

Lesson 14: Opinions Concerning God's Justice

The problem of justice as one of God's attributes has had its own distinct history. Various schools of thought in Islam have held different views on the subject, interpreting it in accordance with their own distinctive principles.

Some Sunnis who follow the views of the theologian Abu'l-Hasan Ash'ari do not believe in God's justice as a matter of faith, and they deny that justice is accomplished by the divine acts.

In their view, however, God treats a certain person, and whatever punishment or reward He gives him, irrespective of what he might appear to deserve, will represent justice and absolute good, even though it might appear unjust when measured by human standards.

These Asharis, thus, distinguish God's attribute of justice from His acts and they, therefore, regard as just whatever can be attributed to God. If He rewards the virtuous and punishes the sinful, this is justice, but so would be the reverse; it would still be in the broad sphere of His justice.

Their claim that the very terms "justice" and "injustice" are meaningless when applied to God is no doubt intended to elevate God's most sacred essence to the position of the highest transcendence. But no thoughtful person will regard these superficial and inadequate notions as having anything to do with God's transcendence. In fact, they involve a denial of order in the world, of the principle of causality both in the general order of the world and in the conduct and deeds of individual men.

The followers of al-Ash'ari believe, moreover, that the bright lamp of the intellect is extinguished whenever it is confronted with the perceptions and problems of religion, that it is unable to benefit man or light up his path.

This claim conforms neither to the teachings of the Qur'an nor to the content of the sunnah. The Qur'an considers disregard for the intellect to be a form of misguidance and repeatedly summons men to reflection and meditation in order to learn divine knowledge and religious beliefs. Those who fail to benefit from this bright lamp within them are compared to the animals. The Qur'an says:

The worst of creatures in the sight of God are those persons who are deaf and dumb and do not

reflect. (8:22)

The Prophet of Islam says: “God has assigned two guides to man: one external to him, the messengers of God, and the other internal, his own power of thought”.

The Mutazilites and Shi'a stand in opposition to al-Ash'ari and his school. Out of all the attributes of God, they have selected justice to be a principle of their creed. Relying on both transmitted and rational proofs, they have also refuted and rejected as incompatible with the principle of justice, the doctrines of the unmediated effect of divine destiny and the predetermination of man's acts.

They believe that justice is the basis of God's acts, both in the ordering of the universe and in the establishing of laws. Just as human acts can be weighed according to the criteria of good and bad, the acts of the Creator are also subject to the same criteria. Since the logic of reason determines that justice is inherently praise worthy and injustice inherently reprehensible, an object of worship whose characteristics include infinite intelligence and spirit, will never undertake an act that reason regards as impermissible.

When we say that God is just, it means that His all-knowing and creative essence does nothing that is contrary to wisdom and benefit. The concept of wisdom, when applied to the Creator, does not mean that He chooses the best means for attaining His goals or remedying His deficiencies, for it is only man who is called on to move from deficiency toward perfection.

God's concern is to make beings emerge from deficiency and impel them toward perfection and the aims inherent in their own essences. God's wisdom consists of this, that He first implants a form of His favor within each phenomenon, and then, after bestowing existence upon it, impels it toward the perfection of its capacities through a further exercise of His generosity.

Justice has, then, an extensive meaning, which naturally includes the avoidance of oppression and all foolish acts. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, peace be upon him, says in explanation of God's justice: “*Justice in the case of God means that you should not ascribe anything to God that if you were to do it would cause you to be blamed and reproached.*”¹

With man, oppression and all the forms of corrupt activity in which he engages, derive, without doubt, from ignorance and lack of awareness and need coupled with innate lowliness; sometimes, too, they are the reflection of hatred and enmity, which leap forth from man's inner being like a spark.

Numerous are those people who are disgusted with their own oppressiveness and corruption. Nonetheless, because of ignorance about the final outcome of their deeds, they continue, from time to time, to act with injustice and pollute themselves with all kinds of shameful, corrupt deeds.

Sometimes man feels that he needs something that he does not have the resources or ability to acquire.

This is the root cause of many evils. The feeling of need, hunger and greed, the prevalence in man of a desire to harm or dominate all these are factors leading to aggressive behavior.

Under their influence, man loses the reins of self-control. He concentrates all his efforts on fulfilling his desires and violating all ethical restrictions, he starts squeezing the throats of the oppressed. The unique essence of God, that infinite being, is free of all such tendencies and limitations, for nothing is hidden from His knowledge without bound, and it is inconceivable that He should suffer from impotence vis-à-vis anything—He, the Pre-Eternal One Whose eternal rays bestow life and sustenance on all things and Who assures their movement, variety and development.

A subtle essence that comprehends all the degrees of perfection stands in no need of anything so that its absence might induce anxiety in Him when He conceives a desire for it. His power and capacity are without any doubt, unlimited and they do not fall short of anything so that He might then be led to deviate from the path of justice and transgress against someone, or take vengeance in order to allay his heart or undertake some inappropriate and ill-sided act.

None of the motivations for unjust behavior can be found in God, and, indeed, the very concepts of oppression and injustice are inapplicable to a being Whose generosity and mercy embrace all things and the sanctity of Whose essence is clearly manifest through out creation.

The Qur'an repeatedly negates all idea of injustice by God, considering Him in His sanctity utterly removed from all unworthy acts. It says:

God never considers it permissible to act unjustly toward His servants; it is rather men who commit oppression and injustice. (10:44)

In this verse, God dissociates Himself from all notion of injustice, something repugnant to men, and, instead, attributes it to them.

In addition, how is it possible that God should call on men to establish justice and equity while at the same time staining His own hands with unrighteous deeds? The Qur'an says:

God commands men to act with justice and virtue and enjoins upon them generosity to kinsfolk. He forbids them evil deeds and oppression. He admonishes you out of His mercy, so that you may accept His advice. (16:90)

Islam values justice so highly that if one group of Muslims wish to deviate from the path of justice and start engaging in oppression, they must be repressed, even if this involves war. This is the command of the Qur'an:

If two parties of believers fight with each other, make peace between them. If one of them has committed aggression against the other, then make war on the aggressor until he returns to observance of God's command. Once he has so returned, then reconcile them and make peace in

utter justice. Certainly God loves the just. (49:9)

The interesting point that emerges from this verse is that the mediator is strictly instructed to make sure, when bringing about reconciliation, that the dispute is settled in accordance with justice, without showing lenience to the aggressor. It may happen, in cases where war has been started for aggressive purposes, that a mediator tries to end the dispute by insisting on leniency and the overlooking of faults, and, ultimately, persuades one of the parties to renounce its claim in favor of the other.

This lenient approach, although legitimate in itself, may reinforce the spirit of aggressiveness existing in those who gained by starting the war. It is, in fact, conventional to satisfy the aggressor in such cases by granting him some concession.

Although the voluntary renunciation of one's claim is a desirable act in itself, it will, under such circumstances, have an undesirable effect on the mentality of the aggressor. The aim of Islam is to uproot force and injustice from Islamic society and to assure its members that no one can gain anything by aggression and force.

If we look at the order of creation, we can see that a vast and comprehensive equilibrium prevails among all physical phenomena. This is evident in the regularity of the atoms, the haste of the electrons, the rotation of the planets, and the movements of all bodies. It is visible in the mineral and vegetable realms, in the precise relations that exist among the organs of a living being, in the balance among the inner components of the atom, in the equilibrium among the vast heavenly bodies and their finely calculated forces of attraction.

All these forms of balance and equilibrium, together with the other precise laws that science is still seeking to explore, bear witness to the existence of an undeniable order in the universe, one which is confirmed by mathematical equations.

Our veracious Prophet has expressed this universal justice and comprehensive equilibrium, the fact that nothing is irregular or out of place, in this concise and eloquent statement: It is true equilibrium and symmetry that maintain the earth and the heavens.

The Qur'an attributes the following words to Moses, peace be upon him and our Prophet:

Our God is the one who endowed all things with the needful and then guided them for the continuation of their existence. (20:50)

In this short sentence, Moses expounds to the Pharaoh the manner in which the world was created together with its orderliness and beauty, which are among God's signs. His aim was to save him from his erroneous thoughts and help him perceive the existence of a just and divinely instituted order in the universe.

One of the norms ruling ineluctably over nature is, therefore, order and justice, and all things, by virtue of their subordination to the norms and laws of nature, are engaged in the process of evolution toward perfection that is specific to each of them. Any deviation from this universal pattern of order and the relations founded upon it would result in confusion and chaos.

Whenever some irregularity occurs in nature, phenomena themselves evince a reaction, and inward or outward factors emerge to remove the barriers to development and reestablish the order needed to continue on the path to perfection.

When the body is attacked by microbes and other factors of illness, white globules begin to neutralize them, in accordance with ineluctable norm. Whatever medicine may be prescribed is an external factor aiding the white globules in their task of neutralization and re-establishing equilibrium in the body.

Finally, it is impossible that God, Whose love is infinite and Who unstintingly grants His favors to His servants, should perform the slightest unjust or inappropriate act. This is, indeed, what the Qur'an proclaims:

It is God Who has made the earth a place of abode for you, Who has raised the heavens, created you in the best of forms, and given you delicious and pleasing foods as sustenance. This is God, your Lord. (40:64)

1. Kifayat al-Muwahhidin, I, p.442.

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