88184 - Ruling on studying philosophy

the question

What is the ruling on studying philosophy? Please note that studying it is compulsory for us in Algeria.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

It should be understood what philosophy is and what its principles are, before stating what the ruling on studying it is, because passing a ruling on something is usually based on the way it is viewed.

Al-Ghazaali said in al-Ihya' (1/22): Philosophy is not one branch of knowledge, it is actually four:

1 – Geometry and mathematics: these are permissible as stated above, and there is no reason why they should not be studied unless there is the fear that one may overstep the mark and indulge in forbidden branches of knowledge, because most of those who study them overstep the mark and go on to innovations, thus the weak should be protected from them.

2 – Logic, which deals with the way in which evidence is to be used, the conditions of evidence being valid, the definition of what constitutes evidence and guidelines on the use of evidence. These come under the heading of 'ilm al-kalaam.

3 – Theology, which is discussion of the essence and attributes of Allaah, which also comes under the heading of 'ilm al-kalaam. The philosophers did not have any other kind of knowledge that was unique to them, rather they had some views and ideas which were unique to them, some of which constitute kufr and some bid'ah (innovation).

4 – Natural sciences, some of which go against sharee'ah, Islam and truth, so it is ignorance, not knowledge that may be mentioned alongside the other branches of knowledge. Some of it involves the discussion of the attributes of different elements and how one can be changed to another. This is similar to the way in which doctors examine the human body in particular, from the point of view of what makes it sick and what makes it healthy. They look at all the elements to see how they change and move. But medicine has an edge over the physical body in that it is needed, but there is no need for the study of nature. End quote.

In al-Mawsoo'ah al-Muyassarah fi'l-Adyaan wa'l-Madhaahib al-Mu'aasirah (2/1118-1121) it says:

Philosophy is a Greek word composed of two words. Philo originally meant selflessness, but Pythagoras turned it to mean love; and sophia which means wisdom. The word philosopher is derived from philosophy and means the lover of wisdom. But the meaning changed and came to mean wisdom.

Then the philosopher came to be called a wise man (hakeem). In the past the word philosophy referred to study of the basic principles, viewing knowledge as something based on rationality, the goal of which was the search for truth. For its supporters, philosophy is, as Dr. Tawfeeq al-Taweel described it: Rational examination, free from any restrictions and authority imposed on it from outside, and with the ability to go all the way on the basis of logic, propagating his view regardless of the difference between these (philosophical) views and what is customarily known, religious beliefs and the dictates of tradition, without being confronted or resisted or punished by any authority. In Aristotle's view, the philosopher is of a higher status than a prophet, because the prophet understands things by means of imagination whereas the philosopher understands things by means of reason and contemplation. In their view, imagination is of a lower status than contemplation. Al-Faraabi agreed with Aristotle in viewing the philosopher as being of higher status than a prophet.

In this sense philosophy is opposed to wisdom, which in Islamic terminology refers to the Sunnah as defined by the majority of muhadditheen and fuqaha', and in the sense of judgement, knowledge and proficiency, alongside moral guidelines which control the whims and desires of the

self and keep it from doing haraam things. The wise man is the one who has these characteristics, hence philosophy, as defined by the philosophers, is one of the most dangerous falsehoods and most vicious in fighting faith and religion on the basis of logic, which it is very easy to use to confuse people in the name of reason, interpretation and metaphor that distort the religious texts.

Imam al-Shaafa'i said: The people did not become ignorant and begin to differ until they abandoned Arabic terminology and adopted the terminology of Aristotle. Even though philosophy existed in the ancient civilizations of Egypt, India and Persia, it became most famous in Greece and became synonymous with that land, the reason being that the Greek philosophers were interested in transmitting it from the legacy of idolatrous peoples and the remnants of the divinely-revealed religions, benefiting from the scriptures of Ibraaheem and Moosa (peace be upon them) after the Greek victory over the Hebrews after the captivity in Babylon, and benefiting from the religion of Luqmaan the Wise. So there was a mixture of views that confirmed the divinity and Lordship of the Creator that was contaminated with idolatry. Therefore the Greek philosophy was in some ways a revival more than an innovation.

Ibn Abi'l-'Izz, the commentator on al-Tahhaawiyyah, summed up the schools of philosophical thought about the five basic principles of religion in their view, as follows:

That God does exist but He has no reality or essence, and He does not know the details of His creation, but He does know about its general terms, thus they denied that He creates the deeds of His slaves. They also did not believe in His Books, as in their view God does not speak or talk, and the Qur'aan is just something that shines from active reasons into purified human hearts. Exalted be Allaah far above what they ascribe to Him. There is no separate entity that ascends or descends, rather in their view it is all ideas in the mind that do not exist in reality. The philosophers are the one who most deny the Last Day and its events. In their view Paradise and Hell are no more than parables for the masses to understand, but they have no reality beyond people's minds.

The Greek philosophers still have an impact on all western philosophies and ideologies, ancient and modern. Indeed, most of the Islamic kalaami groups were influenced by them. The

terminology of Islamic philosophy did not emerge as a branch of knowledge that is taught in the curriculum of Islamic studies until it was introduced by Shaykh Mustafa ‘Abd al-Razzaaq – the Shaykh of al-Azhar – as a reaction to western attacks on Islam based on the idea that Islam has no philosophy. But the fact of the matter is that philosophy is an alien entity in the body of Islam. There is no philosophy in Islam and there are no philosophers among Muslims in this deviant sense. Rather in Islam there is certain knowledge and prominent scholars who examine matters. Among the most famous philosophers who were nominally Muslims were al-Kindi, al-Faraabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). End quote.

Secondly:

The majority of fuqaha’ have stated that it is haraam to study philosophy. Among their comments on that are the following:

1 – Ibn Nujaym (Hanafi) said in al-Ashbaah wa’l-Nazaa’im: Acquiring knowledge may be an individual obligation, which is as much as one needs for religious commitment to be sound; or it may be a communal obligation, which is in addition to the previous and is done for the benefit of others; or it may be recommended, which is studying fiqh and ‘ilm al-qalb (purification of the heart) in depth; or it may be haraam, which is learning philosophy, magic (sleight of hand), astrology, geomancy, natural science and witchcraft. End quote from al-Ashbaah wa’l-Nazaa’ir ma’a Sharhiha: Ghamaz ‘Ayoon al-Basaa’ir by al-Hamawi (4/125).

2 – al-Dardeer (Maaliki) said in al-Sharh al-Kabeer, discussing the kind of knowledge which is a communal obligation: Such as studying sharee’ah, which is not an individual obligation, and which includes fiqh, tafseer, hadeeth and ‘aqeedah, and things that help with that such as (Arabic) grammar and literature, tafseer, mathematics and usool al-fiqh – not philosophy, astrology or ‘ilm al-kalaam, according to the most sound opinion.

Al-Dasooqi said in his Haashiyah (2/174): His phrase “according to the most sound opinion” means that it is forbidden to read the books of al-Baaji, Ibn al-‘Arabi and ‘Iyaad, unlike the one who says that it is essential to learn it in order to understand ‘aqeedah and basic religious issues. But al-

Ghazaali said that the one who has knowledge of ‘ilm al-kalaam knows nothing of religious beliefs except the beliefs that the common people share, but they are distinguished by their ability to argue and debate.

3 – Zakariya al-Ansaari (Shaafa’i) said in Asna al-Mataalib (4/182): As for learning philosophy, magic (sleight of hand), astrology, geomancy, natural science and witchcraft, it is haraam. End quote.

4 – al-Bahooti (Hanbali) said in Kashshaaf al-Qinaa’ (3/34): The opposite of shar’i knowledge is knowledge that is haraam or makrooh. Haraam knowledge is like ‘ilm al-kalaam in which they argue on the basis of pure reason or speak in a manner that contradicts sound, unambiguous reports. If they speak on the basis of reports only or on the basis of texts and rational thought that is in accordance with them, then this is the basis of religion and the way of ahl al-sunnah. This is what is meant by the words of Shaykh Taqiy al-Deen. In his commentary he explains that even better. [Haraam knowledge also includes] philosophy, magic (sleight of hand), astrology and geomancy, as well as alchemy and natural sciences. End quote.

It should be noted that an exception from this prohibition is made for those who study it as a speciality in order to explain its deviations and refute the falsehoods that they stir up.

Thirdly:

If studying philosophy is compulsory, then you must beware of believing in any of its falsehoods or admiring its people. You should strive hard to acquire shar’i knowledge, especially that which has to do with ‘aqeedah (belief), so that you will develop immunity and resistance to specious arguments.

We ask Allaah to help and guide you.

And Allaah knows best.