revelation in 'sensible images and verbal modes' through the intellectual activity of the prophet. This principle was worked out by al-Farabi and later taken over by Ibn

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<sup>49</sup>cf. *Tahsil al-Sa'ada*, last paragraph.

<sup>50</sup>cf. *Tis' Rasa'il*, pp.124, 17-25, i.

<sup>51</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 35.

<sup>52</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 36.

<sup>53</sup>For a detailed exposition of Greek thought on this question, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 32, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup>cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 32, p. 73.

<sup>55</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 36.

Sina who added to it a further distinction in which he held that there was the influx into the soul of certain images through the influence of the heavenly bodies. This distinction helped Ibn Sina to distinguish between inspiration (*ilham*) and the higher function of prophetic revelation (*wahy*). Ibn Sina was particularly keen to distinguish and keep separate the concepts of *ilham*, which might be enjoyed by sundry people like mystics, and *wahy* which is specifically reserved for prophets which involved a verbal revelation and the instigation of a legal code.<sup>56</sup>

The emphasis here is placed on the imaginative faculty of the prophet which must be highly developed. There is a certain dichotomy involved. On the one hand, this faculty must be so strong in the prophet that it is capable of creating the correct images in response to the presence of the revelation in the prophetic intellect. On the other hand, the intellect has to keep a certain check on the workings of the imagination so that it does not go astray. This tension can be found in the writings of Plutarch as well as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.<sup>57</sup> Ultimately Fazlur Rahman judged that it must be kept in creative tension as the philosophers seemed unable to resolve it.

It is necessary to be clear about the action of the imaginative faculty within the psychology of the philosophers. The imaginative faculty is capable of creating vivid and potent symbols which are capable of impelling the organism to action. If, for example, some people are disposed towards some appetitive pleasure, but their appetite is not strong enough to galvanize them, the imaginative faculty stirs up symbols of pleasure which are strong enough to move them into action. With the prophet, the concern is with the generation of symbols which can express religious intellectual truth. These truths must be expressed in symbolic language because that is all that the imaginative faculty is capable of working with as it cannot grasp the universal and immaterial concept.<sup>58</sup>

In ordinary waking life, the imaginative faculty receives certain sensual images from the realm of precepts and delivers them in the form of symbols which can be perceived and worked upon by the intellect. In order for people to exist in the waking state, there must be an element of practicality in this. When they are asleep, the imaginative soul is able to roam freely as it is released from the need to provide symbols for intellection. In ordinary human beings, this freedom to be receptive to the higher world is limited to dreams but in certain rare exceptions, this can occur too in the waking state.<sup>59</sup>

One of the rare exceptions is the prophet, who is capable of freely using the imaginative faculty whilst awake. His imaginative faculty is so strong and his illumination by the Active Intelligence is so thorough that he is able to free himself from normal bodily needs and commune with the higher world whilst fully awake. This can be exemplified in those instances in the *sira* of Muhammad when he was perceived to be awake in the

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<sup>56</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 38.

<sup>57</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, cf. footnote 35, p. 76.

<sup>58</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 36.

<sup>59</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 37.

presence of his companions but at the same time caught up in the process of receiving revelation. It is recorded that he underwent bodily responses at these times like trances and cold sweats.

In the case of the religious function of the imaginative faculty, it is at this point that one encounters the angel as a vehicle for delivering images from the perceptual realm. Ibn Sina regarded the appearance of the angel and the hearing of the angelic voice as purely mental phenomena,<sup>60</sup> while al-Farabi was prepared to admit of these as real perceptions which were often perceived through the senses in terms of light or air. Even in such cases he probably saw them as being private to the prophet rather than 'objective' or externally verifiable.<sup>61</sup>

At this stage, the situation can be thus summarised in two points. First, "the prophet is endowed with such a strong power of imagination that he can recapture the intellectual truth by figurization in visual and acoustic symbols in waking life". Second, "although these symbols may be private not public, this fact does not interfere with their objective validity".<sup>62</sup>

At first glance, the idea that the symbols created by the prophet to figurize his experience are private and subjective throws up the idea that they might be open to deception. How can they be relied upon if they are in no way objective and open to external scrutiny? Upon reflection, it will be seen that this is an erroneous concern in that they arise from a sphere of existence, viz., the higher world, in which *ex hypothesi* error and falsehood are excluded. Provided that one accepts the premise that the prophetic intellect has been illuminated by the Active Intelligence then the possibility of error is eradicated.<sup>63</sup>

The question must now be faced as to why the prophet cannot merely present the naked truth as received through illumination and, therefore, why it must be embodied in symbolic forms. Fazlur Rahman, in his presentation of the philosophers, drew up two dimensions to the answer, viz., the Psychological Law of Symbolisation and the need for a political element.

The Psychological Law of Symbolization, as Fazlur Rahman styled it, says that there is a compulsion to associate images between the internal forum of illumination and the external forum of verbalisation. Because of this, there is the ever-present danger of a confusion between the world of reality and the world of symbols, therefore the intellect must exercise the function of interpretation. This is a reflection of the dichotomy between a powerful imaginative faculty and the check of subjecting the symbols thus formulated to intellection, as referred to above.

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<sup>60</sup> cf. *Shifa'*, *Psychology*, V, 6, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 38.

<sup>61</sup> cf. *al-Madina al Fadila*, ed. F. Dieterici, Leiden, 1896, pp. 51, 14-52, 12, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 38.

<sup>62</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 38.

The fundamental principle, however, in all this must be that whenever the soul considers internal and external images together, it moves from an internal image to an external one which is close to it either absolutely or because of their contiguity which they gain from perceptual and imaginative association, and so from an external image to an internal one... In any case, that form of vision in which the imagination holds sway needs to be interpreted.<sup>64</sup>

The second reason for expressing the revelation through symbols is the political one, that is, by definition, the prophet is communicating to people on a lower intellectual plane than himself. As Fazlur Rahman put it, “since the masses cannot grasp the purely spiritual truth, the prophets communicate this truth to them in materialistic symbols and metaphors”.<sup>65</sup>

Since the masses cannot understand these things in their real existence, attempts are made to teach them in other ways, viz. those of symbolism... These things are thus allegorized for every nation or people in terms familiar to them, and it is possible that what is familiar to one people is foreign to another. Most people who believe in happiness can believe in it only in figurative, not conceptual terms. Those people who believe in happiness because they can rationally conceive it and receive (the essence) of the principles, are the Sages (*hukama'*), whereas those who figuratively understand them and believe in them as such (i.e. who believe the figurative truth to be literal truth) are the Believers.<sup>66</sup>

Here now is an important distinction which is in keeping with what has been said earlier about the extraordinary nature of those few who have been gifted with the prophetic intellect. They are able to make direct contact with the source of truth, whilst religion exists for the benefit of the masses.<sup>67</sup> As al-Farabi put it, “It is, indeed, he [the prophet] who has *invented* these images and persuasive symbols *not in order to understand himself the higher realities as a religion but as symbols and images for others*”.<sup>68</sup>

It would not be fair to regard religion as merely the construct of the prophet for the sake of the masses, “...for each great religion, at any rate, contains, in its corpus of revelations, sufficient glimpses of pure truth to lead the elect seekers of truth to pursue this truth

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<sup>64</sup>Ibn Sina, *Shifa'*, *Psychology*, IV, 2, cf. also Al-Farabi, *Madina*, p. 48, 20 et seqq., cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 39.

<sup>65</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 40.

<sup>66</sup>Al-Farabi, *Siyasat*, pp. 55-56, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 41.

<sup>67</sup>cf. Ibn Sina, *Tis Rasa'il*, p. 124 et seqq., cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 77.

<sup>68</sup>Al-Farabi, *Tahsil-al-Sa'ada*, p. 44, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, footnote 37, p. 76, italics Fazlur Rahman's.

itself and to be able to allegorically interpret the rest of the symbols”.<sup>69</sup> The eternal problem of elitism is clearly represented here as it is inherent in the epistemological system of the philosophers. There is a real sense in which truth is only open to the few and indeed it would be dangerous to extend it to the masses, in that they would necessarily misunderstand it.

Religious symbols, if they are to be properly understood, must always be interpreted... But this interpretation can only be for the sake of a few who are possessed of sufficient intelligence to understand it; for the mass of dullards the letter of the revelation and the materialistic symbols must remain the literal truth.<sup>70</sup>

The final consideration on this question must be the relationship of the various revelations which have been received by prophets and disseminated through religions. This is especially important when it is recalled that, for the philosophers, this mantle of prophecy is not restricted to the classical prophets of Islam, such as might be mentioned in the Qur'an, but would include the greatest of the philosophers of antiquity. Fazlur Rahman addressed this question thus,

The spiritual content and background of all religion is identical... since this is universal, but it is equally true that the symbols in which positive religions have expressed (or hidden?) this truth are not at the same level. Some are nearer the truth than others, some are more adequate than others in leading humanity to the higher truth, some, again, are more effective than others in gaining the belief of people and becoming the directive force of their lives.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 41, cf. also Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-Najat*, Cairo, 1938, p. 305, 21 et seqq.

<sup>70</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 42, cf. also Ibn Sina, *Risala al-Adhawiya*, pp. 44, 10-51, 5.

<sup>71</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p. 41.