BOOK REVIEWS


Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh (325-421/936-1030) is celebrated for his magnum opus, Tajrib al-Umam, and his ethical treatises Tahdhib al-Akhlaq and al-Fawz al-Asghar. His works bear testimony to the fact that Greek ethics had become popular among the then Muslim intelligentsia. This was the time when some scholars were busy disseminating the results of their intellectual pursuits under the title of Rasai'î Ikhwan al-Safa', among the people throughout the Muslim world. While other branches of philosophy were extensively studied by his contemporary Muslim thinkers, Miskawayh turned his attention to the psychological and moral concepts which he analysed particularly in his magnum opus. It is perhaps not far from true to say that the Tahdhib al-Akhlaq of his elder Christian contemporary, Yahya b. 'Adi (d. 975 A. D.) urged him to compile his own Tahdhib al-Akhlaq and al-Fawz al-Asghar which exerted great influence on the subsequent writers of Iran and the Arab world.

The students of modern universities would surely welcome The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawayh of Dr. M. Abdul Haq Ansari published by the Aligarh Muslim University in its Faculty of Arts Publication series. Dr. Ansari wrote this excellent monograph on the Ethical Philosophy of Miskawayh for his Ph.D. degree (in Philosophy) of the Aligarh Muslim University.

“Miskawayh” instead of “Ibn Miskawayh” would, however, astonish the students of Arabic language and Philosophy although it is commonly urged. Perhaps for the sake of convenience and to distinguish him from his contemporary, Abü ‘Ali Sinā (the Shaykh al-Ra’is Abü ‘Ali Ibn Sinā) he was called Abü ‘Ali Miskawayh’ (Cf. His K. al-Hawiimil wa'l-Sawiimil).

In 1946, perhaps for the first time, a small dissertation in English was published by Kh. Abdul Hamid, which presented the ethical philosophy of Ibn Miskawayh. This book was mainly based on al-Fawz al-Asghar. But the subcontinent of Pakistan and India has been acquainted with his moral philosophy through the Urdu translation of this work. There is some truth, therefore, in saying that, “unfortunately, no critical and thoroughly analytical work existed on Miskawayh’s ethics, particularly for the English-knowing circles” (cf. Foreword), or in saying that “This book [viz., Dr. Ansari’s] is the first serious effort in English to present his ethical philosophy.”

Dr. Ansari’s book contains nine chapters. In the first chapter he deals with the times, life and works of Miskawayh. He briefly describes the period of the author and the achievements of the famous Buwayhids. He has divided this chapter into two sections. In the first section he surveys very briefly the political and economic conditions and social and moral life, religion and philosophy, and literary and scientific progress of the time of Miskawayh. In the second section he has discussed the biography and the works of
the philosopher. While mentioning al-Fawz al-Aṣghar the author does not seem to be justified in his categorical statement: "His al-Fawz al-Aṣghar is not a book on metaphysics. It is rather an attempt to give in a plain and precise language philosophical interpretation of the three fundamentals of Islam, viz., God, life after death and prophethood. It is a book on theology, with a detailed discussion of the soul, serving also as the basis of his conception of happiness and virtue." One may pose a question as to what are the problems of Metaphysics if they are not those of God, soul and prophecy? In fact, Miskawayh explains moral philosophy after analyzing the metaphysical thought of Islam. This book is devoted to the study of the three major problems of the philosophy of Religion, viz., God, soul and prophethood—problems which build and nourish moral life.

In the second chapter, the author gives a survey of Islamic Ethics before Miskawayh. Discussing the ethical ideals of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah he throws light on the ethical views of the theologians, the ethics of the philosophers and the ethical ideals of the Sūfis. Rules of conduct have been given significance only next to 'Imān in Islam. The Qur'ān has declared the manners and habits of the Prophet as "great and exemplary character", as is understood from the verse: 'Innaka la 'alā khuluqin, 'ażim. The moral codes of Islam are proof positive that Islamic Ethics was never confined to the problem of good and evil. Islam declares Kalimat al-Tawhid as its summum bonum which necessitates for its followers to pursue high ideals of achieving eternal happiness and bliss by rendering service to the Creatures of Allāh. The earliest followers of Islam practised according to the high ideals set up by the Prophet so faithfully that the Prophet declared, "My companions are like various stars, whosoever you follow, you will certainly be led on the right path."

The third chapter is devoted to the "Metaphysical Foundations of Miskawayh's Ethics." Having been cosmologically noted, Miskawayh's ethical ideas "are simple deductions from his views regarding God, the universe and the human soul."

The author is quite right in saying, "In ethics the major source drawn upon by Miskawayh is Aristotle. He is particularly fond of the latter's doctrine of the man, his idea of happiness, his view of morality as a social enterprise, and his conception of justice," Miskawayh, like other Muslim philosophers, begins the discussion with the concept of the Necessary Being—God, Intellect or Spirit, emanation and revelation—concepts equivalents of which have been prominently emphasized in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth but which lead the readers to believe that the Muslim philosophers were entirely under the influence of neo-Platonic ideas, which is not correct as it is normally stated. Dr. Ansari has also recognized the fact that Miskawayh did not follow Prophyry (p. 62) or Plotinus (pp. 55, 7). The moment Miskawayh declares that "the universe is the Creation of God" and that "the creation is ex nihilo", it becomes quite evident that Miskawayh is Muslim in belief and in his thought. He uses Greek terminology and Aristotelian expressions just to make himself intelligible to the scions of his time when Muslims and non-Muslims devoted themselves to the study of Greek thinkers. In his exposition he is found closely following the method of al-Fārābī, the "Second teacher" (al-Mu'allim al-Thānī), and was therefore designated by his
contemporary savants as al-Mu'allim al-Thālith (the Third Teacher), especially because he emphasized so much the reforms of character and conduct, and disseminated his moral doctrines.

In chapter fourth, Dr. Ansari deals with the central problem of Ethics, al-sa'ādah (happiness)—a term which is surely not Greek although the concept of eudaimonia (bliss) may have influenced its development. It is a Qur'ānic word which has general as well as particular meanings and although it is generally considered to be an equivalent of "goodness" or "happiness" these terms usually do not convey the full significance of "al-sa'ādah". The writer has successfully analysed Miskawayh's doctrine of al-sa'ādah which is the highest end of his ethics and to which he devoted a separate work entitled "al-sa'ādah", as Miskawayh was not satisfied with his chapters on the theme in his earlier books, al-Fawz al-Asghar and Tahdhīb al-Abhīqā. He explains the gradation of sa'ādah and states that the wiser and the nearer to Allāh alone attains the higher grades of the sa'ādah.

The fifth chapter deals with "Virtue" which, according to Miskawayh (following Aristotle), "consists in keeping to a position between deficiency and excess, between securing the maximum satisfaction of a desire and its total suppression."

The sixth chapter is devoted to cardinal virtues which are deduced from the three faculties of the soul—the rational soul, the spirited soul and the appetitive soul. Miskawayh "begins with wisdom, then takes up courage and temperance and finally discusses justice." While analyzing Miskawayh's conception of virtue and discussing cardinal virtues, Dr. Ansari has pointed out how far Miskawayh has followed the Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines and where he has deviated from them. Dr. Ansari has explained that Miskawayh says that Reason is the vicegerent of God in man, and the Shari'ah is His commandments. It is further understood that according to him "there is no essential conflict between Reason and the Shari'ah as both are from God." As for particular reasons, "there is no guarantee that conflict will not occur between the Shari'ah and the pronouncements of particular reasons."

"Practical Ethics" and "Society and the State" form the titles of the seventh and eighth chapters respectively. These chapters indicate that Miskawayh has followed the teachings of Islam more than the Greek thought. The ninth or the last chapter gives the conclusion of the whole study. On the whole, Dr. Ansari proves his contention that "In all his works Miskawayh tries to abide by Islamic beliefs and ideals." Whereas, it is undeniable that a thinker is influenced by the prevalent contemporary thoughts and thus Miskawayh must have been influenced by some non-Muslim thinkers of the period, but we can hardly trace the interpretations of "the neo-Platonic commentators and writers" referred to by Dr. Ansari.

The writer would have been benefited by the Risālah fi Māhiyat al-'Adl li Miskawayh edited and published recently by Dr. M. S. Khan from Leiden had it come out earlier.

Works like The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawayh should be recommended for the serious students of Muslim Philosophy. Unfortunately, our Universities these days have liberally recommended some worthless books which abound in
mistakes and hardly display any originality or serious scholarship.


This book is a reprint of the third edition of Muir's Caliphate, published in 1898. The Editor has omitted the last chapter entitled "Review", but the reason that he has offered for the omission is hardly tenable. He says that the "Review" contains the personal views of the author, therefore, after quoting, what the Editor deems to be necessary excerpts from it, he has eliminated it from the text. But the entire book is pervaded with the personal opinions of the author hence, according to the Editor's principle it should not have been published at all.

Sir William Muir (d. 1905) was a brilliant member of the Civil Service in British India. He rose to such eminence that ultimately he became governor of the North-Western Provinces (later U.P.). But his fame rests more on his scholarly achievements than on his administrative ability. The main field of his interest was Islamic History. He has written a number of books, among which the most important are the Life of Mahomet and The Caliphate: Its Rise, Decline and Fall. The Caliphate is written as a sequel to the Life, therefore it carries the same spirit and purpose. Hence a few words about the Life are necessary to understand the present work.

The Life of Mahomet by Muir was first published in four volumes in 1861. In later editions the work was abridged into a single volume by omitting substantial parts of the text and almost all the footnotes and references. This is the most comprehensive account of the life of the Prophet by any Western scholar. All later attempts on the subject are definitely inspired by and largely based on it. It is a very systematic misrepresentation of the facts of the Prophet's life and his personality and contains most scurrilous, irresponsible and insulting remarks about him. Muir wrote in an age when European imperialism had conquered almost the whole world, and European scholars and governors were unscrupulously busy destroying non-European and non-Christian cultures and religions everywhere. Muir, although a civil administrator, was in the forefront of these crusaders. His book, Life of Mahomet, consequently provoked a strong reaction among the Indian Muslims. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was one of the scholars of the day who took up the challenge and wrote his famous Khubbat-i-Āhmadiyyah, a spirited and reasoned reply to Muir. Sir Syed was so keen about