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3. Third approach to the relativity of knowledge (relativity of religious knowledge)

One of the types of relativism is the relativity of religious knowledge. Some people say: "We also acknowledge that religion is immutable and absolute and that religious values are also consistent with the real, essential and permanent interests and corruptions, and we regard the reality of religion as absolute and fixed. However, we have no access to the real and absolute religion and we cannot establish connection with it. What is accessible to us and at our disposal is our knowledge or understanding of religion. What we present to others as religion is actually our understanding or perception of religion, and others may possibly have their own understanding or perception of religion. We recognize the essence of religion as fixed and absolute but we consider our understanding or knowledge of religion as alterable and relative, believing that one must not treat as absolute his knowledge or understanding of religion and impose his ideas upon others."

At this point, this question is raised: Is it possible for some of our religious understandings to be absolute yet accepted or not by everybody, and that there is no absolute understanding in the realm of religious knowledge, and any knowledge of every religious subject is relative or subjective? As a result, it is possible that there is contradiction between two religious understandings and these two are in total opposition to each other. That is, a person totally believes in a religious narrative while another person totally rejects it, whereas the understanding and perception of religion of both is acceptable and credible!

This third approach on relativism which has been known as relativity of religious knowledge and understanding and whose exponents have labeled it as "the contraction and expansion of the path" has been advanced and promoted in our country for approximately the past two decades. Everyday, it is intensively and extensively discussed more in newspapers and magazines on the basis of which, it is shown that all people do not have equal understanding of religion. One may possibly say according to his belief, "Subh [dawn] prayer has two rak'ahs [cycles or units]," and another person would say based

on his belief and understanding of religion, "Subh prayer has three rak'ahs," while both of them are credible and acceptable!

According to this view, once we believe that *subh* prayer has two *rak'ah*s, we have no right to ask others to perform it in two *rak'ah*s. According to our understanding and interpretation of religion, *subh* prayer has two *rak'ah*s. There might be another understanding of religion according to which *subh* prayer consists of three *rak'ah*s. The latter is also an understanding or interpretation of religion. There is no difference between the two interpretations in terms of value. The interpretation of every person is worthy of respect for himself. No one has the right to treat his interpretation of religion as absolute and ask others to understand and interpret religion the way he understands and interprets it!

My understanding or interpretation of religion is that which is pleasing and the truth for me. The same is true for another person. This is in spite of the contradiction between the two interpretations because knowledge and understanding has contractions and extensions such that one of the interpretations or understanding may possibly be on one side of a spectrum while another interpretation on the other side. It is possible that today a person proves a religious narrative and tomorrow another person negates it. The reason behind these differences is that real religion is inaccessible to us and what is at our disposal is our knowledge of religion. This knowledge and interpretation is also alterable and not the same for all persons.

The distinction between the domain of relative interpretations and the domain of absolute interpretations

At the outset, let us pose these questions: Do the proponents of the theory of "the contraction and expansion of the path" believe that every case in religion can have many interpretations, understandings and readings? Do only some religious cases have different interpretations and readings? Most of the reasons they cite prove only the difference of interpretations and understandings of some religious narratives.

But they generalize this specific reason and apply it to the entire domain of religion and all religious narratives. Then, they conclude that all religious narratives are subject to different interpretations and understandings. One of these reasons is the difference in the religious edicts [fatawa] of mujtahids and fuqaha.

Their claim is that in the realm of Islam, its jurisprudence in particular, the *fatawa* of *mujtahid*s are different from each other. One *mujtahid* opines that the Friday congregational prayer is *wajib* (even during this period of major occultation [*ghaybah al-kubra*]) while another says that it is not *wajib*. One decrees that playing chess is *haram* while another considers it *halal* [permissible or lawful]. One declares a certain form of music as *haram* while another says that it is *halal*.

Thus, the fatawa and understandings of the fugaha and mujtahids are subjective, alterable and variable

such that even a single *mujtahid* can possibly have two different religious edicts on an issue. For example, some *fuaqaha* give a *fatwa* at a given time and after sometime, they recant the said edict and issue another. So, this difference of *fatawa* and understanding is a proof that our knowledge or interpretation of religion is subjective and changeable, and that it is impossible for the knowledge or understanding of religion to be fixed and absolute.

We argue that everybody including an illiterate person living in a far-flung village knows that the *fatawa* of *mujtahid*s are not identical in the sphere of the branches of religion [*furu'ad-din*] and some religious obligations. But this difference of *fatawa* does not warrant you to claim that even the Apostle's (*s*) knowledge of revelation [*wahy*] revealed to him is not absolute on the ground that the knowledge of the Apostle (*s*) also belongs to the realm of human knowledge and subject to be mistaken! That is, when God says in the Qur'an,

﴾قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ

"Say, 'He is Allah, the One'"1 or

﴾ وَإِلَهُكُمْ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ لا إِلَهَ إِلاَّ هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ ﴿

"Your god is the One God; there is no god except Him, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful,"2

Can it be said that we do not know if the revelation is from God? It is through the claim of the Apostle (*s*) that we have been informed of divine revelation. But we have no information of divine revelation. What the Apostle (*s*) has introduced to us is not the essence of divine revelation, rather a product of his knowledge and understanding of it, and since he is but human and thus fallible, it is probable that he might have erred in receiving and understanding it. God might have wanted to say something and he might have erroneously understood it otherwise and perceived his knowledge as divine revelation. The outcome of such a view is that none of the understanding of any of the Qur'anic verses is credible, and in all of them there is the possibility of mistake and error!

Is this a new interpretation of religion? Has the scope of interpretations extended to such magnitude and depth? We acknowledge that there is difference in the *fatawa*, but is the existence of God also doubtful, and can it be accepted that a person will prove the existence of God in the name of Islam and the essence of revelation while another person will negate it, and both claims will be credible as religious knowledge?! Contrary to what the Sunni and Shi'ah *'ulama'* of different schools of thought have declared and stated, can we claim that they have erred and misunderstood it and what they have expressed is their own interpretation, and that we also have our own interpretation?

It is possible to have different interpretations in the domain of issues pertaining to the branches of

religion and not in the domain of issues pertaining to any of the roots of religion [usul ad-din]. Moreover, in the realm of secondary and hypothetical issues of religion, only the opinions of religious experts and authorities are credible and not that of any neophyte or amateur.

What are credible are the opinions of those who have studied for more than 50 years under the teachers like the late Ayatullah Burujirdi, Imam Khomeini and 'Allamah Dabataba'i (may Allah be pleased with them) and have undergone hardships and tribulations, have piety in action, understanding, research, and deduction, and are not under the influence of whims and caprice. In the realm of religion, the opinion of any sensual xenomaniac neophyte who studies Islam for only a short period yet introduces himself as a religious expert is not credible.

In sum, the difference of opinion or the existence of various interpretations is acceptable only in the hypothetical and metaphorical [mutashabihat] issues of religion. In its indisputable, definitive [muhkamat], essential, and self-evident issues, Islam has only one interpretation and that is the interpretation of God and His Apostle (s). In that domain, there is no room for difference of opinion, skepticism and presentation of various interpretations. As such, no difference in it has emerged for the past fourteen hundred years since the birth of Islam.

We witnessed that when the eminent Imam issued the death sentence to the apostate Salman Rushdie, all the true 'ulama' of Islam affirmed it without any dissenting opinion. They said in unison that what the Imam issued was the decree of Islam. Of course, some xenomaniacs who are ignorant of Islam condemned the decree, saying: "Such is not our interpretation of Islam." Yet, it is clear that the intelligent people in the world consider as credible and valuable only the opinion of those who are authorities in the pertinent field, conducting research and expressing views by using correct methods of research appropriate to the given field.

- 1. Surah al-Ikhlas (or at-Tawhid) 112:1.
- 2. Surah al-Baqarah 2:163.
- 3. It refers to Ayatullah al-'Unma Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn Burujirdi (1292-1380 AH). [Trans.]
- 4. It refers to 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn 🗈 abataba'i, the renowned author of Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an. [Trans.]

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