The Role of Intellect in Religious Knowledge from the Perspective of Ghazali and Soren Kierkegaard

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 September 2014
Received in revised form 26 October 2014
Accepted 25 November 2014
Available online 15 January 2015

Keywords:
intellect, religion, religious knowledge, Ghazali, Kierkegaard.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to answer the question that to what extent the human intellect can be enlightened the religion to justify, interpret and analyse from the perspective of Ghazali and Soren Kierkegaard. The result found in this research is that, there are differences and similarities, between Ghazali’s and Kierkegaard's views on this subject. Although both of them give less importance to the role of intellect in religious knowledge, Ghazali distinguishes between religious intellect and philosophical intellect. He believes that philosophical intellect is in contrast with religious realities and also involves extraordinary conflicts in itself; thus it can be hardly used as an enlightening point of view. In the time of revelation and Sufi intuition, Gazali doesn’t take the competence of intellect into account as a criteria for religious knowledge. But Kierkegaard basically separates the domain of intellect from religion and disagrees with the entry and any attempt of intellect to the religious knowledge. He disagrees with the philosophers who claim to be rationalist and also does not accept the intellect as an enlightening way in religious meaning.

INTRODUCTION

There have been several discussions about the validity, effectiveness and scope of intellectual enlightenment on religion. Although various opinions have been presented, some deny the level of enlightening on religious knowledge, while others can accept it.

The main question of this article is, the position of intellectual enlightening on religion from the perspective of Ghazali and Kierkegaard, who are among the outstanding philosophers of Islam and Christianity with their fideism approaches and critical aspect against philosophical thought. The study questions whether the intellect can be an enlightening source for religious statements and justify it.

The research gives importance to know those who have traditionally explored the ideas of these two philosophers and also emphasizes to conduct further studies on them. It should be reminded that there have been several studies on these two scholars separately, both in Persian and in English literature. But there has been no research about the similarities. Montgomery Watt is an orientalist who conducted researches on the thoughts and ideas of Ghazali for many years and the outcome of his researches was the popular book “Ghazali”. In addition, he handled Ghazali in other works such as “The history of Islamic Kalam”. He claimed that Ghazali was an anti-rational in the East like the thoughts of Existentialism in the west, whose main representative is the Danish scholar, Kierkegaard [27]. Obermann also called Ghazali’s method as substantial or individual and claimed that the knowledge achieved by Ghazali is an esoteric chimerical knowledge rather than a knowledge based on theoretical intellect and verbal reason, which is close to the foundations of Kierkegaard [22].

Surprising, those who have explored Kierkegaard’s thoughts, pointed out his thoughts to be close to the Islamic scholars. Malekian [17] stated that there are some strands of Kierkegaard’s faith approach among Islamic scholars, especially those with Ashaari's view. The book “Fideism”, a part of which is devoted to the Kierkegaard’s thoughts, also claims that Kierkegaard’s thoughts can be found among the Islamic fideists who believe that intellect cannot lead us to the certainty [2]. The mentioned book claims that the causes of estimation and postponement reasons are somehow proposed by Islamic fideists. It has been also emphasized in the

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introduction of the book which involves the history of fideism. Christian and Muslim thinkers such as Tertolian, Augustine Ghazali and Ibn-Timieh.(ibid) can also be found.

Therefore, there are several similarities between the thoughts of these two scholars from the perspective of researchers. All these similarities, in addition to the differences, require detailed researches on the ideas of them.

The author, in this study, aims to investigate the level of intellectual enlightenment on religion from the perspective of these two scholars. In order to handle the subject in a problem-oriented way, the contents are examined in three major areas: intellectual knowledge, the limits of intellectual enlightenment, philosophy and philosophers from the views of Ghazali and Kierkegaard.

A) Intellectual knowledge:

Both Ghazali and Kierkegaard believe that all the sciences are existed in human being as innate and instinctive. Then, they defend the idea that by learning our memories about what we knew previously, we can be aware of the reality.

When Ghazali describes the intellect and its divisions, he claims that knowledge is not not taken to human brain directly from outside, it is learned naturally by cause and effect result. He believes that, as the water is existed in the earth nature and it can come out by digging the ground and excavating a well, same as human knowledge is also existed in its innate instinct and would be activated in an appropriate time [4].

Kierkegaard also agrees this approach strongly on human knowledge and argues that, if we take the hypothesis in contrary to the Socrates and Plato’s statement, supposing that one who learn something without previous knowledge, a supernatural evolution is needed for him/her in in learning process. In other words something extraordinary must be happen in order to direct the learner for the unknown thing. When an “enlightenment” occurs in his entity that eliminates the previous ignorance then the process allows him to distinguish between right and wrong [10].

Kierkegaard proves the God through this approach and states that when learner is completely illeterate before learning and achieves knowledge for the learning, the answer can be found in God. It can be concluded from the enlightenment in human being that God exists even in the sequence of historical events. (Kierkegaard, Ibid).

Ghazali attempts to explain this within the Islamic framework and presents them in accordance with Quran interpretation. Referring to the verses of Holy Quran consisting of the promise of mankind with Dhar World, he believes that this is a kind of recall and commitment. (Gazali, Ibid).

B) Limits of intellect enlightenment in the thoughts of both scholars:

Insufficiency of intellect in religious knowledge:

Both Ghazali and Kierkegaard are insisting on the belief that being faithful and religious is not necessarily based on intellect. Also the intellect have no competent position in the exploration of supernatural realities. It is seen that while Ghazali considers meta-intellectual religion Kierkegaard considers anti-intellectual religion.

Meta-intellectuality of religion in Ghazali’s view: believing to the ability of intellect for recognition, He bases its independence on the realities into the doubt and regards it as a need for the revelation and religion. From his perspective, the ability of intellect in the recognition process is limited, so these limitations have to be identified and achievement to a complete knowledge should not be expected.

In addition to the proof of the prophets’ existence, intellect in the realm of religious knowledge admits its inability to understand religious issues and to achieve the religious reality. The intellect is a person who guides the confused people. The intellectual people are responsible for only up to a level, to accept the inabilitys at a further degree is the question of individual.

Anti-intellectuality of Kierkegaard: Kierkegaard also doubts about the enlightenment of the intellect in a more severe way. He pays attention to the idea that one who has no faith and intends to obtain it through theoretical researches will be definitely unsuccessful. By this way, theoretical and rational researches will be useless.

From Kierkegaard’s view, regarding the intellect from the religious view is totally wrong. He believes that the more reasons and arguments are presented, the weaker faith of human being will be. It requires reasoning exactly when it declines to the lowest level and then reasoning and rationality become a need.

He also tries to describe Christianity as the enemy due to the efforts on defending through arguments and reasons. He also considers it as an indicator of human negligence and weakness to recognize the reality. According to him all the efforts given to reason for intellect are originated from lack of faith; and the person who is faithful does not need reasoning.

1- Common Reasons:

2-1- postponement argument:

Delayed argument is for personal use which seek empirical evidence for religious obligation but such a commitment is not actually the result, because he constantly have to wait until new evidence is obtained, so according to Kierkegaard that the individual would never seemed to gain a religious obligation.

Postponement argument was proposed by Kierkegaard against extroversive researches of religion, but it can be seen in Ghazali’s views. In other words Kierkegaard emphasizes that extroversive researches are endless and
it is possible for a new approach to question the structural faith. Thus, while making philosophical researches, one must inevitably be objective in his religious obligation. He concludes that from this point, one who takes this endless way cannot expect to come to a solution with religious certain dogmas or faith.

“Even if I stated, I will never be able to finish it. I have always been obliged to postpone continuously, for the fear of a hazardous event to destroy my reasoning profile.” [1].

We can clearly see in this statement of the book named “Al-manqaz min Al-zalal” of Ghazali, when he speaks about the reality of prophecy and miracles, he considers them beyond reasoning and emphasizes that:

“When your faith for miracle is based on a reason, then another reason may arise doubt in you and weaken your faith.” [3].

As Ghazali tries to raise doubts about intellectuals in the book named “Al-manqaz min Al-zalal”, he believes that it is possible to reach a verdict which refutes intellectual approaches as well, thus the intellect are not an appropriate criteria for judgment alone.

2-2- Reference to the early times of religion:

Another argument on the lack of the intellect in religious knowledge is that, when religious leaders encouraged people to the religion, they never underline faith to the philosophical and theoretical reasons.

When Ghazali handles the science, he regards it useful only for a part of the society. He approves the statement of an evidence from early times of Islam, when the Prophet invited people to Islam, he only asked them to believe in. He never differentiated between the epigonic faith and the reason-based faith. (Ghazali 1409). In “Ihya Al-olum”, he defines intellectual knowledge as:

“The veil of divine knowledge is the evidence of science itself which has remained same since Prophet passed away and the divine knowledge includes the whole universe”.

Kierkegaard also stresses the same thing in this story:

“Essence of religion is neither explained by approbation methods and nor by the use of logic and philosophy. The first and most clear reason for it is that Christ was not a philosopher, a theologian or a romantic thinker. Disciples of Christ were not regarded as philosophers or scientists. Who accepts the rituals of metaphysics and philosophy in order to become Christian or to understand Christianity have to be aware of that this way may also cause misunderstanding.” [26].

2-3- Limitation of intellectual perception:

Ghazali believes that the scope of intellectual perception is limited and it is not easy to achieve all the realms. He describes the intellect as a competent in mathematics, logic, and science, but it is not the same for supernatural issues and cannot be completely relied on. So, Ghazali only denies the capacity of intellect to obtain certain knowledge and states that cannot be trusted.

According to William Horden who mentioned the ideas of Kierkegaard on rationality, we can see that Kierkegaard agrees with the capacity of intellect, but he also advocates the insufficiency of intellect to answer religion and belief. He regards the purpose of Kierkegaard’s faith as his interpretation of God, he believes that intellect reaches to a stage of recognition process where its capability is limited. In addition Kierkegaard’s mutation is not in contrast with intellect, but it is a meta-intellectual mutation which wisdom cannot perceive.

If we evaluate Kierkegaard’s belief about intellectual faith, we understand that it is what Ghazali believes. So the idea of both scholars on the ability of intellectual perception is identical.

It seems that the Kierkegaard’s major view on the role of intellect in religion and religious knowledge is the first view. On the other hand this view of Kierkegaard is not at the same level with Ghazali. Because Ghazali states several tradeoffs between intellect and religion that none of which are observed in Kierkegaard’s thought.

It should be taken into account that despite of the common reasons mentioned before, each of philosophers have proposed different reasons on this subject which cannot be studied in this article.

Different opinions in both:

A: Difference in the world view:

Certainly, everyone has a different view of life, which affects the formation of his ideology. In other words, any practical judgment originates from theoretical judgments, the emergence of practical judgment and the constitute of theoretical judgment affects the individuals’ view of life.

Considering the enlightenment of intellect in the realm of religion, one of the differences between Ghazali’s and Kierkegaard’s views can be seen in their aspects. It can be concluded that this difference arises from religious teachings. By practising, people try to apply the religious orders from the Quran and Gospels in their lives.

B: Difference of belief in understanding or not understanding the reality of religion:

Another difference in their views about religion and religious knowledge is that: Ghazali believes in the achievement of the reality of religion through mysticism, while Kierkegaard regards the reality of religion as devoid of knowledge and considers it so superior that human cannot find out its reality, so he disagrees with the idea of identifying the reality of religion.
Ghazali believes that it is possible to achieve the reality of religion and its secrets, but discovering the reality by using intellectual tools would be wrong. He believes that prophecy is the only transcendental status of mankind perception which reveals hidden affairs and clarifies the complexities without any education. The practitioners of mysticism gained the ability to achieve these sciences by their competency of a pure heart. Passing through several stages, they reach to a level in which they can see the angels' and prophets' souls and hear about them. Then they go beyond this level and reach to a higher degree that cannot be described by the words but only felt. From his view, a Sufi is the person who is able to reach the position of prophecy by special efforts.

Kierkegaard not only disagrees with this belief, but also he claims that understanding the reality of religion is basically impossible. So, he states that Christianity is not a doctrine which can be recognized and theorized, but also it is a mission that can be neither understood nor perceived. When he describes Ibrahim, all he wants to purport is that Ibrahim cannot be understood totally. Ibrahim himself should be represented for mankind. Because of the stress and anxiety of the paradox caused him not to purport. From this perspective, faith is a paradox in itself and its leaders are never understood, so this paradox creates an obstacle that cannot be found and resolved. The only evidence of the intellect is that it is an impossible paradox, which is hard to discover.

C: The Philosophy and the philosophers for the two scholars:

3-1. limited sight of philosophers:

Ghazali has criticized philosophers by their arguments and accused them of not being sophisticated. He believes that what philosophers cannot prove by their limited sight is regarded as impossible.

“They interpret the world by their intellectual perceptions, and call impossible to everything that they cannot understand.” [4].

Kierkegaard also considers the philosophers' belief as limited and restricted:

“A theoretical philosopher always thinks about the form and structure. He defends this up to a point. He tries to be active. He takes step for research and observes. From Christians' perspective, it is difficult to understand that how a person can reach to the unlimited [12].

He also states the philosophers as those who carry out their extroversive researches and have no concern of religion or faith. (Kierkegaard, Ibid.)

The difference between these two scholars is that, when Ghazali becomes free from contestation with philosophers, he begins to appreciate religious intellect and considers it as an enlightenment while Kierkegaard's criticism on intellectual achievements are not limited to Hegel and other philosophers. He always intends to express that both intellectual argument and philosophers have no competence to prove or explain metaphysical categories. Wisdom requires subsequent justification in the proving process that would not be ended and eventually leads to the success. So wisdom is not enlightening from his perspective and actually is not a component to take this mission.

3.2. Conflict with the present philosophical system:

Whether we can call Ghazali and Kierkegaard as philosopher or not is a matter of dispute. But in their era both of them were not indifferent to the prevalent philosophical system and started to struggle. Ghazali regarded Peripatetic school as misleading and heretical; it can be said that he was inspired of another philosophy which was not based on reasoning and theory, but also based on discovery and heart intuition. Kierkegaard also disagreed Hegel's philosophy and called it non-moral, which established the origin of a new philosophy called existentialism.

In this section, we are trying to review each person's perspective against the philosophical system of their era, by comparing and criticizing their points.

A: The critique of Hegel's and Kierkegaard's intellectual system:

It is not reasonable if we say that Kierkegaard's philosophy is an intellectual reaction and reflection against Hegel's intellectual philosophy. Scientific philosophy, history, Hegel's dialectical principle, Hegel's concept of soul and his generalization are the main contents of his philosophy which were not considered by Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard formed enthusiastic thought against the Hegel's idea of scientific philosophy and stated that enthusiasm is incompatible with rationality. He called the theory "purposeful history" of Hegel as something that has been evaluated in this theory. It seems to accept that life should be organized by looking back to the past and planning for the future through learning from the experience but in Hegel's philosophy and historiography what is disregarded is looking to the future. Kierkegaard has shown off three spheres of life to the Hegel's dialectic, and masterly transformed intellectual dialectic into the religious dialectic and also considered "thesis", "antithesis" and "synthesis" in religion. In such a way that reflects the antithesis of aesthetics, and considers by the moral level results in the awareness of sin, so it is an antithesis of moral level. Being aware of the sin accompanied with its desperate form would pave the way for the transition to the third stage, which was the
anchor of faith. In fact, human who reaches to the faith level complete his entity by existence, and it is exactly the antithesis of religious level. Kierkegaard also shows that the dialectic is not only the sum of contradistinctions but also it is the choice of answer. [14].

B: The criticism of Ghazali and Peripatetic philosophy system:

Ghazali is a mystic thinker, who severely criticized the teachings of Peripatetic philosophy. Peripatetic philosophy began slowly among Muslims and fertilized by the efforts of Farabi and reached perfection by IbnSina’s efforts. Ghazali’s criticism were effective with respect to his time in Islamic society, and this effectiveness was such great that it eliminated the philosophical sprite from Sunis and thus philosophy declined in the 12th century in the Middle East.

However, as mentioned above, Ghazali’s criticisms over the Peripatetic philosophy shouldn’t be generally considered as his opposition to the intellect. His praises of the intellect in various books reflect the fact that he doesn’t completely deny and he supports it. He makes a distinction between intellect and its philosophy and also believes that negation of the philosophy does not mean the absolute negation of intellect. But it can be obtained from Ghazali’s statements that he considers philosophical teachings to be paradoxical and considers the conflict between religious facts and Peripatetic philosophy beliefs. By his polemical and analytical methods, he claims that the philosophical ideas are basically void. He accuses them of blasphemy in three cases and of innovation in 17 cases. Then he argues on bringing something new to Islam which are not consistent with constitutive Islamic thought.

It can be concluded from the conflict of Ghazali and Kierkegaard that:

a) What is noticeable about their rebellion against philosophers is this rebellion does not originate from iller. When Kierkegaard was studying at university, he met with familiar with intellectual philosophy of Hegel and was even affected by it. But as he realizes that they are not answering social needs although some arrangements made by mind, he disagreed and started to struggle.

When Ghazali was in Neishabour, he learnt about philosophy from his masterJoveyni and was not satisfied with it; so he attempted to learn about philosophy when he was a teacher in Baghdad. According to him, he reached to the extreme point of philosophers’ knowledge in 2 years. Then he thought for 1 year about the subject and made investigations on the problem. Then he wrote the book named “Maghased al-phalasefe” which was considered as a unique source of Peripatetic philosophy; if he had not written the book called “Tehafat al-phalasefe”, now he would not be considered as one of the thinkers in Peripatetic philosophy like Avicenna and Farabi.

So that they had no attempt to rebel and protest, but they denied strongly due to the internal contents of philosophical systems.

b) This rebellion against prevalent philosophical systems was a comprehensive rebellion and included all philosophical beliefs and systems. Such comprehensive dispute was stated both from Ghazali and Kierkegaard.

It should be regarded that Kierkegaard and Hegel’s philosophy completely shaped Lutheran religion of which Kierkegaard was a member and Hegel’s philosophy was considered as the symbol of all philosophies of his era. So Kierkegaard considered his dispute against Hegel as an argument against all the philosophies of this era.

This dispute is also the same for Ghazali. When he encountered with merey intellectual philosophy of Peripatetic, he thought in a negative way and refused to accept any of its teachings. He declared the preceding principle toward philosophers as “my position towards philosophical view is denial”. He strongly denied the philosophy and stated that there is nothing possible in philosophy unless it is logically essential and its denial is logically impossible.

Criticism of Ghazali and Kierkegaard’s views:

The knowledge of intellect, religion (revelation), and mysticism are various subjects which have been given by God to human beings in order to achieve the reality. Each of them have their own certain, specific role and application. Beyond knowledge one can only do the tasks and each are performed appropriately in a suitable place or function. There are not any obstacles for each other, but they can also help and complete each other. Therefore, at first each of them must be used in their own place and secondly, no extravagance should be given place in their use. Because extravagant intellectualism may lead to the denial of faith and religion also extravagant religiosity without considering the intellect will cause several problems and disorders in the society. Therefore:

1- As intellectual knowledge believes in the creation of universe by God according to its doctrine, it supports the existence of a plan for human life. So, the intellect should also understand that religion is a need to reach the prosperity. The third role of intellect in religion is, the understanding of religious thoughts’ content.
2- Regardless of the fact that intellectual knowledge is considered as a complete knowledge, the certainty of intellectual reasoning cannot be denied. As sciences like mathematics are among the positivist sciences there is no doubt on their certainty and proof. The only criteria for their validity can be logical reasoning.

3- Although postponement reasoning has been used against intellectual reasoning, it is regarded as an intellectual reasoning by itself too; because identification between fideism and intellectualism requires intellectual reasoning as well. Thus, a kind of intellectualism can be seen in the base of fideism.

4- The belief on the intellectual reasons about the existence of God do not lead to a certainty and it is not comprehensive, because it can be interpreted that intellectual reasons for the existence of God may be certain for some people and they can reach it through this way. So intellectual reasoning is compatible with religion and intellectual reasoning do not discourage the person’s excitement and interest.

5- The point of intellectual reasoning reduces religious passion does not seem correct, because there are numerous people in the history that believe both in intellect and faith with religious passion at the same time.

Discussion and Conclusion:

It can be concluded from the discussion that, from the perspective of both scholars, being faithful and religious is not necessarily based on intellect and it does not play a significant role to recognize religion. But the difference between their perspectives is that Ghazali considers meta-intellectual religion while Kierkegaard considers anti-intellectual religion.

With respect to the intellectual views of Ghazali, first we must distinguish between the philosophical intellect and the religious intellect, and then we shouldn’t regard his criticisms to Peripatetic philosophy as opposition to the intellect. He believes that philosophical teachings include paradoxical points in itself, also philosophical beliefs of Peripatetic are contradicted with religious realities; therefore philosophical intellect may not be enlightening. Several praises for the intellect in his different works refer to religious intellect. In this way, he believes that intellect plays many significant roles and transforms many unknown to the known, but it is not able to restrict the religion and become a measure for it. According to him, intellect goes through certain steps and tries to answer various, detailed questions to guide human like helping a blind person. It should obey and follow the religious teachings up to a point. From his perspective, only mystics and Sufis are able to discover the reality and reach the ultimate knowledge by purification of heart. From Ghazali’s view, a Sufi can even reach to the position of prophecy by special efforts.

But from Kierkegaard’s point of view, it is wrong to describe intellect with the realm of religious subjects. He believes that the more religion is ingrained with reasons, the more faith in human will be weakened. The faith requires reasoning when it declines.

Another conclusion is that Ghazali believes the achievement in reality of religion. Also he believes that this reality can be achieved through mysticism and Sufism. While Kierkegaard not only disagrees with this belief, but also he states that achievement in the reality of religion is basically impossible. Thus he supports that Christianity is not a doctrine which can be recognized and theorized, but it is a mission that can be neither understood nor perceived. In the other words, faith in his views is a paradox which has never been understood. So people should not follow every way and do anything to achieve it. The only way to accept it, is not to concern about any method.

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