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Part 1: Fate and Destiny are the Words that Cause Alarm

No two words more awful than fate and destiny have ever struck the ears of a human being.

Nothing can be more depressing to the spirit of a man than the feeling that he has no liberty and all his acts are controlled by a superpower.

It may be said that freedom and liberty are the supreme blessings and the most bitter disappointment is supreme blessing and the most bitter disappointment is a feeling of helplessness, a feeling that one has no independent personality, a feeling that he is just like a sheep in the hands of a shepherd and that he has no control even over his food, sleep, life and death.

A feeling of quiet endurance and resignation resulting from helplessness is more consuming and oppressive to human spirit than any king of fire.

That is the position when a man finds himself helpless against another who is more powerful or against an animal which is stronger. It is easy to imagine what his position will be if he finds himself dominated by an invisible and mysterious force which he cannot resist. Obviously his position will be far worse.

A question which has always engaged human attention is whether the affairs of this world are going on in accordance with a pre-arranged and inevitable program. Are all the events in this world governed by an invisible but immensely powerful force called fate and destiny? Is everything that is happening now or will ever happen, predetermined? Is man subject to determinism and has no liberty of choosing? Or is it that there is no such thing as fate and man is absolutely free to determine his own destiny? Or is it that actually there operates a third alternative, according to which all events of the world are governed by destiny, the influence of which extends to everything without exception, but still its irresistible influence does not curtail human liberty in the least. If this is the case, how is it to be explained?

The question of fate and destiny is one of the most equivocal philosophical questions. For certain

reasons to be explained later, it has been a subject of dispute among the Muslim thinkers from the first century of the Hijri era. The various views held in this connection have caused many controversies and given rise to a number of sects in the Muslim world with queer results during the past fourteen centuries.

Though it is a so called metaphysical subject, for two reasons it also comes under the category of practical and social questions.

The first reason is that man's way of thinking about this question affects his practical life and social attitude.

It is obvious that the spirit and attitude of a man looking at himself as a being subject to inexorable determinism, is different from those of one who believes that he has been created free and hence he is master of his destiny.

Generally speaking, most of the philosophical questions do not affect the spirit, attitude and actions of man. The practical attitude and the social spirit of a person are not influenced by such questions as the temporal eternity or transience of the universe, the finiteness or infinitude of its dimensions, the system of causation, the theory that many cannot emanate from one and the identicalness of the essence and the attributes of the Self-existent Being.

The second reason is that the doctrine of fate and destiny, despite its being a personal belief, comes under the category of the questions of universal application, for the number of people who are in search of its solutions is very large.

It is one of those questions which engage the attention of nearly all those who have some capacity of thinking over general questions. Everybody is naturally interested in knowing whether he is at liberty to determine his course of life or it has already been irrevocably determined by his fate.

The scope of other philosophical questions is limited. They are only a matter of personal and private interest and do not attract such a general attention.

From these two view-points this question may be included in the category of practical, universal and social problems.

In olden days attention was seldom paid to the practical and social effects of this question. It was discussed only from theoretical, philosophical and scholastic points of view. But modern scholars give more heed to its practical and social aspects, and look at it from the angle of its effect on the way of thinking of the nations and their progress and decline.

Some critics of Islam hold that the biggest cause of the decline of the Muslims is their faith in fate and destiny. Now a question arises, if belief in destiny is a cause of the decline of an individual or a society, how is it that the early Muslims were not adversely affected by it. Did they not have a belief in destiny? Was this question introduced in the teachings of Islam later, as asserted by some European historians?

Or is it that the nature of their belief in fate and destiny was such that it was not inconsistent with their faith in liberty and responsibility? In other worlds, did they believe that one's destiny was not absolutely beyond his control and that he could change it. If so, what was the basis of their thinking?

Leaving aside the basis of their belief, let us see what the Qur'an and the Imams say in this respect. Then we will see what way of thinking we should logically adopt.

Verses of The Qur'an

Some verses of the Holy Qur'an expressly support the rule of destiny. They state that nothing happens in the world without the Will of Allah and that every event is already recorded in the 'Book'.

A few of the Qur'anic verses to this effect are quoted:

“Every affliction that falls on the earth or yourselves, already exists in a Book before it is brought into being by us. No doubt that is easy for Allah to accomplish”. (Surah al-Hadid, 57:22)

“With Him are the keys of the invisible. None but He knows them. And He knows what is in the land and the sea. Not a leaf falls, but he knows it, not a grain amid the darkness of the earth, nor anything green or withered but is recorded in a clear Book”. (Surah al-An'am, 6:59)

It is often seen that in the sentence, “there is nothing green or withered, but it is recorded in a clear Book”, the word, Book is taken to be referring to the Qur'an, but it may be said with certainty that here the word, 'Book' does not refer to it. So far as we know, not a single reliable expounder of the Qur'an has interpreted the verse that way.

“They said: Do we have any say in the matter? Muhammad, tell them: All matters belong to Allah. They try to bide within themselves what they do not reveal to you, saying: Had we had the matter in our hands, we would not have been slain there. Say: Even though you had been in your houses, those appointed to be slain would have been slain by your sworn enemies while you were in your beds”. (Surah Ale Imran, 3:154)

“We hold the store of every thing and we send it down in an appointed measure”. (Surah al-Hijri, 15:21)

“Allah has set a measure for all things”. (Surah al-Talaq, 65:2)

“Surely We created everything by measure”. (Surah al-Qamar, 54:49)

“Then it is for Allah to have in error whom He will and to guide whom He pleases. He is the Mighty, the Wise”. (Surah Ibrahim, 14:4)

“Say: Allah! Owner of Sovereignty! You bestow sovereignty on whomever you will and you

withdraw from whomever you will. In your Hand is all that is good. No doubt you have power to do everything". (Surah Ale Imran, 3:26)

There are other verses which indicate that man is free and he can change his destiny:

"Allah never changes the condition of a nation unless it change what is in its heart". (Surah al-Ra`d, 13:11)

"Allah coins a similitude: a town whose people that lived secure and well content. Its provisions came in abundance from every quarter, but its people denied the favours of Allah, so He afflicted them with famine and fear because of what they used to do". (Surah al-Nahl, 16:112)

"Allah did not do injustice to them, but they had wronged themselves". (Surah al-Ankabut, 29:40)

"Your Lord does no injustice to His slaves". (Surah Fussilat, 41:46)

"We have shown man the right path. Now it is upto him to be grateful or thankless". (Surah al-Dahr, 76:3)

"Muhammad say: This is the truth from your Lord. Let him who believe in it, and let him who will reject it". (Surah al-Kahf, 18:29)

"Corruption has become rife on land and sea because of the misdeeds of the people". (Surah al-Rum, 30:41)

"Whoever seeks the harvest of the hereafter, We shall give it to him in abundance, and whoever seeks the harvest of the world, We give him a share of it. But in the hereafter he shall have no share". (Surah al-Shura, 42:20)

"As for him who desires the worldly pleasures, We swiftly provide in this world whatever We will to whomever We please. Then we assign to him Hell in which he shall burn despised and rejected. As for him who desires the hereafter, strives for it as he should, and is a true believer, it is such people whose efforts shall be appreciated by Allah. Each group will receive its share from the bounty of your Lord. And the bounty of your Lord is not limited" (Surah al-Isra', 17:18-20).

There are many other verses of both the categories. Most of the expounders of the Qur'an and the scholastic theologians consider the verses of the two categories to be contradictory to each other. According to them it is necessary to accept the verses of one category and explain away those of the other. This way of thinking appeared in the second half of the first century. The exponents of human liberty and the doctrine of free will tried to interpret the verses of the first category. They came to be known as the Qadarites.

Another group inclined to the doctrine of predestination, interpreted the verses of the second category,

and was called the Jabarite or predestinarian. Gradually two big groups of the scholastic theologians, two schools of theology came to be recognized. They absorbed in their ranks both the Jabarites and the Qadarites which ceased to exist independently. The Ash'arite school advocated predestination and the Mu'tazilite supported doctrine of free will.

Qadarite

We have used the word, Qadarite for the advocates of human liberty and free will. This term has been used in this sense by most of the scholastic theologians. In the religious reports also this word mostly has the same meaning. Anyhow, occasionally this term has been applied to the Jabarites also. On the whole, both the exponents of free will and predestination did not like themselves to be called the Qadarites, and applied this term to their opponents. The reason of this abhorrence was that a hadith was current according to which the Holy Prophet (s) was reported to have said that the 'Qadarites were the Magians of the Muslim *ummah* (nation)'. The Jabarites said that the term, 'Qadarites' referred to those who denied *taqdir* (destiny). Their opponents held that the Qadarites were those who believed that everything, including human acts, was predestined. Anyhow, for two reasons this term stuck to those who denied destiny:

Firstly because the Ash'arite school became popular and the number of its opponents went on decreasing and secondly because the Qadarites were compared to the Magians, who were known to be confirming Divine destiny to what they called 'good'. Evil was ascribed by them to Ahriman (Devil).

Conflicting Views

We have already said that according to the most of the interpreters of the Qur'an as well as the scholastic theologians, the Qur'anic verses in respect of destiny and human free will are conflicting and hence it was necessary that the verses of one of these two categories should be interpreted in a way different from what they apparently convey.

It may be mentioned here that there are two kinds of contradiction. Sometimes a statement expressly contradicts another. For example, someone says: "The Holy Prophet died in the month of Safar". Another person says. "The Prophet did not die in the month of Safar". In this case the second statement expressly repudiates the first. But sometimes the position is some what different. The second statement does not contradict the first, but the truth of the second implies its falsity. For example, someone says: "The Prophet died in the month of Rabial-Awwal". It is self-evident that if the Prophet died in the month of Rabi`al-Awwal, he could not have died in the month of Safar.

Now let us see how the verses of the Qur'an in regard to fate and destiny on the one hand, and human liberty and free will on the other are mutually incompatible. Are they of the first type and expressly contradict each other, or of the second and the import of the verses of one category denies that of the verses of the other category.

There is no doubt that the Qur'anic verses on this subject do not expressly contradict each other. The position is not that the verses of one category say that everything is destined and those of the second declare that there is no such thing as destiny; or that the verses of one category say that man is free and has a choosing power, but those of the second category assert that man is not free and has no choice. No verses of the Qur'an deny that the Knowledge of Allah is all-comprehensive and that everything depends on His Will.

The reason why the two sets of these verses are considered to be conflicting is that the scholastic theologians and some commentators of the Qur'an think that destiny implies that man is not free. According to them destiny and liberty are mutually inconsistent. They argue that the fact that everything is within the Knowledge of Allah means that everything has been predetermined by Him. Should it be admitted that man exercise his own free will, Allah's Knowledge may on many occasions prove wrong.

In contrast, if it is true that man is master of his destiny and an effective factor in making or marring his fortune that automatically means that nothing is predestined.

Hence, one out of these two sets of verses needs interpretation.

The commentaries of the Holy Qur'an and the scholastic books of the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites are full of explanations and interpretations on this point. The Mu'tazilites explain the verses referring to destiny and the Ash'arites interpret those related to free will. To see the specimens of these interpretations a reference may be made to Tafsir al-Kashshaf by Zamakhshari, whose way of thinking is that of the Mu'tazilites.

Now let us see if it is feasible to have a third view which may resolve the apparent conflict between the belief in fate and destiny on the one hand and Allah's Omnipotence and His Omniscience on the other. If we can find such a proposition there will be no need of interpreting any set of the Qur'anic verses.

As we will see later there already exists a third view, according to which there is no actual conflict between these two sets of the Qur'anic verses. As a matter of fact, conflict has been created by a misunderstanding on the part of some theologians and commentators.

On principle it is meaningless to say that there is any contradiction in the Qur'an and that it is necessary to reconcile the conflicting verses. The fact is that there is not a single verse which may require any reconciliation. That is not the case even with the so called most equivocal verses. The consistency of the Qur'an is a subject which requires detailed discussion, but it is beyond the scope of this book. Anyhow, it may be said safely that constancy is one of the most miraculous aspects of the Holy Book.

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