

Lesson 21: An Improper Interpretation of Faith and Destiny

Some pseudo-intellectuals have erroneous ideas about fate and destiny and imagine that this doctrine causes stagnation and inactivity, restraining man from all forms of effort to improve his life.

The source of this notion in the West is a of adequate understanding of the concept, particularly as it is expounded in Islamic teachings. In the East, it has gained influence because of decline and backwardness.

It is fairly well-known that whenever individuals or historical communities fail to reach its goals and ideals, for whatever reason, they console themselves with words such as 'luck "accident," "destiny," "fate."

The Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him, expressed himself eloquently on this matter An age will come for the people of my community when they will commit sin and inequity, and in order to justify their corruption and pollution, they will say: 'God's fate and destiny decreed that we act thus.' If you encounter such people, tell them I disown them.

Belief in fate and destiny does not prevent man from striving to reach his goals in life. As those who have the necessary religious knowledge realize, Islam calls on human beings to strive to the utmost in improving their lives, both morally and materially. This is, in itself, a powerful factor in intensifying the efforts man makes.

One of the Western thinkers who has an inadequate understanding of fate and destiny is Jean-Paul Sartre. He imagines it is impossible simultaneously to believe in a fate and destiny determined by God and in the freedom of man, and that it is, therefore, necessary to choose either belief in God or the freedom of man: Because I believe in freedom, I cannot believe in God, because if I believe in God, I will have to accept the concept of fate, and if I accept fate, I will have to renounce freedom. Since I am attached to freedom, I do not believe in God.

However, there is no contradiction between belief in fate, on the one hand, and the freedom of man, on

the other. While regarding God's will to be universal in scope, the Noble Qur'an also ascribes a free and active role to man, describing him as capable of consciously fashioning his own destiny with a knowledge of good and bad, ugly and beautiful, and the capacity to choose between them.

We have shown the path to man, and he is free to choose the right path and be thankful or to choose the path of ingratitude. (76:3)

Whoever wishes for the eternal abode and strives for it as needed will find his efforts rewarded. (17:19)

Those who on the Day of Judgment seek refuge in determinism and say:

If God wished, we would not worship other than Him (16:35)

are rebuked for attributing their own sinfulness and error to divine will and fate.

In none of the verses of the Qur'an are the corrupt and evil deeds of individuals or societies attributed to fate and destiny. Equally, fate and destiny are not depicted as obstacles to a corrupt and polluted society's reforming itself. Not a single verse can be found in which God's will has supplanted man's will, or in which it is said that men started to suffer because of fate and destiny.

The Qur'an repeatedly mentions the wrath of God that will overtake the tyrannical and corrupt, bringing painful punishment in its wake.

Since God is extremely loving and merciful to His servants, having bestowed countless bounties on them, and is, at the same time, clement and ready to accept repentance, He always keeps open for the sinner the path of return to purity and rectitude. God's acceptance of repentance is, in itself, a great instance of His mercy.

Although the scope of man's will is greater and more extensive than that of all other known living creatures and plays a more creative role, his will has effect only in areas delimited for his activity and deeds by God. He cannot, therefore, accomplish everything he wants throughout his life.

It often happens that man decides to do something but however hard he tries, he is unable to accomplish it. The reason for this is not that God's will opposes itself to man's will and prevents him from doing what he wishes. It is rather that in such cases some unknown external factor which lies beyond the scope of man's knowledge and control creates obstacles in his way and prevents him from attaining his goals.

Both individuals and societies constantly encounter such obstacles. Considering the fact that in the natural realm there is no cause without an effect and no effect without a cause, and that our means of perception are limited to this world and to the human realm, it should not be difficult for us to accept that our aspirations may not be fulfilled as we desire.

God has set billions of factors to work in the order of being. Sometimes those factors are apparent to man, at other times they remain unknown to him and cannot be incorporated in his calculations. This, too, relates to fate and destiny, but not only does it not result in depriving man of free will or prevent him from striving to attain satisfaction in life; it also guides him in both thought and activity and imbues the very depths of his being with greater vitality. He seeks to augment his knowledge and identify, as precisely as possible, the factors that pave the way for attaining greater success in life. Belief in fate and destiny is then a potent factor in advancing man toward his aims and ideals.

The question of the salvation or damnation of man is implicitly solved in the preceding discussion, since salvation and damnation arise from the deeds and acts of men, not from matters that lie beyond their will or from natural phenomena that have been implanted in human existence by the Creator.

Neither environmental and hereditary factors nor the natural capacities present in man have any effect on man's salvation or damnation; they cannot fashion his destiny. That which fixes man's future, is the axis on which his salvation or damnation turns and the of his ascent or descent, is the degree to which man, as a being endowed with choice, makes proper use of his intellect and knowledge and other powers.

Happiness and salvation do not depend on an abundance of natural capacities. It is, however, true that the one who has greater capacities than others also bears greater responsibilities. A slight error on his part is far more significant than a similar error on the part of a weak and powerless individual. Everyone will be called to account in accordance with the talents and capacities he possesses.

It is entirely possible that a person whose innate capacities and resources are slight should order his life in accordance with the duties and responsibilities that have been imposed on him and reach that true happiness which alone is worthy of the lofty station of man. What will enable him to achieve that result is the intensity of his efforts he expends in order to make correct use of the limited capacities he has been given.

Conversely, one who has been given abundant inward resources and capacities, not only may not use them to benefit himself, he may actually misuse them to trample on his own human dignity; and cast himself into the swamp of corruption and sin. Such a person is, without a doubt, a sinner destined to damnation and will never catch a glimpse of salvation. The Qur'an says:

Every soul will be held in pledge for what it has acquired. (74:38)

Hence, the salvation or damnation of a person is dependent on the volitional acts, not on his natural or psychological make-up. This is the clearest manifestation of God's justice.

One of the characteristic doctrines of Shi'ism is bada', a term meaning that men's destinies change when the factors and causes regulating them change: what appears to be eternal and immutable changes in accordance with a change in man's conduct and acts. Just as material factors can reshape a man's destiny, non-material factors may also elicit new phenomena.

It is possible that such non-material factors may make apparent what is hidden and contrary to the apparent course of affairs. In fact, through a change in causes and circumstances, God will decree that a new phenomenon will appear, more beneficial than the phenomenon it has replaced. This is comparable to the principle of abrogation in revealed law. If an earlier law is abrogated in favor of another, this does not indicate ignorance or regret on the part of the divine lawgiver, but only that the validity of the abrogated law has expired.

We cannot interpret the concept of bada in the sense of God changing His mind after the reality of something previously unknown to him becomes known to Him. This would contradict the principle of the universality of God's knowledge and so it cannot be accepted by any Muslim.

Recommended (*Nawafil*) prayer is another factor, the effectiveness of which should not be belittled. It is obvious that God is aware of the innermost secrets of everyone, but in man's relationship with God, *Nawafil* prayer plays the same role as man's efforts and acts in his relationship with nature. Quite apart from its psychological effect, prayer exercises an independent effect.

Every instant new phenomena appear in nature in the emergence of which preceding causes play a role. Likewise, in one great sphere of existence, *Nawafil* prayer is profoundly effective in advancing man toward his goals. In just the same way that God has assigned a role in the system of causality to each of the natural elements, so, too, He has assigned an important role to *Nawafil* prayer.

When a person is besieged by difficulties, he must not fall into hopelessness and despair. The doors of God's mercy are never closed to anyone. It maybe that tomorrow a new situation emerges in no wise corresponding to what he had anticipated. For, as the Qur'an says:

Each day God is engaged in a different affair. (55:29)

One should, therefore, never relinquish one's efforts. A *Nawafil* prayer that is not joined to appropriate efforts is, as the Master of the God fearing, 'Ali, peace be upon him, has said, Like a person who wishes to loose an arrow from a bow without a string.

While making continuous efforts, one should place one's desires before God, in hope and sincerity, and seek aid with one's whole being from that source of infinite power. God will then certainly take one by the hand and aid him. The Qur'an says:

When My servants ask you whether I am far from them, distant or near, let them know that I am

near to them. Whoever calls upon Me, I shall answer him and fulfill his prayer. Let them hearken to My call and believe in Me in order to attain happiness. (2:186)

Man's spirit will ascend toward God and immerse him in true happiness when he avoids the pitfall of neediness by severing himself from all causes and turning directly to God. He will then see himself linked directly to God's essence and palpably feel His infinite favor and grace.

Imam Sajjad, peace be upon him, addresses God as follows in the prayer known as the Prayer of Abu Hamza: O Creator! I see the paths of request and petition leading to You open and smooth and the sources of hope in You abundant. I see it permissible to request aid from Your favor and mercy, and I see the gates of prayer open to all who call upon You and beg for Your aid . I am certain that You are prepared to answer the prayer of those who call upon You and to grant refuge to those who seek it with You.¹

There is also a tradition concerning the effects of sin and good deeds: “Those who die on account of sin are more numerous than those who die on account of natural death, and those who live on account of performing good deeds are more numerous than those who live on account of their natural life span.”²

It was the effect of prayer that enabled Zakariya, a true Prophet who had despaired of having a child, to attain his desire; it was the effect of repentance that saved the Prophet Yunus and his people from disaster and annihilation.

The laws that the great Creator has implanted in the system of the universe do not in any way limit His infinite power or lessen its scope. He has the same absolute discretion in changing those laws, in confirming or abrogating their effects, as He did in establishing them.

That Unique Essence, Whose careful and comprehensive supervision covers the whole system of being, can hardly be helplessly subject to laws and phenomena He Himself has created, or lose the power and capacity to do whatsoever He wills.

When we say that God is able at any instant to change the phenomena He has created in the world, we do not mean that He destroys the order of the world and its fixed regulations or overturns the laws and principles of nature.

The very process of change takes place in accordance with certain unknown principles and criteria that escape our limited perception and cognition.

If man looks carefully and critically at the matter and takes into consideration the wide range of possibilities with which he is confronted, it will prevent him from ambitiously attempting to predict all things on the basis of those few principles which he has been able to observe in the natural realm.

1. Mafatih al-Jinan, p. 185.

2. Safinat al-Bihar, I, p.488.

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