



Razi's Age or the Rebirth of the Golden Period of Iranian Civilization

Jafar R*¹ and Farideh M²

¹Department of Anatomy and Pathology, Lorestan University of Medical Sciences, Iran

²Department of Social Medicine, Lorestan University of Medical Sciences, Iran

***Corresponding author:** Jafar Rezaian, Department of Anatomy and Pathology, Research Office for the History of Medicine, School of Medicine, Lorestan University of Medical Sciences, Khorramabad, Iran, Email: jafarrezaian@gmail.com

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Abstract

After a period of stagnation, the Islamic culture experienced a new efflorescence, which can be mainly attributed to the activities of ethnic and religious minorities. This article explores this period of re-efflorescence and the role of minorities and their unconventional views and contributions.

Keywords: Iranian Civilization; Iranian Renaissance; Religious Relativism

Introduction

The late George Sarton, in his book called History of Science, named the second half of the ninth century as the Age of Razi (Rhazes, 854 – 925 AD) [1]. This age is considered as the first Iranian renaissance, which in its most extensive period dates back to the middle of the third century A.H. and extends to the ninth and tenth centuries A.H. This period is the zenith of culture and civilization, the evidence being the appearance of a group of great men who helped with the cultivation and dissemination of the ancient culture of Iran, taking advantage of their enthusiasm, the available means, and their social status [2]. But it must be mentioned that the pinnacle of the Iranian cultural efflorescence, which is also known as the golden age of the Islamic civilization, in fact, quite contrary to what is imagined, coincides with the extreme weakness of the Islamic government. It seems as if the weakened intervention and involvement of the government in cultural and societal affairs provide opportunities for cultural and scientific growth and development [3].

From a theoretical perspective, the growth and progress and the subsequent retrogression of the Islamic civilization, many

of the elements of which were not Moslem, in periods which were parallel to the medieval age in Europe, as the Moroccan Ibn Khaldun mentions in his Muqaddimah (Introduction), can be attributed to widespread prosperity in civil societies and its decline and downfall are due to the destructive invasion of primitive populations, as also happened in the case of the Roman empire. Settlement and migration are two important elements in the progress of science and knowledge. Based on this, cultural domain was considered an important element in the Islamic government. In the territories controlled by the Islamic government, various ethnicities resided, including Iranians, Andalusians, and Africans, all contributing to the cultural and scientific developments of the period in equal measure to Arabs, if not more [4,5].

The Universal View

In Islamic studies, knowledge was divided into two branches: rational knowledge and traditional knowledge. Rational knowledge, which included medicine, mathematics, and astronomy, was more commonly studied by the upper classes of the society, such as former Vaspuhars (nobles) and Dehghans (landowners). All representatives of rational

knowledge in Iran, like Farabi (Alpharabius, c. 872 – c. 950 AD), Razi, Biruni (973 – 1048 AD), Ibn Sina (Avicenna, c. 980 – 1037 AD), and Abu Miskawayh (932 – 1030 AD), flourished in Iranian Vaspuhari (noble) governments such as Afrighids, Ma'munids, Khwarazmians, Samanids, and Ziyarids. In other words, rational knowledge and sciences were court-supported sciences, and their growth and advancement was associated with the growth, prosperity, political power, and authority of governments. On the other hand, traditional knowledge was associated with the two sublayers of urban and rural middle classes. In the urban layer, the middle class of traders and, in the rural layer, landowners such as Ferdowsi Tusi and Nizam al-Mulk Tusi can be seen. Those involved in hadith (the prophet Mohammad's traditions), sermons, and the pulpit, and mosque and bazaar knowledge also belong to this class [6].

The period of the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate led to the resurrection of Iranian elements, especially Daylamites, Khurramites, the Kurds, Saffarids, and Samanids. Daylamites, with the cooperation and help of Khurramites and other Zoroastrian groups and new converts to Islam, were able to free some parts of the Sasanid Iranian territories from the domination of the Arabs and openly tried to revive and re-establish the ancient Iranian empire. The golden Iranian civilization began with the advent of the Buyids in the west and the Saffarids in the east after the domination of the descendants of Iranian families. In one sentence, Razi's age is the age of revival and renaissance of Iranian ancient culture. However, the confrontation of Iranian rulers and the downfall of the Saffarids at the hand of the Samanids, who considered themselves the descendants of Bahram Chobin (Bahram VI), can be regarded as negatively affecting Iranian efforts to throw off the yoke of the Arabs [7]. The reign of Nasr II of the Samanid dynasty was the pinnacle and a brilliant period for the Samanids. However, he allowed Isma'ili missionaries to freely proselyte for their creed and showed great sympathy towards them and this finally led to his overthrow. The infiltration of the Samanid government by the Isma'ilies, such as the Jeyhani and Bal'ami families, and Isma'ili-oriented philosophers, such as Abu Zeid Bal'ami, Abolhasan 'Ameri, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), was widespread. The Iranian approach of the Sunni Samanids was not without its effects on the support they offered these scientists, historians, and poets.

The effect of these activities was that the social stratification, which was based on lineage, was disrupted and that knowledge, intelligence, and talent became the determinants of social class and position. The social advancement and acceptance of scholars and the efflorescence of trade, which went beyond the Islamic territory, stretched from Spain to India. This society was even more cosmopolitan than the Greek society. Maximum progress occurred during the

second half of the fourth century A.H. under the clear-sighted and tolerant rule of the Buyids in Iraq and western Iran. Individualism, cosmopolitanism, and religious tolerance are three prominent features of this period. Cultural cosmopolitanism and pluralism in this period created an atmosphere in which scepticism naturally flourished and was accepted by intellectuals, and scholars began to believe in religious relativism.

Since religion was a nominal and arbitrary framework for different issues and behaviours, it lacked authoritative influence and power; however, it did not wane and did not lose its power. Religion was compulsory and philosophy was independent of religion and theology. Religious ideas and traditions were coded truths that were useful for the masses of the people; however, intellectuals tried to go beyond tradition. Of course, no confrontation of attrition occurred among faith, belief, and reason. Teachings regarding the adequacy of thought and the vast number of beliefs and ideas circulating in that era led to the spread of a sort of scepticism in the big cities, including Baghdad, Rey, and Nishapur. In Baghdad, sessions were held by Manicheans who pretended to be extremist Shi'is. Theology arose out of a polemical and rational defence of Islam and a tedious war was ongoing among its greatest proponents. Casuistry and sophistry, advocacy of the masters of various doctrines and schools of thought, frustration with beliefs and faiths, heresy, and corruption were common. The spread of scepticism, aversion to religion, and secularism were inevitable. Groups, such as various Shi'i sects or Alawites, intended to replace a politico-spiritual life for the life of the common man [8,9].

Mu'tazilites had many followers, and theologians were either Mu'tazilite or Ash'arite. The majority of Shi'i Mu'tazilites were Zaidis. Twelver Shi'ites, like Ibn Babawayh (c. 923 – 991 AD), were opposed to theology, but this does not mean that they did not cooperate with these sects. However, the Isma'ili order, as an underground movement, greatly influenced intellectuals, especially the viziers (government ministers), court-supported authors, and even lower echelons. Of course, divisions and schisms very soon appeared among the intellectual sources of this sect. They started their proselytizing activities in north-eastern parts of Iran. Some missionaries were sent to Rey, Iran, the first of whom was called Khalaf. Then, this responsibility fell to Abu Hatam Razi. Ahmad ibn Ali Amir converted the inhabitants of Rey to Isma'ilism. With the Invasion of Rey by the Samanids, Abu Hatam escaped to Deylaman. The dialog between Zakaria Razi and Abu Hatam apparently took place in Rey in the presence of Mardavij, which is also mentioned in a book titled The Proclamation of Prophethood (Al-alam Al-nabuwah). Mardavij was first sympathetic to Isma'ilis. However, in the last years of his life, he became hostile to them and persecuted them. Abu Hatam escaped to Azerbaijan. The motto of the unity of religion and

state, which was parallel to the reconciliation of religion with philosophy, was unacceptable to Mardavij, because he did not have the intention of following sharia. On the other hand, daily and increasing heresies regarding the appearance of the hidden Imam (Mahdi), indifference to religion, and various turbulences were sources of crises [10].

Among the non-Muslim minorities or the Dhimmis were Christians who played an important role in cultural and scientific permanency and, in fact, the translation of philosophical and scientific works from Greek and Syriac was exclusively done by them. They played an outstanding role in the continuation of the Alexandrian tradition. They also played a leading part in philosophical studies. Most of them were naturalists, physicians, and materialists. On the other hand, Muslim philosophers were under the domination of the Islamic government or sharia and had to intermingle religion with philosophy, thereby creating Islamic philosophy. Christian scholars protected ancient formularies, traversed long distances to find them, and brought the heritage of the classical culture into the Islamic world. They were not restrained by Islam, and were at a distance from Christian power centres, and therefore, were relatively free to address the fundamentals of philosophical beliefs independently [11]. Mata Yunes Dirghanati, a Nestorian philosopher living in Baghdad, was the teacher of Farabi and Yahya ibn Adi (893 – 974 AD). The doctrines of Yahya ibn Adi formed the dominant school in religious studies and research in the fourth century A.H., which testifies to the important cultural contribution of Eastern Christian scholars [12]. Yahya ibn Adi was also the pupil of Mohammad Zakaria Razi. Yahya ibn Adi organized a circle of scholars studying various religions in Baghdad and it can be said that these scholars were the pioneers of a renaissance in the Islamic countries. The Dhimmis were exempt from religious and criminal persecution and therefore were able to disseminate their philosophical thoughts, even if these ideas were heretical [13].

The spread of sceptical thought pioneered a cultural renaissance in the Islamic world. Richard Nelson Frye mentions that Razi's ideas expressed in his book called *On the Tricks of False Prophets* received a lot of attention from Western rationalists who were influenced by his ideas [14]. Zakaria Razi expressed his own philosophical viewpoints in the guise of Greek-Harrani philosophy. The Dhimmis hid their heresies behind traditions, hadiths, and philosophy, too. The Sabian minority had a profound influence on the advancement of science. Abu Nasr Farabi was a pupil of Abu Abdollah Batani, who was from a Sabian family, in Harran (in present day Turkey). Razi was a rationalist and defended the autonomy and independence of reason, which reminds us of the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century Europe. Razi is also a representative of scientific progress.

Many scientists and scholars considered the foundations of Islam a tradition contributing to the welfare of human beings. However, the anti-traditionalism of Shi'i orders was fundamentally different from that of Razi and Ravandi. In fact, these orders tried not to appear radical and tried not to worry the Sunni majority by adhering to dogmatism and conservatism. Thus, they managed to preserve a foreign heritage disguised by Islam. But, Razi and his sympathizers repeated the same irreligious elements, which dates back to the earliest periods in history when the magi were worshiped [15].

One of the effects of the establishment of independent governments in Iran was the transfer of centres of knowledge from Baghdad to cities such as Rey, Nishapur, and Isfahan. After the trampling of Iranian pride by the Arabs, these governments attempted to make a return to the past and emphasized nationalism. If the Buyid emirs did not encourage the growth and spread of knowledge and literature, it was not possible for the Islamic renaissance to occur during the Buyid rule. For example, in praise of the atmosphere created during the rule of 'Adud al-Dawla (936 – 983 CE), Abu Sulayman Sijistani (c. 932 – 1000 CE) writes at the end of his treatise called *Fi al-Kamale al-Khas benow' al-Insan* (On the Special Perfection of the Humankind): "This king deserves that all people, especially, people of knowledge and culture, praise him and pray for the continuation of his rule, because he has encouraged people of knowledge, has dignified their words, and has freed their tongues for each of them to express the beliefs of their order without reservation (without taqiya), so that it becomes known what their claims are, it becomes clear what they believe, and right and wrong are distinguished from each other, and such security has been created that no one attacks anyone else with the language of religious bigotry" [16]. One of the reasons for this tolerance was the influence of Shi'i sects and their approach, which opened a window to other ideas. For instance, the acceptance of the Neoplatonist philosophy can be mentioned, the influence of which is observable in Shi'i orders [17].

The cultural efflorescence of the Buyid period did not last, because it did not have deep roots and seriously depended on the continuation of the rule of the Buyids. The assaults of Oghuz and Ghaznavid Turks and Seljuq Turkmens were the coup de grace of this efflorescence. The rule of the Turks did not bring about anything but the slaughter of scholars, their displacement and dispersion, the burning of the books, and the persecution and murder of Qarmatians, Mu'tazalites, Dhimmis, and dissidents. For instance, Sahib ibn Abbad (938 – 995 AD) the well-known vizier of the Buyid dynasty established a library which contained 10000 tomes and which was burned down by the order of the Ghaznavid sultan. The library of Majd al-Dawla (997 – 1029 AD) faced the same fate,

because it was said that these books were written by zindiqs (free-thinkers) and rafidas (rejectionists). They came, killed, burned, and displayed their devotion. The efflorescence died away and the domination of the Ash'arites started, who struggled against philosophy and reason [18,19].

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