

Good Deeds Without Faith

It has become clear that, first of all, our discussion has a general aspect, and we don't want to pass decisions about individuals.

Second, our discussion is not about whether the true religion is one or several; rather, we have accepted that the true religion is one and that all are obligated to accept it.

Third, our discussion is this: if a person, without accepting the true religion, performs a deed which the true religion considers good, does that person receive a reward for that good deed or not?

For example, the true religion has emphasized doing good to others. This includes cultural services like establishing schools, places of learning, writing, and teaching; health services like medicine, nursing, establishing sanitary establishments, and so forth social services such as mediating disputes, helping the poor and disabled, supporting the rights of the exploited, fighting the exploiters and oppressors, assisting the deprived, establishing justice which is the aim and goal of the Prophets' mission, providing the means of satisfaction for the broken-hearted and misfortunate, and such like. Every religion and every Prophet has enjoined these things. In addition, the reasoning and conscience of each individual rules that these things are good and worthy.

Now, we ask whether a non-Muslim is rewarded if he or she performs such services. The true religion says to be trustworthy and not lie; if a non-Muslim acts in accordance with this principle, will he or she be rewarded or not?

In other words, is it equal with respect to a non-Muslim to be trustworthy or treacherous? Are adultery and prayers equal with respect to him or her? This is the issue that we wish to discuss.

Two Ways of Thinking

Normally, those with an intellectual inclination say with certainty that there is no difference between a Muslim and non-Muslim, and even between a monotheist and non-monotheist; whoever performs a good deed, a service like establishing a charitable organization or an invention or something else,

deserves recompense from God.

They say that God is Just, and a God who is Just does not discriminate among His servants. What difference does it make for God whether His servant recognizes Him or not or believes in Him or not? Certainly, God will not ignore the good deeds or waste the reward of a person simply because that person doesn't have a relationship of familiarity and love with Him.

And even more certainly, if a person believes in God and does good deeds, but does not recognize His Messengers and thus does not have a relationship of familiarity and covenant of friendship with them, God will not cancel out and nullify his or her good deeds.

Directly opposite to these people are those who consider almost all people worthy of punishment and believe in a good end and accepted actions with respect to only a few. They have a very simple standard; they say that people are either Muslim or non-Muslim.

Non-Muslims, who are about three-fourths of the world's population, shall go to Hell because they are non-Muslims. The Muslims in their turn are either Sh`a or non-Sh`a. The non-Sh`as, who are about three-fourths of all Muslims, will go to Hell because they are non-Sh`as.

And of the Sh`as, too, a majority – about three-fourths – are only Sh`a in name, and it is a small minority that is familiar with even the first obligation, which is to perform “taqlid” of a mujtahid (follow the religious rulings of a particular scholar), let alone their remaining obligations, and the correctness and completeness of those obligations depends on this obligation.

And even those who perform taqlid are for the most part non-practicing. Thus, there are very few who will achieve salvation. This is the logic of the two sides: the logic of those who, it can almost be said, are absolute conciliation, and the logic of those who we can say are a manifestation of Divine anger, giving anger precedence over mercy.

The Third Logic

Here there is a third logic, which is the logic of the Qur'an. In this issue, the Qur'an gives us a concept that is different from the previous two ideas and that is peculiar to it. The Qur'an's view accords with neither the nonsensical idea of our so-called intellectuals, nor with the narrow-mindedness of our holier-than-thou pious people.

The Qur'an's view is rooted in a special logic that everyone, after learning of it, will admit is the correct position in this matter. And this fact increases our faith in this astonishing and remarkable Book and shows that its lofty teachings are independent of the worldly thoughts of human beings and have a celestial source.

Here we present the proofs of both disputing groups (the so-called intellectuals and the so-called pious)

and investigate them so that by critiquing them we can slowly arrive at the third logic in regard to this issue, that is, the logic and particular philosophy of the Qur'ān.

The So-Called Intellectuals

This group brings two types of proofs for their view: rational and narrational.

1. Rational proof. The rational demonstration that says that good deeds entail their reward no matter who performs them is based on two premises:

The first premise: God has an equal relation to all existent beings. His relation to all times and places is the same; just as God is in the East, He is in the West, and just as He is above, He is below.

God is in the present, past and future; the past, present, and future have no difference for God, just as above and below and East and West are the same for Him. Similarly His servants and creation are also the same for Him; He has neither family ties nor a special relationship with anyone.

Thus, God's showing grace or showing anger towards people is also the same, except when there are differences in the people themselves.¹

As a result, no one is dear to God without reason, and no one is lowly or outcast without justification. God has neither ties of kinship nor of nationality with anyone; and no one is the beloved or chosen one of God.

Since God's relation to all beings is the same, there remains no reason for a good deed to be accepted from one person and not from another. If the actions are the same, their reward will also be the same, since the assumption is that God's relation to all people is the same. So justice demands that God reward all those who do good whether Muslims or non-Muslims in the same way.

The second premise: The goodness or badness of actions is not based on convention, but on actual reality. In the terminology of scholars of theology and the science of principles of jurisprudence, the "goodness" or "badness" of actions is innate.

That is, good and bad deeds are differentiated by their essence; good deeds are good by their essence, and bad deeds are bad by their essence. Honesty, virtue, doing good, helping others, and so forth are good by their essence and lying, stealing, and oppression are bad by their essence.

The goodness of "honesty" or badness of "lying" is not because God has mandated the former and forbidden the latter. To the contrary, it is because "honesty" is good that God has obligated it and because "lying" is bad that God has forbidden it. In short, God's commanding or forbidding is based on the goodness or badness of actions in their essence, and not the other way around.

From these two premises, we conclude that since God does not discriminate, and since good deeds are

good from all people, whoever does a good deed will definitely and necessarily be rewarded by God. It is exactly the same way with regard to evil deeds since there is no difference between those who commit them.

2. Narrational proof. The Qur'an affirms in many verses the principle of non-discrimination among people in rewarding good deeds and punishing evil deeds – which was mentioned in the above rational proof.

The Qur'an strongly opposed the Jews, who believed in such discrimination. The Jews believed and still believe that the Jewish race is chosen by God; they would say, "We are the sons and friends of God. Supposing God sends us to Hell, it will not be for more than a limited time."

a) The Qur'an calls such ideas wishes and untrue thoughts and has strongly combated them. The Qur'an also points out the error of Muslims who have fallen prey to such deception. Here are some of the verses in this regard:

وَقَالُوا لَنْ تَمَسَّنَا النَّارُ إِلَّا أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَةً قُلْ أَتَّخَذْتُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَهْدًا فَلَنْ يُخْلِفَ اللَّهُ عَهْدَهُ أَمْ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ بَلَى مَنْ كَسَبَ سَيِّئَةً وَأَحَاطَتْ بِهِ خَطِيئَتُهُ فَأُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ

"And they said, the Fire shall not touch us except for (a few) numbered days. Say: have you taken a covenant with God, for God shall not violate His covenant, or do you attribute to God that which you don't know? Nay, those who earn evil and whose mistakes have enveloped them are the inhabitants of the Fire; they shall abide therein forever. And those who believe and do good are the inhabitants of Paradise; they shall abide therein forever."²

b) In another place, the Qur'an says in answer to the conjecture of the Jews:

وَعَرَّهْمُ فِي دِينِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ فَكَيْفَ إِذَا جَمَعْنَاهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ وَوُفِّيَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

"And their forgeries deceived them in their religion. So how will they be when We gather them for a day in which there is no doubt and every soul shall be given in full what it has earned; and they shall not be wronged."³

c) In another place, the Christians have been added to the Jews, and together they have been opposed by the Qur'an:

وَقَالُوا لَنْ يَدْخُلَ الْجَنَّةَ إِلَّا مَنْ كَانَ هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَى تِلْكَ أَمَانِيُّهُمْ قُلْ هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ بَلَى مَنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ فَلَهُ أَجْرُهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

“And they said, None shall enter Paradise except those who are Jews or Christians; this is their fancy. Say: bring your proof, if you are truthful. Rather, those who submit themselves to God and do good shall have their reward with their Lord; and they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.”⁴

d) In Sūratul Nisā, the Muslims too, have been added to the Jews and Christians. The Qur'an demolishes discriminatory thinking no matter who it is from. It is as though the Muslims had come under the effect of the thinking of the People of the Book, and in the face of they who without reason considered themselves superior, adopted such an opinion about themselves. The Qur'an says, refuting these immature fancies:

لَيْسَ بِأَمَانِيكُمْ وَلَا أَمَانِي أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مَنْ يَعْمَلْ سُوءًا يُجْزَ بِهِ وَلَا يَجِدْ لَهُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَى وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظَلَّمُونَ نَقِيرًا

“(This) shall not be in accordance with your vain desires nor in accordance with the vain desires of the followers of the Book. Whoever does evil, he shall be requited with it. He will find for himself neither a guardian nor a helper other than God. And whoever does good deeds whether male or female and he (or she) is a believer, it is these who shall enter paradise and they will not be wronged (so much as) the speck on a date stone.”⁵

e) Leaving aside the verses that condemn baseless suppositions of honour and nearness to God, there are other verses that say that God does not waste the reward of any good deed.

These verses have also been taken as proof of the acceptance of the good deeds of all people, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. In Sūratul Zilzāl, we read:

فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ وَ مَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُ

“So whoever does an atom’s weight of good shall see it, and whoever does an atom’s weight of evil shall see it.”⁶

Elsewhere, God says:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

“Verily God does not waste the reward of those who do good.”⁷

And in another place, He says:

إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ عَمَلًا

“Verily We do not waste the reward of those who do good.”⁸

The wording of these verses makes them universal statements that are not given to exceptions.

The scholars of the discipline of the principles of jurisprudence (Uṣūlul Fiqh) say that certain universal statements do not accept exceptions; that is, the wording and tone of the universal statement is such that it resists any exceptions.

When it is said, “We don’t waste the reward of the doer of good,” it means that God’s divinity demands that He preserve good deeds; thus it is impossible for God to disregard His divinity in one instance and waste a good deed.

f) There is another verse which is frequently referred to in this discussion, and it is said that it clearly points to the assertion of this group:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِقُونَ وَالنَّصَارَى مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

“Indeed the faithful, the Jews, the Sabaeans, and the Christians—those who have faith in God and the Last Day and act righteously—they will have no fear, nor will they grieve.”⁹

In this verse, three conditions have been mentioned for salvation and safety from God’s punishment: belief in God, belief in the Day of Judgement, and good deeds; no other condition is mentioned.

Some who are apparently intellectuals have gone one step further and said that the aim of the Prophets was to call towards justice and goodness, and in accordance with the rule “Comply with the spirit and not the letter of the law” we should say that justice and goodness are accepted even from those who don’t believe in God and the Day of Judgement.

Thus, those who don’t believe in God and the Day of Judgement but have made great cultural, medical, economical, or political contributions to humanity shall have a great reward. Of course, these people can argue on the basis of verses like:

إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ عَمَلًا

“We don’t waste the reward of one who does good,” and:

فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ

“So whoever does an atom’s weight of good shall see it,”

but verses like the one above contradict their assertion. Below we take a look at the proofs of the other group.

The Rigid Group

In opposition to the supposed intellectuals who claim that good deeds are accepted by God from all people in all situations are the “rigid pious ones”; their position is directly opposite to the former group.

They say that it is impossible for a non-Muslim’s actions to be accepted. The actions of unbelievers and similarly those of non-Sh`a Muslims have absolutely no value. The non-Muslim and non-Sh`a Muslim himself is rejected and rebuffed; his actions are even more worthy of being rejected. This group also brings two proofs: rational and narrated.

Rational proof: The rational proof of this group is that if it is supposed that the actions of non-Muslims and non-Sh`a Muslims are to be accepted by God, what is the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims?

The difference between them should be either for the good deeds of Muslims and Sh`as to be accepted to the exclusion of non-Muslims and non-Sh`a Muslims, or for the evil deeds of Muslims and Sh`as not to be punished, again to the exclusion of non-Muslims and non-Sh`a Muslims.

But if we suppose that the good deeds of both groups entail reward and the evil deeds of both groups lead to punishment, what difference will there be between them?

And what is the effect of being Muslim or Sh`a in such a case? The equality of Muslims and non-Muslims, and similarly Sh`as and non-Sh`as, in accounting for their actions means that in essence practicing Islam or Sh`aism is unnecessary and without effect.

Narrated proof: In addition to the above reasoning, this group also argues from two Qur'anic verses and several traditions.

In a few verses of the Qur'an, it has been clearly stated that the actions of unbelievers are not accepted; similarly, in many traditions it has been said that the actions of non-Sh`as – that is, those who do not have the wilayah (Divinely-ordained guardianship) of the Ahlul Bait (as) – are not accepted.

In Surat Ibrahim, God compares the actions of unbelievers to ashes which are scattered by a strong wind and lost:

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَرَمَادٍ اشْتَدَّتْ بِهِ الرِّيحُ فِي يَوْمٍ عَاصِفٍ لَأَقْدِرُونَ مِمَّا كَسَبُوا عَلَىٰ شَيْءٍ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الضَّلَالُ الْبَعِيدُ

“A parable of those who defy their Lord: their deeds are like ashes over which the wind blows hard on a tempestuous day: they have no power over anything they have earned. That is extreme error.”¹⁰

In a verse of Suratul Nur, the actions of unbelievers have been likened to a mirage which appears to be water but upon being approached, turns out to be nothing.

This verse says that great deeds that give people pause and, in the view of some simpleminded people, are greater than the services of even the Prophets are all null and void if they are not coupled with belief in God. Their greatness is nothing but a fancy, like a mirage. The words of the verse are as below:

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَسَرَابٍ بَقِيَعَةٍ يَحْسَبُهُ الظَّمَانُ مَاءً حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَهُ لَمْ يَجِدْهُ شَيْئًا وَوَجَدَ اللَّهَ عِنْدَهُ فَوَفَّاهُ حِسَابَهُ وَاللَّهُ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

“As for the faithless, their works are like a mirage in a plain, which the thirsty man supposes to be water. When he comes to it, he finds it to be nothing; but there he finds God, who will pay him his full account, and God is swift at reckoning.”¹¹

This is the parable of the good deeds of unbelievers, which appear outwardly to be good. So woe upon their evil deeds! We read their parable in the following verse in these words:

أَوْ كَظُلُمَاتٍ فِي بَحْرٍ لُجِّيٍّ يَغْشَاهُ مَوْجٌ مِّنْ فَوْقِهِ مَوْجٌ مِّنْ فَوْقِهِ سَحَابٌ ظُلُمَاتٌ
بَعْضُهَا فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ إِذَا أَخْرَجَ يَدَهُ لَمْ يَكِدْ يَرَاهَا وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ
مِنْ نُورٍ

“Or like the manifold darkness in a deep sea, covered by billow upon billow, overcast by clouds, manifold [layers of] darkness, one on the top of another: when he brings out his hand, he can hardly see it, and one whom God has not granted any light has no light.”¹²

By adding this verse to the previous verse, we deduce that the good deeds of unbelievers, with all their deceptive appearances, are a mirage that lacks reality. And as for their evil deeds, alas! They are evil above evil, darkness upon darkness!

The above verses clarify the status of the deeds of unbelievers.

As for non-Sh`a Muslims, from the point of view of us Sh`as, the traditions that have reached us from the Ahlul Ba`t (as) clarify their position.

Many traditions have reached us on this topic. Those interested can refer to al-Kaf, Volume 1, “Kitab al-Ujjah,” and Volume 2, “Kitab al-Imn wa ‘l-Kufr”; Was’ilush Sh`a, Volume 1, “Abwab Muqaddamat al-‘Ibdat”; Mustadrakul Was’il, Volume 1, “Abwab Muqaddamat al-‘Ibdat”; Biharul Anwar, “Discussions about Resurrection,” Chapter 17 (Chapter on the Promise, Threat, Invalidity of Actions, and Atonement), and Volume 7 of the old print, Chapter 227, and Volume 15 of the old print, section on ethics, Page 187. As an example, we relate one tradition from Was’ilush Sh`a:

Muhammad Ibn Muslim said, “I heard Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (as) say, *“Whoever worships God and tires himself in worship but doesn’t recognize the Imam (leader) God has appointed for him, his deeds are not accepted, and he himself is astray and lost, and God abhors his actions... and if he dies in this state, he dies not in the state of Islam, but in a state of unbelief and hypocrisy. O Muhammad Ibn Muslim, know that the leaders of oppression and their followers are outside the religion of God. They themselves went astray, and they led others astray. Their actions are like ashes which are caught in a strong wind on a stormy day, and they cannot reach anything out of what they have earned. That is the distant deviation.”*¹³

These are the proofs of those who say that the basis of salvation is faith and belief.

Occasionally, some from this group go to extremes and consider simply the claim of having faith, or in

reality a simple affiliation, to be the criterion of Judgement. For example, the Murj`ah sect in the era of Ban`Umayyah propagated this idea, and fortunately, with the decline of Ban`Umayyah, they also ceased to exist.

In that age, the Sh`a position, inspired by the Imams from the Ahlul Ba`it (as), was opposite to the Murj`ah one, but unfortunately the Murj`ahs' view has lately taken hold in new clothing among some of the common Sh`as.

Some simpleminded Sh`as consider mere apparent affiliation with Am`rul Mo`minin `Al` Ibn Ab` `alib (as) to be sufficient for salvation, and this idea is the basic factor behind the Sh`as' poor state in the modern era.

The dervishes and Sufis of the recent era malign good deeds in a different way and under a different pretext; they have made the issue of goodness of heart a pretext, even though true goodness of heart encourages and affirms deeds rather than conflicting with them.

As opposed to these groups, there are others who have raised the value of deeds to such a point that they say that one who commits a major sin is an unbeliever. Such a belief was held by the Kharijites. Some theologians considered the committer of major sins to be neither a believer nor unbeliever, and held that there is a "state between the two states (of belief and unbelief)."

Our task is to see which of these positions is correct. Should we believe in the primacy of belief or the primacy of action? Or is there a third path?

To begin, let us discuss the value of belief and faith.

1. Of course, this does not mean that all things have the same relation to God and deserve the same treatment. The relation of things to God is not the same, but the relation of God to things is the same. God is equally close to all things, but things are different in their closeness and distance from God. There is an interesting sentence in Du`al-Ifitih in this regard:

الَّذِي بَعْدَ فَلَا يُرَى، وَقَرُبَ فَشَهِدَ النَّجْوَى

In this sentence, God has been described thus: "Who is distant and thus cannot be seen, and Who is near and thus witnesses all conversations."

In fact, it is we who are far from Him, while He is close to us. This is an enigma; how is it possible for two things to have a different relation with each other in terms of closeness and distance? But yes, such is the case here; God is close to things, but things are not close to God – that is, they have varying states of closeness and distance.

The interesting point in this sentence is that when it describes God as being "far," it mentions an attribute of His creations as evidence, which is the attribute of sight: "None can see Him." And when it describes God as being "near," it mentions an attribute of God as evidence, which is the attribute of Divine presence and awareness. When speaking of our state, we use the attribute of "distance" for God, and when speaking of His state, we use the attribute of "closeness." Sa`d` says:

“یار نزدیکتر از من به من استو این عجیبتر که من از وی دورمچه کنم با که توان گفت که دوستدر کنار من و من مهجورم

He is a Friend closer to me than myself, and amazing it is that I am far from Him. What to do; who can I tell that the Friend is by my side, and I am forsaken!”

2. Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Baqarah (2), Verses 80–82
3. Al-Qurʿān, Sūrat ʿAlī Imrān (3), Verses 24–25
4. Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Baqarah (2), Verses 111–112
5. Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Nisā (4), Verses 123–124
6. Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Zilzāl (99), Verses 7–8
7. Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Tawbah (9), Verse 120
8. Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Kahf (18), Verse 30
9. Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Mʿīdah (5), Verse 69
10. Al-Qurʿān, Sūrat Ibrāhīm (14), Verse 18
11. Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Nūr (24), Verse 30
12. Al-Qurʿān Sūratul Nūr (24), Verse 40
13. Wasʿīlūsh Shʿāʿa, Volume 1, Part 1, Page 90

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/islam-and-religious-pluralism-ayatullah-murtadha-mutahhari/good-deeds-wit-hout-faith>