Chapter IV

Islamic Metaphysics
Metaphysics

Not all things in existence are perceptible to our senses. There are things in this world we cannot see, hear, touch or smell, yet they have long proven to be among the realities we recognise. The more we learn the more we become aware of the existence of creatures, elements and media which may seem new to us although they have long been there. As an instance, two centuries ago people would not have believed that germs or viruses, electromagnetic waves of the ionosphere existed. Of course, the scope of knowledge has expanded tremendously in the last few decades, but this expansion has been limited to the physical world.

Information about the metaphysical world cannot be acquired through our senses by physical experimentation. Its sources are divine revelation either relayed by Prophets or through the inspired flashes of other – worldly perceptions experienced by saints and mystics. Those who follow other channels in search of knowledge about the metaphysical, end up with nothing but mere conjecture.

The supernatural world is much more extensive than our limited one. For instance, in the physical sense man is defined by his body and the phenomena operating within it. Whereas in the metaphysical sense man is not only a mere body, but he possesses a soul, a spirit as well as a heart. This metaphysical heart is not the organ which pumps the blood
through the lungs and the rest of the body, it is the centre of passion, love, hate, affection, longing, anger, happiness and sadness.

**Angels**

The words referring to "Malak" in Hebrew, Greek and Persian languages mean the messenger, one who carries God's message to Prophets. Sir Syed writes that people have different opinions regarding the existence of Angels. He says that it is the reference to such creations which he is not aware of, that unnecessarily, the thought of its physical appearance strikes his feelings. Consequent upon this he starts thinking of their features and characteristics and develops an imaginative structure specific to those characteristics. He then forgets the reality that he does not know the creation and has never seen it. He begins realizing that it is the same creation that he thinks of and when the concept and belief passes to different generations, gets concretised to the extent that it gets established as a matter of fact. The same has cropped up regarding the Angels.¹

Regarding angels some deject their being physical or inconsistent which has given rise to two schools of thought in human beings. One believes in the existence of Angels and their inconsistency whereas the other sect denies their inconsistency. Others believe Angels to be heavenly bodies having the shape of a beautiful human being neither male nor female.²
Sir Syed propagates the opinion of Jews regarding Angels. Who thought Angels to be like man and real bodies. But they consider them to be made of different stuff than human beings. They believe that angels have sacred bodies free from unwanted matter. They on their own appear before human beings, talk to them eat with them, and disappear and cannot be seen. Christians are of the same opinion that angels have bodies and are sacred. Bible has described Christ to be superior to angels.³

Arabs, the idol worshipers, thought angels to have physical existence and inconsistent. They believed that angels neither ate nor had any humanly need and that they stayed in the sky and visited the earth. They thought that human beings could see angels moving on the earth. Sir Syed accepted that Muslims have the same beliefs as that of Arabs.⁴

The discussion regarding the angels is worthy of attention. There is a clear reference in the Qur'ān about the angels. Therefore, every Muslim who believes in the Qur'ān should have faith in the existence of angels. More to it there should necessarily be a complete faith about their creation. There is a common sense among Muslims and the Ulama that they posses all the physical features of humans and animals in addition, they have wings to fly in the sky and land on earth. They convey the message of Allah to the Prophet and also deal with the
worldly matters. They are also having the quality of, if needed sometimes (whenever they want), the form of human beings.\textsuperscript{5}

Sir Syed writes;

“There is no denying the fact that such creation who is having the physical features like humans and is not visible to us and without having any proof we cannot deny their existence as a creation. But on the other hand we cannot claim for such creation. More to it whatever the act they do we can not accept that. It is because of the fact that we are not having any authentic proof about these details. However there is no indication in the Qur\'ān regarding such type of the creations of these angels neither is there any indication about their physical structure nor about their acts whatever it may be”.\textsuperscript{6}

In so far as Sir Syed’s view regarding angels is concerned, he says that as we see a continuous process of angels, in the same way there is no rejection of the existence of angels. He says that we don’t have any evidence to deny the existence of a creation superior to us. Perhaps it may be strange and unacceptable. But as far as our knowledge and understanding is concerned there is no reference to the existence of any such creation in the Holy Qur\’ān. In the Qur\’ān Allah says,

They say: “why is not an angel sent down to him?” If we did send down an angel; the matter would be settled at once, and no respite would be granted them. If we had made it an Angel, we should have sent him as a man, and we should certainly
have caused them confusion in a matter which they have already covered with confusion. [Qur‘ān: VI, 8-9]

These verses describe that angels neither have any body, nor are they seen. They are not at all having the shape of the existing creations.⁷

Now there are questions like what angels are about and what do they stand for? He admits that there are angels but as to what kind of existence should be attributed to them, he differs from the generally accepted view. He ridicules the idea that they should be conceived as having bodies like us with wings and yet invisible. He asserts that there is no support for such a view in the Qur‘ān.⁸ To clarify his position, he elaborates a general principle in understanding the Holy Book. In order to state something, a speaker sometimes uses words which have no direct bearing on the matter under discussion. He calls such words as speech of secondary import. A man says, “It will happen when the sun will rise from the west”. The rising of the sun from the west is of secondary import; for the speaker intends to convey that such and such a thing will never happen and not that the sun will ever rise from the west. The Qur‘ān, though a word of God, is in the language of the common people and meant for them and therefore we find in it several instances of similar words of secondary import. It often refers to several things and events which the Arabs of those days accepted to be true and on the basis of these it goes to the matters which it wanted to teach.
Unless we distinguish between the matters of first and second import, the main theme and the ancilliary thing, we cannot grasp the real sense of the Qur'an.

Sir Syed, therefore, tries to show that for a true understanding of the Qur'an we must distinguish between such matters which are of secondary importance and which the Qur'an uses only because it is revealed in the language of the people and is to be understood by them, and the matters of primary importance which the Qur'an wanted to convey by such words. The word “Angel” according to Sir Syed belongs to this category of secondary importance. It was a common belief among ancients which they inherited from primitive times when man first began to think and reflect upon the mysteries of life.

Sir Syed quotes the different uses to which the word “angel” is put in different books of the Bible and other ancient literature. Wind, epidemic, messenger, prophet, seer, apostles of Christ are all called by the word angel. In ancient Hebrew literature, “spirit” was regarded as antonym of “matter” but later on it came to be employed for a sort of subtler body. Generally, it was believed that the angels had bodies but, being purer and subtler, they are not visible to us. The ancient Arabs were not familiar with this concept of angel and therefore the word “Michael” and “Gabriel”, the proper names of the two angels, are not
Arabic but Hebrew and they mean “who is like God?” and “man of God”, respectively.\[^{11}\]

Sir Syed contrasts the Jewish and Christian concept of pre-Islamic Arabs who “used to apply the term *malāi’kah* to those powers by which the affairs of this world are accomplished, on the lines of the law of nature” and “to those qualities of the perfect nature of God, Nourisher of all, which comes to the fore, in different degrees, in each one of His created being”.\[^{12}\] *Gabriel* and *Michael* are only a specification (*takhsīs*) of the generic term “angel”. Sir Syed maintains that a correct exegesis of. [Qur’an: II, 97]

> Say: Whoever is an enemy
> To Gabriel- for he brings down
> The (revelation) to thy heart
> By God’s will, a conformation
> Of what went before,
> And guidance and glad tidings
> For those who believe,

For instance, shows that the Jewish name *Gabriel* here stands for the *habitus* (inherent possession) of prophethood (*malakah - i - nubūwat*) in the prophet himself and thus stands for the cause of revelation.\[^{13}\]

According to Sir Syed, the word “angel” is never used in the *Qur’an* for matters of primary importance; rather it is used for the forces
of nature by which this universe is maintained in its course. Thus in the
Qur'an God describes the functions of angels as

"Then arrange to do
The commands of their Lord" [Qur'an: LXXIX, 5]

He concludes that wherever we come across the word "angel", it
must be taken to signify the limitless power of God and the potentialities
which God has bestowed on the things. Thus, hardness of the stone,
fluidity of water, power of growth in vegetation, the power of attraction
and repulsion in electricity, in short all powers that we see manifested in
the world are called by the word angel in the Qur'an.15

Spirit [Rūh]

The Muslim 'Ulama' have generally avoided the discussion about
the spirit [Arabic Rūh]. Only a few of them have bothered to discuss it in
length. Sir Syed is one of them. There is no denying that spirit exists. Sir
Syed also believed firmly that spirit exists. But what is the spirit all
about? Whether it is a creature like any thing or it is some thing which
we cannot recognize. What is the reality of the spirit? These are some
questions that need discussion. Sir Syed seems to have considered
these questions. He seems to have come to the conclusion that Rūh
exists but it is beyond the human comprehension and understanding. He
first writes that man has been bestowed upon only such faculties by
which he can comprehend and recognize material and physical things.
Although he can also take note of such things which are not material but he cannot know the "reality" of things. Man does not know the reality of anything. He cannot even know the reality of those things which is in front of him and which he uses daily like water.¹⁶

Now those things which are not material and physical, like spirit, cannot be comprehended fully. "So we can say something about the spirit only through wild guesses".¹⁷ He says that although Qur'ān speaks about Rūḥ, it does not mention any detail. He points out towards the Qur'ānic verse "spirit is among my things and tries to explain that God has not elaborated for the reasons known to Him only. Not only spirit, the Qur'ān even refuses to elaborate upon and tell the reality of all those things which are not possible for the "human nature" to perceive.¹⁸

Then Sir Syed goes on to prove the existence of spirit through rational arguments. He says "that if men and animals were simply the combination of material things without Rūḥ, their movements, and actions would have been unidirectional. In other words, if man or animal were without spirit, they would not have acted according to his volition, will and reason. On the contrary, man and animal both act and behave in different ways in reaction to similar circumstances. Thus the existence of will, volition and reason goes to prove the existence of Rūḥ. Our eyes receive the image of a thing. This is a natural and physical process. But when our eyes recognize that thing; this is the work of Rūḥ. Here Sir
Syed has almost equated *Rūh* with volition, will and reason [*Irādah, Ikhtiyār, Ta‘aqqul*].

Sir Syed did not go into the controversy whether spirit is material or immaterial. For him spirit is a "Jawhar" and it does exist. Human nature does not require to know about the reality and nature of this *Jawhar.* Therefore we should not go into the details.

Interestingly Sir Syed believed that man and animal both possess the same kind of spirit. He writes that because of the constitution of elements a particular kind of *Rūh* is called "*Nisma*". This is related to the real *Rūh* which has been called as *ma nahnu fīhi* in the *Qur’ān*. Similar kind of *Rūh* is also created among the animals. We can see that the animals also possess intelligence [*Ta‘aqqul*] and will power. Therefore we have no reason to deny *Rūh* in the animals. We have also no reason to believe the animal's *Rūh* is different from man's *Rūh*.21

Furthermore, Sir Syed has described *Rūh* as a subtle body (*jism - i - latif*) which has got its own independent existence. It is also imperishable. This concept of Sir Syed is based on his belief in the scientific fact that nothing, even material and physical thing, is destroyable. Things only change their shape and form. They do not completely destroy. For example, water dries because of the heat but it is not finished. It only changes its form: Oxygen separates from Hydrogen. Not a single particle of water gets finished. Thus, once we
accept the existence of \( R\ddot{a}h \) we have to accept the eternal nature of \( R\ddot{a}h \) as well.\(^{22}\)

In the continuation of this discussion Sir Syed goes on to say that when man is raised on the day of judgement he will be raised with his body as well as \( R\ddot{a}h \). Although he finds many Muslim scholars and 'Ulamā' having similar views regarding this but Sir Syed differs from the latter on one point. Whereas, the latter believed that man will be raised with a new body, Sir Syed believed that man will be raised with the same body. Because like \( R\ddot{a}h \) body is also not perished. The \( R\ddot{a}h \) will be able to acquire the same body on the Day of Judgement. The life in the heavens will be a continuation of this worldly life.\(^{23}\)

**Paradise and Hell**

Sir Syed's views regarding paradise and hell are unconventional and defy age-old concepts regarding them. Whereas conventional concepts entail their existence rather physical existence as they have been described in the Qur'ān and traditions, according to him they are mere symbolical words.\(^{24}\) Consider, for example, Sir Syed's comments on the following verse:

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But if ye cannot
And of surety ye cannot
Then fear the Fire
Whose fuel is Men and Stones,
Which is prepared for those." [Qur'ān: II, 24]
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Sir Syed says that from the word *u’iddit* (i.e. prepared) it is generally inferred that both paradise and hell have already been prepared by God, i.e. they are in existence. According to him, the past tense used in this context does not imply that they actually exist and were created at some date prior to the creation of man. The Qur’an often uses this tense when mentioning future events which are inevitable. The verse in question in the Qur’an says, “Fear and fire are prepared for the infidels, whose fuel is men and stone.” Now, he argues, men can be called “fuel” only when they will be thrown into the fire and not before, and this will happen, according to common belief, after resurrection and judgment. Sir Syed rejects the theory that paradise and hell are in existence, for such a point of view is not supported by the Qur’an. Moreover, according to him the exact nature of paradise and hell have not been explained by God or the Prophet. About Paradise the Qur’an says,

\[ \text{Now no person knows} \\
\text{What delights of the eye} \\
\text{Are kept hidden (in reserve)} \\
\text{For them-as a reward} \\
\text{For their (good) deeds.} \]

He then proceeds to argue by a tradition related by Abu Hurayra which says that the paradise prepared for the pious is such as “Has never been seen by the eyes, nor heard by the ears, nor even guessed
by the hearts of any man." Thus such words as garden (\textit{Jannat}), streams (\textit{anhar}), "houses made of gold, silver and pearl bricks", rivulets of milk, damsels, etc mentioned in the \textit{Qur'an} should not be construed in human terms. A garden in paradise should not be concerned in terms of the garden in this world with grass, flowers etc. These words should not be taken literally.

God has described paradise in these terms because man can understand things only in those terms. Man can understand the nature of things which he experiences through his senses; even the things he can conceive in his imagination must be based in the last resort on what he had already seen. According to Sir Syed it is impossible to express the reality of super sensuous things in language even though that language be of God, and hence he concludes that the words used in the \textit{Qur'an} to describe the rewards in paradise and punishment in hell are all allegorical and metaphorical. What is then paradise and hell? According to him they only "refer to psychological states of happiness which man will experience in the life after death". To substantiate his point of view, Sir Syed quotes a tradition from the \textit{Tirmizi}.

A man asked the holy Prophet whether there would be horses in paradise. He replied, "You will have a red turquoise horse and you will be free to ride anywhere you like". Another person asked, "Will there be a camel also"? He replied, "yes, and everything else which you will desire to have".
This tradition, he adds, does not mean that there will be horses and camels; what the Prophet wanted to point out was that it would be a place of perfect happiness, however differently a man may interpret happiness to be.\textsuperscript{33}

**NOTES & REFERENCE**


25. This word is used in four different places in the Qur'an (II: 24, III: 131, 133, LVII: 21).


30. Ibid, p. 31; Loc. cit.


32. فقال يا رسول الله هل في الجنة من خيل قال إن الله خلق الجنة فلا تشاء ان تحمل فيها على فرس من ياقتون حمراء تطير يرك في الجنة حيث شئت ففعل وقال يا رسول الله هل في الجنة من