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17. Concerning Religious Disputation (Al-Jidal)

Abu Ja'far says, concerning disputation: "Disputation concerning Allah is prohibited, because it leads to that which does not befit Him"; then he quoted as-Sadiq, peace be upon him, as saying: "The speculative theologians (ahlu 'l-kalam) will perish, and those who accept the faith without question will be saved".

Abu 'Abdillah ash-Shaykh al-Mufid, may Allah have mercy upon him, comments that: Disputation is of two kinds; true (i.e., a sincere quest after the truth) and false (i.e., discussion without the object of arriving at the truth or merely to find fault).

The true disputation is recommended and desirable; whereas the false one is prohibited, and indulgence in it is abhorred. Allah, the Almighty, admonishing His Messenger, says:

And argue with them in the best manner [16:125],

which obviously states the legality of arguing with opponents in order to convince them, since the disputation of the Prophet was true. Also Allah, the

Almighty, addressing the whole Muslim community, says:

And argue not with the People of the Book except by what is best [29:46].

Thus, He permitted them to argue with the People of the Book with what is best, and prohibited indulgence in false and base disputation with them.

He, the Exalted, reporting the speech of the people of Noah, peace be upon him, in their disputation says: They said,

"O Noah! indeed you have disputed with us and prolonged dispute with us" [11:32].

Thus, if disputation was altogether vain, then Allah, the Almighty, would never have commanded His Prophet to adopt it, or the prophets before him to use it, and would not have allowed the Muslims to employ it.

As for the false disputation, Allah, the Almighty, the Belessed, has described it in His saying:

Have you not seen those who dispute (foolishly) about the signs of Allah, how they distort them? [40:69].

Thus, He reproached their false disputation concerning the signs of Allah, either to reject or to vilify them, or to cast suspicion on them. He, the Exalted, also reports the controversy of His friend, Ibrahim, with an unbeliever (concerning the existence of Allah) and says:

Have not you thought of him who disputed with Ibrahim about his Lord [2:258].

Also, reporting his refutation of his opponents, He says:

And that is Our argument, which We gave Ibrahim as against his people, We raise up in degrees whom We will [6:83].

Also, commanding His Prophet (Muhammad), peace be upon him and his progeny, to argue with. his opponents, He says:

Say: "Have you any knowledge, for you to bring forth for us?" [6: 148].

And He, Exalted be His Name, says:

All food was lawful to the Children of Israel [3:93],

and telling His Prophet, says:

Whoever then disputes with thee in this matter after the knowledge that has come to thee [3:61].

Moreover, the Imams still continued to debate the religion of Allah, and the learned amongst their followers in every age used to rely on sound argument and reasoned proofs in their polemics, in order to establish the truth and refute the false, and the Imams always praised them for that, and appreciated their efforts highly in this respect.

Chapter: al-Kulayni¹, may Allah have mercy upon him, relates in his book, al-Kafi, which is one of the most admirable books of the Shi'ah, the discussion Yunus ibn Ya'qub² had with Abu 'Abdillah, peace be upon him, when the Shami³ came to dispute with him.

Abu 'Abdillah said to him: "O Yunus! I wish that you had mastered speculative theology (kalam)"; thereupon Yunus replied: "May I be made your ransom! I have heard that you have forbidden people to dispute and that you have said; 'Woe unto those who indulge in dialectics, who say this is a tenable proposition and this is not, this consistent, and this not, and this is conceivable and this is not.'

"Then Abu 'Abdillah said: "I called woe upon them if they abandoned my teaching and clung to what is

opposite to it." Then he asked Humran ibn A'yan4, Muhammad ibn at- Tayyar5, Hisham ibn Salim6 and Qays al-Masir7 to hold a debate before him and afterwards Hisham8 (ibn al-Hakam) came forward with his thesis (lit. apology); then the Imam praised him and congratulated him, and said:

"It is you who can dispute with the people." Also, (it has been related) that when he heard of the death of at-Tayyar, he said: "May Allah have mercy upon him and show him splendor and happiness; indeed, he was vigorous in his defence of us, the People of the House." Abu 'I-Hasan Musa ibn Ja'far, peace be upon him, said to Muhammad ibn Hakim9:

"Dispute with the people and disclose the truth which you are following, and make clear the error into which they are fallen." Abu 'Abdillah (Ja'far as– Sadiq), peace be upon him, said to some of our companions: "Debate with the people with my argument, and if they overcome you by argument, it will be I who am controverter, not you."

Also, he said to Hisham ibn al-Hakam, after he had answered his question concerning the Names of the Almighty and their etymology: "Have you comprehended what I have explained to you to such an extent that you would be able to refute our heretical opponents and make their polemics of no effect?" "Yes," answered Hisham.

Then the Imam said: "May Allah help you". He also admonished a group of his followers and said: "Explain to the people the guidance which follow and show them the evils to which they adhere, and initiate (bahilhum fi 'Ali) discussion with them concerning 'Ali." Thus, the report displays that he (Ja'far as–Sadiq) encouraged them to dispute with others, and he admonished them to comprehend the methods of disputation, and recommended them to exert themselves in learning it.

It has been related also that he (the Imam) once forbade a man to dispute whereas he commanded another to exert himself in acquiring this art: there-upon, some of his followers asked him: "May I be made your ransom! Why have you commanded one of them to master disputation whereas you forbade it to other?" He answered: "Because the first has a keen insight into the matter and is more informed about it than the other."

Thus, the argument mentioned above confirms the fact that for the two sadiqs (i.e., the two veracious imams, Muhammad al-Baqir and his son, Ja'far as-Sadiq), prohibition only applies to a particular group of those who are not well-versed in it, and are uninformed in its methods, and whom dialectics confuse; and it (i.e., kalam) is commanded for the other group who have perfected it and mastered its methods.

As for the prohibition of disputation applied to Allah, this is, in fact, limited to discus- sion regarding the drawing of comparison between Him and His creation, and also charging Him with injustice. But as for discussion about Allah's unity and the denial of His resem- blance to His creation and the affirmation of His transcendence and His glory, there are many traditions and narrations commanding and encouraging it.

Some of these evidences I have recorded in my book al-Arkan fi da'aimi 'd-din, and I also wrote a comprehensive chapter in my book al-Kamil fi 'ulumi'ddin. Also, on this subject, my book 'Uqudu'd-din, contains a section; he who depends on it can dispense with everything else. Then it is self-evident that whosoever denies insight and reasoning bears witness to the weakness of his own opinion, and this displays his deficiencies in seeking knowledge and indicates his fall from the ranks of people of perception.

Also, we should discriminate between nazar and munazarah, (i.e., 'insight' and 'disputation'), since it is permissible some– times to restrain people from doctrinal disputation for the sake of their self–preservation (at–taqiyyah) 10, whereas it is not permissible, in any circumstances, to forbid them reasoning and insight; because to restrain them from exercising reason is to pave the way to blind imitation, which is sharply criticized by the unanimous opinion of the learned divines, as also by the plain text of the Qur'an and Tradition.

Allah, the Almighty, reporting the speech of the unbelievers, and reproaching their blind imitation says:

"Lo! We found our fathers upon a com- munity, and we are following upon their traces." [43:22], and also He, the Exalted, says:

(And the Warner said:) "What! even though I bring you a better guidance than you found your fathers following" [ibid.: 24].

al-Imam as-Sadiq, peace be upon him, says: "He who takes his faith from the mouth of men, men will make him slip (from the truth), but he who takes his faith from the Book and Tradition will never slip though mountains may slip (from their positions)."

Also, he says:

"Beware of blind imitation, because he who follows others blindly in his religion will be destroyed, since Allah says: They have taken as lords their Rabbis and their Monks [9:31].

By Allah they have never prayed for them nor fasted for their sake, but they declared lawful what was forbidden and considered forbidden for them what was lawful and they followed them blindly in what they enjoyed and what they forbade, and therefore, they worshipped them unconsciously 11. And he says: "He who responds to a Warner has worshipped him, then if he was sent by Allah he has worshipped Allah, and if he was from Satan, then he has worshipped Satan."

(The logical conclusion of our argument, then is that) if blind imitation was approved and insight was vain, then to imi- tate one group is no more praiseworthy than to imitate another, and also, whoever erred through imitation would have been excused, and whoever follows an innovator would not have sinned.

But this is an assumption which no one (endowed with reason) would assert; thus, it is a self-evident

fact that reasoned speculation is right, and sincere disputation is approved, and as for the traditions which Abu Ja'far, may Allah have mercy upon him, related their true interpretation is the one which we have put forward, and the real meaning is not what he has imagined. And Allah is the truest supporter.

- 1. Muhammad ibn Yaʻqub ibn Ishaq al-Kulayni ar-Razi: He is known as Abu Jaʻfar, the compiler of the great compendium of Shiʻite traditions, al- Kafi fi ʻilmi 'd-din, which occupies in Shiʻism a position analogous with that of the Sahih, of al-Bukhari among the Sunnis. It was his life-work and took twenty years to compile. He is called, in recognition of his diligence in collecting Shiʻite traditions, the Trustworthy authority of Islam "Thiqatu'l-Islam", (In respect to Thiqatu 'l-Islam al-Kulayni and the book of al- Kafi, see our two introductions to the English translation of al-Kafi at the beginning of the "The Book of Reason and Ignorance" [ed.])al-Kulayni was born porbably before 260/847, and died in Baghdad in Shaʻban, 329 AH (May, 941 AD). For a critical and detailed account of his life and work see Ivanow, W., The Alleged Founder of Ismaʻilism, pp.Il-27. Also, the "Introduction" to the new edition of al-Kafi by Dr. HusaynʻAli Mahfuz (Tehran, 1381 AH). an-Najashi, op. cit. p.266; at-Tusi, op. cit., p.495; al-Mamagani, op. cit., vol.3, p.211, no.11540.
- 2. Yunus ibn Yaʻqub ibn Qays: His kunyah was Abu ʻAli al–Jallab. He wascontemporary with both as–Sadiq, the sixth Imam, and his son, al–Kazim (a.s.). He was highly esteemed by the Shiʻah for his profound knowledge of fiqh. The Shiʻah biographers honour him for being the author of a book on pilgrimage, which is counted among the Four Hundred Principle Books. He died during the imamate of the Eighth Imam, 'Ali ibn Musa ar–Rida (203/ 818). See an–Najashi, op. cit., p.311; al–Kishshi, op. cit., p.245; at– Tusi, op. cit., p.335; al–Mamaqani, op. cit., vo1.3, p.344, no.13365.
- 3. 24 For more detail concerning this debate, see al-Kulayni, al-Kafi, vol.l ,p. 171; al-Mamaqani, op. cit., vol.l, p. 371.
- 4. Humran ibn A'yan ash-Shaybani: His kunyah is variously reported as Abu '1-Hasan or Abu Hamzah. He was a distinguished traditionist and jurist. He was contemporary with both Imams, al-Baqir and as-Sadiq (a.s.), and was highly respected by the latter, of whom it is reported that he said: "Humran is one of our company both in this world and the world here- after". He also promised him paradise for his intimacy with the Family of the Prophet, and his staunch defence of the Shi'ah tenets.

Opinions differ concerning his trustworthiness, thus, while the Shi'ah authorities generally praised him and accepted him as a reliable transmitter, the orthodox were split; some discarded his reports, others accepted them as genuine and reliable. See al–Kishshi, op. cit., p.117; at–Tusi, op. cit., p.117; al–Mamaqani, op. cit., vol.l, pp.370–2, no.3351; adh–Dhahabi, Mizanu 'l–i'tidal, vol.1, p.604, no.2292; Ibn Hajar, Tahdhibu 't–tahdhib, vo1.3, p.25, no.32; Ibnu'n–Nadim, al–Fihrist, p.220.

- 5. Muhammad ibn 'Abdillah ibn at-Tayyar: A follower of the Fifth ImamMuhammad al-Baqir (a.s.). He was known as a dialectic theologian and a reciter of the Qur'an. See al-Kishshi, op. cit., pp.222-3; at-Tusi, op. cit., pp.135-292; al-Mamagani, op. cit., vol.3, p.134, no.10895.
- 6. See al-Kafi, "Introduction" to "The Book of Divine Unity", (Eng. transl.), published by WOFIS, Tehran.
- 7. Qays al-Masir: The famous Shi'ah theologian and traditionist, who lived during the first half of the second century of the hijrah. He was an intimateassociate of the Fourth Imam, 'Ali ibn al-Husayn (d. 92/710-1), from whom, it is said, he acquired skill in disputation. He relates many tradit- ions on the authority of as-Sadiq (a.s.). See al-Mamaqani, op. cit., vol.2, p.33, no.9728; al-'Amili, A'yanu 'sh-Shi'ah, vol.1, pt.2, p.77.
- 8. See al-Kafi, "Introduction" to "The Book of Divne Unity", (Eng. transl.), published by WOFIS, Tehran.
- 9. Muhammad ibn Hakim al-Kath'ami: His kunyah was Abu Ja'far. He was associated with both as-Sadiq and his son al-Kazim (a.s.). See at-Tusi,op. cit., p.316; an-Najashi, op. cit., p.205; al-Mamaqani, op. cit., vo1.3, p.109, no.10624.
- 10. See p.92.
- 11. al-Kulayni, al-Kafi, "Babu 't-Taqlid", vol.l, p.53.

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