

The scientific-intellectual aims of Akhavan-Al-Safa¹ (Brethren of Purity)

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Abstract

Aims and objectives are the pivotal tenets of any educational system and without them the educational methods and principles would not get anywhere. The purpose of the current study is the investigation and determination of the scientific and intellectual aims of Akhavan-Al-Safa. The research method used in this paper is descriptive and analytical. To find an answer to this aim, the relevant papers, treatise, and books were studied. The results show that they considered for themselves an educational duty and a role much like that of the prophets; they had set their intellectual and scientific aims within the center of their activities for removing the superstitions and ambiguities from the religion and for correcting the community. Aims such as the finding and reviving of the talents, seeking knowledge, eclecticism and best selection, enlightenment and awareness and also free-thinking have been but some of the mediating aims of the afore-mentioned area in achieving the ultimate end and integrity. One of the practical outcomes left behind by them can be seen within the 51 papers covering all the knowledge of the time. Their comprehensiveness has been influenced by their intellectual origins and sources in the areas of theology and philosophy and the scientific and cultural conditions of that era.

Keywords: Akhavan-Al-Safa, scientific objectives, intellectual objectives

1. Introduction

Anything that can be known in the universe as a system has an original pivot without which the system is meaningless, whether it is the system of creation or one created by man. This pivot is the aim. "The aim, the outcome of an action, the favorite, voluntary, and compulsory is the affair that is conscious and is providing directions and stimulations." Phillip Smith has mentioned the features of directing, harmonizing, and resuscitating and evaluating as regards the importance and the criteria of the aims. The origin of the aims in purpose and end and in action is the spiritual and physical needs of mankind and of the resources the philosophy, science and religion have been selected. The main position of the intellectual and scientific aims is the area of epistemology. As human brain commands the other members of the body, cognition in general and the intellectual and scientific aims in particular have a direct impact on one's attitudes and behaviors and direct their activities. With this introduction, in ranking the aims, the cultural and scientific aims can be placed in the heart of the other aims. The importance here lies within the fact that the circle of influence of these aims is not restricted to this and may encompass other individual and collective dimensions. One of the school thoughts that have had educational, intellectual, and social system is the Akhavan-Al-Safa. The importance in their task has been the prioritization of the intellectual and scientific aims in gaining the ultimate end of completion and social and individual amendment through them. The outcome of this has been summarized in 51 papers and treatise. Their influence has not been limited to this alone, rather, their pioneering methods in the advancement of human knowledge in general and in the cultural and scientific blooming of the Islamic nations in the fourth century in particular. What is of basic importance is the introduction and determination of the thoughts of this school that had considered for themselves very indisputably a mission and that were following social amendment. The other point that calls for scientific research in this area is that they have been studied less than the other Muslim thinkers. This group not only has had a major role in the advancement of the Islamic culture and civilization but also has been successful in transferring knowledge to Europe. In practice, however, what has made the author do research in this area has been the disorganization in the present society in selecting inappropriate and inaccurate and unclear aims and the lack of information about the thinkers whose aims are obscure. As mentioned earlier, this group has had some methods and principles to put the ultimate and unique aims into practice. Given the content comprehensiveness and the method that they had adopted and also the sense of pioneering in their task, many of the present challenges of the educational system can be removed.

¹ . The Brethren of Purity (Arabic: اخوان الصفا ikhwān al-safā; also The Brethren of Sincerity) were a secret society of Muslim philosophers in Basra, Iraq, in the 8th century CE. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brethren_of_Purity

In this study, which is in line with the research purpose based on the determination of the intellectual and scientific aims of Akhavan-Al-Safa, the following questions will be examined:

- 1-What cases are included in the scientific and intellectual aims?
- 2-What position do these aims have compared with the other aims and goals?
- 3-What ultimate end is targeted by the intellectual and scientific aims?
- 4-What outcomes did the intellectual and scientific aims have?
- 5-How are the intellectual and scientific aims related?

2. the political, social, and historical conditions in which the Akhavan-Al-Safa emerged

The fourth century coincides with the tenth century BC in which the Muslim nations were ruled by the Abbassi dynasty. Their rulers were at this time very weak and were not powerful as before. At this time, bribery and corruption were prevalent and women and slaves were dominant (Saghafi, 1997, p. 145).

Other than the prevalent corruption in that time period, the oppression by the Arab conquerors imposed on the non-Arab nations are worth considering. One of these oppressions is seen in the form of taxes taken by the Omavi and Abbassi caliphates from the commoners. This added to public dissatisfaction. At this time, concurrently the rule of Al-Buyeh in Iran, the belief and theological debates and the conspiracies of the ambitious politicians who were claiming religion made the condition worse (Erfai et al., 1998: 163). In this era, conflicts among the religious sects had reached a maximum so that on one side of the continuum the role of recitations and on the other extreme reasoning was deemed significant. Some had thought that the Akhavan were Mo'tazeleh for their rationalism. Another factor which can be mentioned in this way is the conspiracies adopted by the ambitious politicians which indicate the instrumental use of religion and hypocrisy at that time. Iraq did not have a prosperous economic condition as well. Hunger and poverty were common and some died of starvation (Halabi, 1971: 5).

One of the reasons that Akhavan thought of the Abbass rulers as incompetent was the same mismanagement that caused a gap and economic disorder. This corruption along with disease and poverty were followed by moral and belief downgrade in that historical period. An incident occurred in the 4th century and that was the popularity of the Greek philosophy among the Muslims. In such a historical, cultural and socio-political atmosphere, the Akhavan-Al-Safa emerged. This group started its activities by producing 51 treatises and the majority of its members were Persians (farshad, 1987: 117). Apart from the fact that Islam itself has provided enough grounds and advice and incentive for collecting knowledge for its followers, another major issue that contributed to the progress of the Islamic culture and civilization, especially by the Akhavan, was the translation movement. This led to the extension of the intellectual peripheries among the Muslim thinkers and they created eclecticism and became the origin of influence on the West. Under the dire circumstances, this population was determined to establish social, political, and religious reform and contrary to some reformers they were anxious about the both worlds. According to TahaHossein, they were seeking intellectual diversification so as to establish political diversity and for this reason their first task was intellectual and scientific activity and this itself made preparations for the political and religious reforms based on their Utopian model.

Perfection

In their thoughts, perfection is a stage referred to as the ultimate end. Based on the hierarchy of this population, man is able to arrive at that stage. This aim which is in line with the truth-seeking nature of man is an actual affair and not an illusion. Through two ways one can take steps in this path. "The first step toward perfection is pondering over the sensible in order to receive clearer knowledge and use it in deductions with the impetus of accumulating the known facts; as one with this actual knowledge is more like angels and closer to God." (Nasr, SeyyedHossein, 1966: 450).

There is a direct relationship between the above-mentioned terms which is seen between the perfection and actual wisdom on one side and the closeness to God and the perfection. In another stage, "in the pursuit of perfection the rules of the divine law must be obeyed. One must be released from the bodily matters and tear apart the dress of nature to enlighten the transparent and bright essence of the self. In this stage, one must oppose to the lust which installed in one's nature" (ibid, 1966: 243). This second step is called self-cleansing in the language of the Akhavan-Al-Safa. Here, the human heart gets the necessary cleanliness to ascertain the truth and the evolving movement.

Before this, about the relationship with God and the link to the perfection some issues were discussed. Here, we deal with the features that liken human to God." The four main features in this way are: 1-Knowledge about the truth of the beings 2-belief in the accurate views 3-being of good morals 4-Clean deeds and virtuous works. Any one that has not these four traits is like an embryo which is not born perfect and is not enjoying the bounties of the world for physical weakness" (Safa, Zabihollah, 1966: 167).

The above features and the knowledge related to them belong to a perfect human being and all the treatises left by the Akhavan confirm this.

The discovery and revival of the talents

Earlier, the human capacities for passing the way of the perfection were mentioned. These capacities that are called gifts must be discovered and revived. "the aim of the Akhavan-Al-Safa in writing their papers is educating in its widest sense which means the fruition of the hidden gifts the growth and perfection of which is the condition for redemption and rescue and spiritual freedom." In other words, Akhavan-Al-Safa think the task of education in a way from turning the potential into reality dealing with human nature, therefore, education is an effort by the teacher to enrich the capacities of the learner.

One point which is noteworthy concerning the individual abilities in their view is the individual differences of the teachers. "Akhavan-Al-Safa do not deny personal differences of the people in learning various sciences and indicate that even those whose gifts are not compatible with knowledge can with more attempts (Rasael, vol. 603, 98, 1-792 cited by Rafi'ee). In their views, other than the personal differences, the sciences have also been categorized. Another element which is important in this way in reviving the gifts is the persistence which helps the people with fewer capabilities to use their powers.

What can be inferred by the practical methods and the writings of the Akhavan-Al-Safa is the criterion for the selection of the members of this group. This includes moral substance and technical (scientific) substance. Moral substance is given a priority here. To pass the four stages one must be successful in hard tests.

Seeking knowledge

Islam is one of the origins and resources for the Akhavan-Al-Safa intellectuality, the main goal of which is the removal of dust from the face of religion. This group followed the models of Islam based on age, temporal, spatial, and gender limitations in learning the ways of seeking knowledge. This middle purpose is in line with the bases of truth-seeking and the perfection as the ultimate goal. Akhavan-Al-Safa mention some outcomes and signs for knowledge based on the words of the prophet: "knowledge causes modesty, closeness, and the reason of the way and protection from the enemies and decoration for man leading to success, the brightness of the sight, the strength of the body, and the ladder of the men in the path of perfection and also a tool for obedience, worshipping, and distinguishing good from evil, empowerment, highness, closeness, perfection, generosity, shame, prestige and health" (Erfai et al., 77). Akhavan-Al-Safa was well aware of the needs of the man and community and thus categorized the industries of words and sciences according to their aims. While they thought of sciences as plural, they believed that they have one desire in accordance with the revelation of the mysteries and unity of the existence. There is a common desire which is the offshoot of all sciences and any branch of knowledge should provide it, that is to say, the movement of man towards the ultimate end of the creation and the moralities and preparations for the afterlife." (Nasr, SeyyedHossein: 1968: 258).

In the completion of these words, the Akhavan-Al-Safa believe that there are no and knowledge since any knowledge can be useful in educating the perfect man and their difference is in the degree of influence. Then, in the process of human perfection, all the branches of knowledge and even the secular ones have spiritual purposes. "This aim is not restricted to religious and divine knowledge but includes all knowledge. Sciences like geometry, astronomy and music also have spiritual aims. For instance, the aim in learning geometry is finding a way to understand the selves and the sensible in order to attain the rational matters from physicality to spirituality and from the lowest of being to the highest. Studying astronomy encourages the clean selves to ascend the heaven and the spiritual homes to visit and be with the close angels. The aim of music is the up-going of the thinking self of man towards the heavens after the death (Nasr, SeyyedHossein: 1967: 22).

In their view, in the hierarchy of the sciences, knowledge begins with knowing oneself and arrives at knowing the God. They are related and the best kind of knowledge is that of monotheism and theology. "The aim of all the philosophers in studying mathematics is finding a way to understand the natural sciences and aim of them would be reaching the divine knowledge as the ultimate purpose of the wise and the promotion to the truthful knowledge. The first stage here is self-knowledge and the identifying the origin of the self to know where it has been before becoming one with the body and after parting with it where it will go. The human duty is to know god and there is no way of doing it other than knowing oneself (Rafiee, 2010: 170). So, after the classification of the sciences, Akhavan-Al-Safa identified the highest and the superior knowledge as the knowledge of the divine (Rasael, vol. 3, p. 513, cited by Erfai, 137). Akhavan-Al-Safa thought good of the philosophy contrary to the common belief of that age in which philosophy was said to be misleading. They however thought so on condition that the religious rudiments were learned a priori.

They thought that learning philosophy was unfavorable for the young and adolescents and anyone who had not learned the religion and the Shariat verdicts as much as necessary. But for those who have done so would not be harmed by looking into philosophy. Contrariwise, their knowledge of theology would be enhanced in this way and their idea of the afterlife, the Day of Judgment and the punishment would become certitudes. They would be fond of the afterlife and also the closeness to God". (Youhana, Ghamir, 76).

Akhavan-Al-Safa thought highly of the practical aims of the education aside from the natural merit of education and just as they felt that generosity was obligatory, they had the same opinion on the spread of knowledge and advised the wise to do so.

“Man has four states in his knowledge such as his states in collecting wealth which are, 1-The state of acquiring the wealth 2-Storing wealth and being independent of others 3-Using the wealth for oneself 4-Using and consuming it for the others and the state of generosity which is the best of the conditions. Knowledge also has four stages: 1-the position of a learner 2-being independent of others in seeking knowledge 3-arriving at some insight and thinking about the acquired knowledge and using it for enlightening the others and making them aware.” (Esmail, Ali and Mohammad Javad, Reza, 1937, p. 79). Given the role of science in the perfection of man, its place and importance, and also the effects that it has in the goals of the worldly and spiritual life of man, the Akhavan-Al-Safa has collected the knowledge of their times apart from the educational and verbal activities in the form of the treatises so that they are considered the first collectors of encyclopedia in the area of the Islamic culture and civilization. This is one of the innovative activities in the fourth century. In addition, another point that adds to their importance is the collective and coordinative work in preparing the writings that was unprecedented at that time. Their classification of the tasks that they covered has been in the form below:

“First part on mathematics and logics consisting of 13 treatises, the second part on natural sciences consisting of 17 works, the third part on metaphysics in 10 works, and the fourth part dedicated to theological and comparative matters consisting of 11 treatises. Akhavan-Al-Safa wrote 50 treatises in 50 kinds of wisdom and one essay containing all the others in brief which is called the Akhavan-Al-Safa papers” (Haghighat, 1994: p. 208).

Eclecticism and best selection

With a glimpse of the writings, their aims, methods, and the structure and organization of the Akhavan-Al-Safa, it is known that training the human mind has been their foremost priority. They have been under the influence of Islam which places no limitation for learning the ideas and has always been asking the followers to make the best choice. Then, this group sought to learn the truth in all branches and intellectual schools such as the Greek, Egyptian, Persian, and the Pythagoras's thought, and above all the teachings of Islam, choosing elements from each and combining them. This has been adopted in order to remove the ambiguities from the face of religion through philosophy. Another activity is meditative interpretation originating from two sources: the Holy Quran and the implicit and explicit texts and also the Ancient Egyptian Hermes thoughts. Therefore, they can be called the founders of the Islamic hermeneutics. This was not only for the coverage of the contents but also for the area of behavior and method. They thus used rational, empirical, and interpretative methods along with sermons, allegories and stories, records, and philanthropy.

Enlightenment and awareness

In the thought of the Akhavan-Al-Safa, these elements had been linked to the removal of ambiguities from religion and political awareness. In the fourth century, despite the scientific and cultural blooming in the Islamic nations, just rulers were not controlling these nations and therefore there had been a desire for the rule of the just and worthy. The oppressions and cruelties of that century led some thinkers to consider the establishment of a government whose rulers are virtuous and learned men. In accordance with this enlightenment, the youth were in the center of attention for this intellectual change. “The Akhavan-Al-Safa had for the most part the youth in their minds in establishing their Utopia and improving the dire situation. The younger generation is the instrument for reforming the society, then, in addition to an emphasis on their education, the primary conditions for selection must be efficiency, respect and worthiness and obedience with regard to the masters (Saeed Sheikh: p. 38).

Having a secret organization, recruiting members, educating the young generations, selection, and the efficiency of the members all point to the political education and reformation of the society and firm steps towards the establishment of the worthy community with the command of the good and worthy. This political enlightenment was an inspiration to the movement of the Fadaian Esmailieh and the Fatemian rule in Egypt. As mentioned earlier, enlightenment has had two areas, the political one which was discussed, and the second area that has been more influential is scientific-intellectual. The domain of the scientific activities expresses this reality. They were trying to elevate the knowledge of the society especially the younger generation through the spread varied sciences. One subject that ought to be discussed here is the rationalism. For the emphasis that they put on reasoning some have called them the Mo'tazeleh. This school of thought believed that the only way of being free from the unjust rulers is the intellectual change and so they tried to cultivate men intellectually. This does not mean that they have been purely rational while they have had some of the Sufi traditions and the purity of the heart and mind has been of their goals. With these explanations, it seems that the Akhavan-Al-Safa has been the pioneer of the Islamic enlightenment.

Free-thinking (reconciliation and tolerance)

The fourth century which coincides the Middle Ages in Europe is the epoch of the translation of the works done by other nations and the progress of the Islamic nations. In this condition, the Muslim scientists transferred their knowledge to Europe through the Andalusia. One of the populations of this era is the Akhavan-Al-Safa that

created their own blend by combining various branches of knowledge which was comprehensive and superior at that time. What is thought of as the academic liberty today is best seen in the practice and mind of the Akhavan-Al-Safa. "Thus far, it is known that the Akhavan-Al-Safa used and adapted the thoughts of the other schools if they see them fit in explaining their philosophical beliefs under the influence of the political and social and meta-religious condition. This method by using different branches causes a diversity and heterogeneity in their belief-system." (Di Buer, 88, pp. 90-91). What has been important for them is the clarification of their opinions and then defending them. "Akhavan-Al-Safa believed that using the other beliefs is just in clarifying their own views." (Erafi et al., 1999, p. 165). They had no fear in translating the texts from other nations. In many cases, they made use of the Pahlavi sources, the Greek and also the other holy texts (Safa, 1953, pp. 307-310). They were looking for an axial commonality among the human societies in order to remove the dualities and differences and they wanted to achieve this without bigotry and any bias which is precisely the academic liberty or tolerance. This has been only possible to them through reasoning.

"This group whose concern was success in the public in philosophy and Shariat not only used the interpretation of the verses and recitations but also turned to some religious tolerance and widespread ideology. In their opinion, no knowledge and science should be opposed, no book should be put aside and at the same time no bigotry should be shown against any religion. The opinion and religion that they had chosen encompasses all the others as their viewpoint considers all the beings whether sensible or abstract, implicit and explicit, hidden and obvious, within the vision of the truth linking each of them to the one origin and the sole reason. This view supports the one universe and the unique self that is able to observe the essences and details superior to the environment." (Rasael, vol. 1, p. 10). What is obvious is that they can be labeled the pioneers of religious pluralism and free-thinking and perhaps the main cause of opposing them among the religious men has been the same thing. "In the view of the writers of the Rasael the Adam, the Noah, and Abraham and Moses have been the cause of guidance and illumination among the people. Ashur of the Zarathustra has also guided in the path through the truth and rescue. The Akhavan-Al-Safa was of the opinion that the god of the Israelites, the Persian prophet, and Plato the Greek philosopher address the same god that Ashur of Zarathustra calls it the Ahoura Mazda. The Zoroastrian Ahura-Mazda is the same origin that Plato addresses as the superior good."

The final sentence of this discussion is dedicated to the pluralistic and comprehensive speech of the Akhavan-Al-Safa concerning the perfect man. In their view, the perfect human being is the one whose race is Persian, his religion Arabic, his manners Babeli, his inner self Hebrew, Christian in the path he takes and his perseverance the Shami, his science of the Greeks, his vision of the Hindus, his path as the Sufis, and the one who is Maleki in manners and divine in view and wisdom. (Rasael, vol. 1, pp. 118-119).

3. Conclusion

The Akhavan-Al-Safa had members from the intellectual reformers in the fourth century whose main concern was religious, political and intellectual reform. They endeavored to remove the dust from the face of religion by blending philosophy and religion. They also wanted to establish the rule of the just as they saw the main cause of the public disorder in unjust rulers. Coming to this stage required a reshuffling of the intellectual and rational milieu of the public. Hence, with the establishment of their educational system they began to recruit and train the members of the society in the areas of morality, and social and political knowledge. This comprehensiveness has its roots in their intellectual resources including the Islamic teachings, the Greek wisdom, the Pythagoras's thoughts and the neo-platonic and the other Persian and Hindu branches of knowledge. They had in mind, in their goals and plans, the present and the next world and all the facets of human beings.

The first and foremost goal for the Akhavan-Al-Safa was the satisfaction of God. The stage of satisfaction and content is even higher than the closeness to god. The fourth and the last stage in their view is the certainty which is in another manner of speaking the perfection as the ultimate end. Finding and reviving the talents and gifts is the first step towards perfection which itself plays the role of a mediating goal. Turning the human potentials into realities has been the most profound pillar of their intellectual and scientific system. At this stage, they acted selectively and also considered the scientific ingredients of the followers in addition to their moral stance. Reviving these gifts through gathering knowledge was pursued as the second goal from the intellectual and scientific domain. Akhavan-Al-Safa completed the bulk of their works at this time given the relationship which exists between the seeking knowledge and perfection. What's more, they believed that they should also set a spiritual goal for the secular sciences.

Eclecticism and the selection of the best were other goals of the intellectual movement of the Akhavan-Al-Safa. This very tenet is also given credit by the Holy Quran. This would practically lead to the strengthening of the views and the selection of the best methods. Enlightenment and awareness is the third goal which goes so far as to include the political peripheries as well. Owing to the superstitions and the ignorance which were very prevalent at that time, the enlightenment was a top priority. Free-thinking was the last goal that was in accordance with their scientific and intellectual goals. This made it possible for them to move beyond the books and methods and religions to avoid any one-sided judgment in their scientific research. This method is today remembered as academic liberty.

Then, in general terms, the Akhavan-Al-Safa consisted of young men over fifteen years of age. This is somehow negligence of education for younger age. They were determined to put their aims into practice by adopting pluralistic and selective methods. Their importance in group work, free-thinking, scientific impartiality, realism, and comprehensiveness in aim and practice can be summed in science and morality.

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