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Divine Love

Love as the Highest Reason for Creation

In early *kalam* (Islamic theology), a heated debate started on the purpose behind God's creations and acts. Some theologians thought that the attribution of reason or purpose to His deeds leads to the assumption that God is in need of His creatures and He creates them to meet some needs, just like a human being who, say, works to earn money, or studies to learn. However the dominant view, especially among those who have had a more rationalistic approach like Nasir ul-Din al-Tusi has always been that God is the Wise (*hakim*), so whatever He does is for some exactly and carefully pre-studied purposes. He never does something arbitrarily or in vain. It is asserted in the Qur'an that, "**What! Did you then think that We had created you in vain...?**" (23:115)

Of course, it is clear that God Himself does not gain anything from His creatures, nor from His act of creation. This is not only because He is completely free from any sort of need, but also because it is logically impossible that a given effect would have any type of influence on its (existential) cause. Whatever the effect has is received from the cause and it would be circular to suppose it otherwise. God has not created the universe to make some benefits for Himself, but rather to give benefits. A popular Persian poem says: "I have not created the creation to get some benefits, I have created people to show them my generosity."

There is a famous divine saying (*hadith qudsi*) which can probably be found in all books written about the goal of creation in Islam. According to this hadith, God says: "I was a hidden treasure; I loved to be known. Hence I created the world so that I would be known." (My translation) The Arabic original term for "loved" is derived from the root *hubb*, which means to like or to love. In other words, *hubb* is a general concept that can belong to simple things such as preferring some types of food (which in English could

be translated as 'would like') or to the most important things in one's life such as the intensive desire for someone or some ideals as the beloved to the extent that one might even be ready to be destroyed in order to please the beloved or secure it. *Hubb* in such cases can be translated into 'love'. There is another term in the Islamic culture which is sometimes used in Arabic and more commonly in Persian to mean the intensive love i.e. *'ishq*. There is also *wudd* which means mostly friendship and affection.

Thus, a question arises: why did God love to be known? Certainly, God has no desire for fame. The purpose behind His love to be known is understandable by considering the fact that God who is the Wise, the Compassionate and the Omnipotent creates the universe and particularly human beings to give them the maximum grace and perfection that they have the capacity for receiving. Of course, the perfection of any kind of being is decided by the degree of its similarity or closeness to God, and the most important factors in this are love of God, and prior to that knowledge of God, since there can be no love without knowing the beloved subject. 1

God's Love for Himself

Since the reason for loving something is nothing other than the apprehension by the lover of the beauty and perfection or more generally the goodness of the beloved, the greatest possible love is certainly the love of God for Himself. God is the most beautiful and the most perfect being and His apprehension of Himself is also the best apprehension, so His love for Himself and His joy are the most intensive ones. Avicenna writes:

The necessarily existent (*Wajib al-wujud*) that has the highest perfection, beauty and brightness and perceives of Himself as so with a complete perception ... is in Himself the greatest lover and the greatest beloved and has the greatest joy ...2

Elsewhere he says:

The being that has the greatest joy in respect to something is the First (*al-Awwal*) in respect to Himself, since He has the greatest understanding and has the greatest perfection.3

Sadr ud-din al-Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra and the founder of the school of *al-hikmah al-muta'aliyah*, makes the same point:

What causes love is what is received or will be received from the beloved. The higher goodness and more intensive existence the more deserving for being loved and the greater love for goodness. Now the being, which is free from potentiality and contingency, due to its ultimate goodness, has the ultimate

level of being loved and the ultimate level of loving. Therefore, His love for Himself is the most perfect love and the most loyal one.⁴

He also adds that since God is the Simple (not compound, without any parts) and Divine attributes are not additional (or accidental) to His essence in existence (the idea which is greatly accepted by Muslim philosophers and the majority of theologians and known as the unity of His essence and His attributes), His love is identical to His essence. In this way, one can justifiably say that He is love as He is knowledge and life.

God's Love for Creatures

God's love for the world in general, and human beings in particular is unanimously believed and emphasised by all Muslims. Indeed, one of the God's names is *al-Wadud*, He who loves. This is in addition to those names which imply His love for creatures, such as *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim* meaning the all-Compassionate, the all-Merciful. Every chapter of the Qur'an except chapter 9 (which starts with verses about warning pagans) begins with the phrase: "***In the Name of God, the all-Compassionate, the all-Merciful***". Yet the number of repetition of this phrase in the Qur'an is equal to the number of chapters i.e. 114, since in the chapter 27 this phrase occurs twice. It is noteworthy that although one of the things attributed to God in Islam is the wrath (*ghadab*), its application is much more limited compared to His mercifulness and love for His creatures. Indeed, His wrath is only for those who deliberately disbelieve or commit evil actions. This is an idea that all Muslims agree and is clearly expressed in many sources. I would like here just to mention only one profound statement. In a well-known prayer, *Jushan al-Kabir*, God is addressed as the one "whose mercy has preceded His wrath".

As we will see later, this wrath or anger is also out of His love and mercy. If His love or mercy did not exist He would not care at all. It is like a father who becomes angry with *his* son when he does something wrong, because he has care and concern for his son and his entire family, because he wants his son to correct his behaviour and set a lesson for other children not to copy that wrong act.

God has different levels or degrees of love for His creatures. One is His general and encompassing love that includes all beings. If there were no such love nothing would be brought into being. This love includes even wrongdoers, since they also manifest or represent some stages of goodness in their essence and this is that aspect of their being which is loved by God, though it might be overwhelmed by the demonic aspect of their characters and therefore they might be overall hated.

A higher level of Divine love is His love for true believers, those who believe in Him, the ultimate Truth and do good deeds. Those are the people "***He loves and who love Him***" (5:54). In the Qur'an, we find

that God loves "**the doers of justice**" (5:42; 8:60; 9:49), "**those who purify themselves**" (9:108), "**the pious**" (3:76; 9:4 & 7), "**those who do good (to others)**" (5:13 & 93; 3:134 & 148; 2:195) "**those who trust (Him)**" (4:35) "**the patient**" (3:146) and "**those who repent very much and purify themselves**" (2:222).

It is noteworthy that in the Qur'an in many cases God's displeasure is described not by focusing on His hatred, but rather indirectly by phrases, such as "**God does not love any ungrateful (or unbeliever) sinner**" (2:276), "**God does not love the unjust**" (3:57&1140), "**surely, God does not love him who is proud, boastful**" (4:36) and "**surely God does not love him who is treacherous, sinful**" (4:107).

God's Love for Perfect Human Beings

According to Islam, the highest level of Divine love for any creature is His love for perfect human beings, such as prophets. The Prophet Muhammad has a special place in this regard. One of the wellknown titles of him is *Habib Ullah*, which means the beloved of God. In a famous Divine saying God addresses the Prophet, "If thou were not, I would not have created the heavens." As S.H. Nasr and many others have indicated, "Muslim saints over the centuries have seen in the love of God for the Prophet and in his love for God the prototype of all love between man and his creator". 5

1. It has to be noted that Muslim mystics usually speak of manifestation (tajalli) rather than creation (khalq).

2. Avicenna, 1956, p.369

3. Avicenna, 1375 A.H., Vol. 3, p.359

4. al Shirazi, 1378 A.H., Vol. 2, p.274

5. Nasr, 1989, p. 321

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