

Nineteenth letter from Dr. J. F. to Mrs. A. Schwarz, Stuttgart.

Philosophic conversations of the Master with a French consular official.

Apart from Dr. F., Persian and Arab Bahá'ís are also present.

Place: Reception room of the Master.

Time: January 1910.

Language: Exclusively Arabic.

Main topic: Darwinistic trains of thought in Islamic philosophy and in the Bahá'í Teachings.

The Frenchman: "Excellency, modern scholars, like Prof. Browne, Ethe, Goldziher, Houtsma etc assert that the Bahá'í Teachings have borrowed many concepts from Darwin's theories of development and descent, and in this seem occidental rather than oriental. Is that so?"

The Master: "The Blessed Beauty Bahá'u'lláh has set down in His Writings the oriental natural philosophy that we share with the Persian Sufis.

This natural philosophy, which is also recognized by the Arab philosophers (Arab philosophers of the Muslim Faith, such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn-i-Sina and al-Ghazali, to name but the most important), has some similarity with the Darwinian theory of development and descent: In the Occident, so I was taught, Darwin's theory is considered to be a materialistic, atheistic one! Orthodox (traditional) Christianity raises against Darwinism the accusation that the theory of descent shows the concept of an almighty personal Creator to be superfluous.

This is just what happened in Persia. Under the enlightened Sassanid monarch Yazdigird II, who ruled from 438/9 — 157 [sic], the teachings of Zarwanism (pronounced like Zwanism) gained ascendancy over all other religious systems. In this religion the supreme principle was considered to be infinite time (Persian zarwan = time, in Arabic dahr = time). A Zarwanist thus is synonymous with a Dahrite. Arabic philosophy is always Muslim and therefore rejects the Dahrite system, which does not know a personal Creator of the world. The Dahrite philosophers showed no need to derive all existence from a spiritual Being Who related Himself personally to His creatures and manifested Himself as a creative, continuously acting Power.

This category of time was based on astrology and tied in with the endless movement of the heavens. The stars of the heavenly sphere represented the primal elements or the primal powers. The sun, the timeless sun, was as it were supreme, the Primal Power, and to be compared to an impersonal, eternal, incomprehensible Godhead remote from mankind. The adherent of this philosophy, called Zarwanists, also called themselves avowers of Unity, in contrast to the dualistic Zoroastrians, who postulated a good and an evil principle as the Godhead. The Zarwanists thus were the Monists who preached the lack of attributes of an impersonal Primal Power or Godhead. The Sassanid monarch,

Yazdigird II himself, is reported to have said: 'About the eternal Godhead only negative things can be said.

It is the essence of eternal time, exalted above space, movement, light and power.' The visible world, existent nature, must indeed represent a creative act of this Godhead, and thus this earthly creation is limited in time. The creative power of the eternal, i.e. the timeless, which is inherent in nature, creates continuously and dynamically, so that progressively and potentially all earthly creatures have developed from one primal cell. Here we already find the germ of Darwin's theory of development and descent. This concept of Creator and world was palatable only to the philosophically-minded. The great mass of the people, however, did not want for their pious religious needs any highly intellectual theories or logical conclusions, they wanted not philosophic enlightenment, but a religion. The Zarwanists were followed by the Qadarites, then the Mu'tazilites. All three of these categories of freethinkers all too easily disregarded religious traditions, the Word of God in the Holy Books (Avista, Qur'an etc.). Reason was considered of greater value than the Revealed Book! For example, orthodox (rightly believing) Muslims taught that the Qur'an had been revealed to the Prophet at a certain time, but that it, the Qur'an, as the Word of God, had originated in eternity, that it was one of the eternal attributes of God.

The freethinkers, however, the Mu'tazilites, said that it was unseemly to believe in an eternal Qur'an next to Allah, that this was idolatry and contrary to the concept of the absolute unity, absolute eternity, absolute indivisibility of God! Although the Mu'tazilite Caliphs had it proclaimed as a State dogma that the Qur'an had been created, the large mass of the people would not accept this. Even the public punishment of a denier of this State dogma was not only no deterrent, but it served to inflame, for: 'Martyrs make disciples'.

The natural and rational religion of the freethinkers was at that time considered to be purer and higher than the recognition of the revealed teachings in the Qur'an, which were represented as acquired, secondary, learnt knowledge. The best known Mu'tazilites (freethinkers) are Abu'l-Hudhayl al-'Allaf (died 950), then an-Nazzam, a contemporary of the former, and Jahiz, the pupil of the latter. An-Nazzam was a total Darwinist. Just let us hear what he said: 'Creation is a one-time act through which the Eternal, the Timeless, has created everything all at once, so that one thing is contained within the other, and in the course of centuries and millenia the divers kinds of minerals, plants and animals as well as human beings, will slowly be made visible from their latent condition.' But an-Nazzam goes even further. He asserts:

Fire, i.e. warmth, is, for example, latent in wood, but it becomes liberated when its antagonist, cold, disappears more and more through mechanical friction. A movement, a conversion into power then takes place, but there is no qualitative change'. The sensual qualities like colours, tastes and smells are — according to an-Nazzam — bodies.

The Master: "My German friend", turning to me — "are these not the modern thoughts of your German physicist, what is his name? Ober-Eier?" — "Robert Mayer", I correct, and gladly confirm to the Master that such concepts would be quite typical coming from a modern physicist.

"An-Nazzam was also the first Arab religious philosopher who demonstrated that Muhammad, the Prophet, had a mission for the whole of mankind (such as Christ had). God sends His Prophets from time to time to the whole of mankind. His pupil, Jahiz, (died 869), as aesthete and natural philosopher, demanded: 'A true scholar has to combine the study of theology with that of natural science! 'Man's only merit' — so says Jahiz — 'consists in willing and striving for good and perfection!'

From the Baghdad school of freethinkers (around the year 900) came some other materialistic scholars of natural philosophy, such as Mu'ammār, Abu-Hashim of Basrah (died 933) and others. They — in addition to many others — taught: 'Doubt in all things divine and human is praiseworthy and commendable, for doubt will awaken the thirst for knowledge, the instinct to know, the hunger for faith!'

But, as already said, the freethinkers and Darwinists — despite support from the State — did not find acceptance among the people, the great mass.

Our Lord Muhammad, with wise knowledge of human nature, had in His Holy Book, the Qur'an, given the believers a Religion, not just a philosophy, He had laid down laws in the Qur'an, not just dogmas. 'Faith should be obedience, not understanding.' However, understanding cannot harm perfect obedience in matters of belief! The great Prophet, our Lord Muhammad, Himself said: 'The first thing God created is knowledge, or rather: the mind's capacity for understanding!' But obedience in matters of Faith should come first, otherwise knowledge and understanding will become the fatal apple of the forbidden tree of paradise! - We Bahá'ís can agree with this: 'First obedience in matters of Faith, then understanding, and from understanding will spring forth spontaneously tolerance, peaceableness and brotherliness and, from this, world unity.

It has become late, perhaps we can return to this topic again some other time.

Allah-u-Abha!"

Those present are dismissed — the Master holds back only the French consular official who will have the privilege of dining with the Master today. - Two days later I meet the Frenchman at the sea-shore. He tells me that the Master had agreed to again speak about oriental Darwinism some time soon — at one of the future audiences, but only in an intimate circle. First of all the Master wanted to speak about al-Ash'ari (73-935) [sic], the Arab religious philosopher who was able to bridge the gap between materialistic philosophies, the Mu'tazilites, and the orthodox Teachings, the "obedience in matters of Faith". Time permitting, the Master would also instruct us on the sect of the faithful brothers of Basrah and the Qarmani party of 'Abdu'lla ibn-Maimun, who are represented as the Darwinists of the tenth century. - We doubt, however, that

we will be able to enjoy hearing the Master discourse uninterruptedly on *one* topic? But in spite of this we looked forward to this prospect, because living knowledge, presented in a masterly way, has immensely more value than school-learning from books! Insha'allah — so we hoped — this pleasure would not elude us.

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