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Chapter 5: Human Origin and End

Question

About twenty years ago in Tabriz, in a literary circle, one of my friends mentioned a few points concerning determinism, freedom, and how human conduct is evaluated. He said that human beings return to the life of this world many times—between 80 to 100 times. Of course, they return not in the form of vegetables or animals, as some believers in reincarnation hold; rather, they return as human beings, and their affairs in each life is determined by their conduct in the previous life. It is only this explanation, he insisted, that could account for the many hardships and difficulties that people experience in this world.

Adam, for instance, sinned and was expelled to the earth. He died but was subsequently returned to the earth to receive the treatment he had earned in his previous life. All people undergo such consecutive lives. In each life they are different. In one life, they may be scholars, in others laypeople; in some they may be rulers, in others ordinary citizens; in some they may be beautiful, in others ugly; and so on and so forth.

It is only after living many lives and passing many tests that they earn what they actually deserve. It is based on this truth, he contended, that the Qur'an asserts that on the Day of Judgment no one will object to the evaluation of his deeds. This friend argued that if this was not the case, it would be unjust that one should turn out to be the Prophet and another Shimr. 1

Another point that my friend made was that Adam was not literally an individual human being as I and you. He was the universal human being, subsuming in his existence all individual human beings, similar to a cluster of grape, which encompasses many grapes. As the human beings collectively sinned they were ousted from Paradise. If Adam was merely one individual human being who had sinned, why then should other humans bear the burden of his sin? To support this claim he also cited the Qur'anic verse that states that humankind made a pledge to God, indicating that all human beings were present along with Adam.

Another issue raised by this friend, which relates to the first point, was that if each individual had only

one life and then died for good, the majority of humans would not deserve entrance into Paradise nor damnation to Hell. They would rather have a middle position, since the good and bad deeds of most people are equal.

This contradicts the Qur'anic division of humanity into the people of Paradise and the people of Hell. The only explanation that could account for such division, according to this friend, is that afforded by reincarnation [tanasukh]. After experiencing life in this world over and over again, it is then that people attain to what they deserve, whether it be damnation to Hell or entry into Paradise.

Please respond to these questions.

Answer

To answer the questions raised above duly, one would need to provide detailed explanations. This, however, is not possible for me at present, for a variety of reasons. Therefore, I will treat these questions in brief, in the hope that the questioner will find his answer.

The belief that the soul returns to this world after death in another life is referred to as reincarnation. The advocates of this belief are, for the main part, idol-worshipers. They are of the opinion that if an individual succeeds in purifying his soul of all worldly impurities, he will attain union with God and, consequently, divinity. If, however, he fails to reach this lofty goal, there are two possibilities.

If he was virtuous in his prior life, he will return to this world in another body to be rewarded in worldly pleasures. This process will repeat, and each time he will be compensated in accordance with his conduct in the prior life. This is if he was virtuous in the previous life. If, however, he was evil, he will return to this world to be punished for his wrongs; he may degenerate into a lower form of existence, even possibly turning into an inanimate object. But, regardless of the person's moral state, reincarnation will continue indefinitely. It is based on this belief that believers in reincarnation deny a Day of Judgment and claim that the world is eternal.

This friend of yours, however, limits the number of reincarnations to 100. He believes in the Day of Judgment and in Resurrection but does not accept the idea of an individual progenitor for humankind. He disagrees with the main advocates of reincarnation in that he accepts the Islamic notion of receiving reward or punishment in the Hereafter. Thus, his explanation of reincarnation is that the human being in the course of multiple lives attains to the status that is appropriate to him, but his requital will be delivered on the Day of Judgment. His argument for supporting this belief is grounded on several points.

First, one life is insufficient grounds for determining an individual's character. As such, any divine evaluation based on a single life would be arbitrary. To accept such arbitrary evaluation is tantamount to acquiescing to the notion of determinism (that human beings have no choice as to the life they lead, and it is God who predetermines one as the Prophet and another as Shimr). And the logical conclusion of

determinism is God's injustice. Thus, if we wish to avoid this conclusion, we have no choice, this friend argues, but to embrace the doctrine of reincarnation.

Second, we know by the testimony of the Qur'an that on the Day of Judgment all creatures will accept God's evaluation of their conduct. This acceptance is undoubtedly due to their genuine agreement not out of fear of God's wrath, for that would implicate God's injustice. This friend claims that the only reasonable explanation for this agreement is the doctrine of reincarnation: those who receive a negative evaluation know that they deserve it, for they were given multiple chances, but they still failed.

Third, a single life is too short to offer all people equal opportunities. On the Day of Judgment, the thief could argue that he was penniless and so was forced to steal. One guilty of fornication could legitimately claim that the circumstances were not right for marriage, and so fornication was out of necessity. Hence, one life is too limited a basis for dividing humankind into the righteous, who go to heaven, and the evil, who end up in Hell.

These are the central points in your friend's line of reasoning. He is, however, incorrect on every account. First, his limiting the number of reincarnations to 80 or 100 is unwarranted. But in spite of that, the Qur'an—which treats of human life and conduct and eschatology in numerous verses—makes no mention of reincarnation. On the contrary, it states that there is only one life in this world:

"You were lifeless and He gave you life, then He will make you die, and then He shall bring you to life, and then you will be brought back to Him."2

"They will say, 'Our Lord! Twice did You make us die, and twice did You give us life. We admit our sins. Is there any way out [of this plight]?"3

The latter verse quotes those sentenced to Hell and unambiguously points out that humankind experience two deaths: one to the life of this world and another to the life of the Intermediate World [barzakh].

The first objection that this friend states is the problem of determinism. But if determinism is to pose a problem, a multiplicity of lives would not solve it. Suppose a person is reincarnated 100 times, and each time he commits a sin—say, murder. In such a case, the determinist will still hold that the punishment that the individual in question will receive on account of the murder is unjust, as he committed it involuntarily.

If, however, we side with the proponents of freewill, to which we are naturally inclined, we will acknowledge that when a sane adult commits a crime, he deserves due punishment. It is unreasonable to claim that one must commit a misdeed 100 times, for instance, in order to deserve retribution. In this light, Shimr's heinous decision to slay the grandson of the Prophet was his choice, and thus he alone bears the burden. God does not dictate anyone's life.

This friend's next premise is that people will willingly submit to God's judgment. From this, he infers that the human being experiences more than one life in this world, for otherwise he would be displeased with God's judgment. This inference, however, is flawed. Humankind's submission to God's judgment is on account of their awareness that they had many opportunities in their worldly life to rectify their conduct, but they failed to take advantage of them.

The shame of their guilt will force them into silence. (In this relation, it is helpful to consider that all of what we have in this life, even our very existence, are God's bounties, which He has bestowed on us. Our relation to Him is one of absolute indebtedness, and this makes the burden of our guilt on the Day of Judgment even more onerous.)

This friend further contends that distinguishing righteous people from evil people is fortuitous unless they live more than one life. Again, this contention is invalid. Sound reason rules that three factors suffice in designating an individual as guilty or innocent: adulthood, sanity, and voluntary performance. When these three factors are present in an individual and he commits a misdeed, he is guilty, regardless of any other factor. This is the basis of law in all civilized societies, and it is also endorsed by Islamic law.

According to the Qur'an, we deserve the reward or punishment of every single deed we perform. For this reason, it exhorts believers to repent even if only for a single sin; one need not be an inveterate sinner to repent. Islamic law defines penalties—including the death penalty—even for individuals guilty of a single crime. 4 This is God's judgment in this world, and it is unreasonable to assume that it will be different in the Hereafter.

The above explanation makes clear that for most people one life is sufficient to determine their fate in the Hereafter. But in cases where a person's good and bad deeds are truly balanced, such that neither side prevails, those entrusted by God with the authority to intercede will secure his entrance to Heaven. 5 (Of course, this intervention is not arbitrary. It is granted to those who have faith in their worldly life but who commit too many sins to be allowed into Heaven on account of their conduct.)

Let us now consider more thoroughly Qur'an's treatment of this subject. In respect to the final outcome, the Qur'an distinguishes two groups: those who will attain to felicity in Heaven and those damned to Hell—

فَأُمَّا الَّذِينَ شَقُوا فَفِي النَّارِ

"As for the wretched, they shall be in the Fire... As for the felicitous, they will be in Paradise."6

This is in relation to the final outcome. At the time of reckoning, however, there will be three groups: the righteous who have earned their entry into Heaven, the damned who will certainly enter Hell, and the oppressed [mustad'afin], those whose cases are unsettled. Regarding the latter group, the Qur'an states:

"[They] are waiting God's edict: either He shall punish them, or turn to them clemently..."7

And in yet another division, the Qur'an points to two groups of felicitous people:

"You will be three groups: the People of the Right Hand—and what are the People of the Right Hand? And the People of the Left Hand—and what are the People of the Left Hand? And the Foremost Ones are the Foremost ones."8

This friend's other thesis is that Adam is the universal human being, not a particular individual. He supports this thesis with two lines of reasoning. First, the story of Adam's fall indicates that all human beings were present at the time. If Adam as a specific human being was exclusively to blame for the sin, it would be unjust for others to bear the consequence. We are still suffering from the consequence, and therefore, we are all guilty of that sin. Conclusion: we were all present at and complicit in that incident.

Second, the Qur'an states that prior to our existence in this world, God made us acknowledge that He was our Lord, lest we should claim on the Day of Judgment that we were ignorant.

9 This reveals that all human beings were created before this world and so were present when the primordial sin was

committed.

His line of reasoning, however, is fallacious. We derive the story of Adam from the Qur'an, not from the Torah or the Evangel or any other mythic source. The Qur'an very clearly describes Adam as a human individual and the progenitor of humankind:

"O humankind! Be wary of your Lord who created you from a single soul, and created its mate from it, and, from the two of them, scattered numerous men and women..."10

This verse declares Adam and Eve as the progenitors of humankind.

The other aspect of this thesis is to some degree true. That is, all human beings have the potential to attain to the status of Divine vicegerency, and so Adam was, as it were, humankind's representative: we are possessed of the same qualities that gave Adam his distinctive position. This is no indication, however, that human beings were actually present there.

But as regards Adam's sin, the popular conception is incorrect. The Qur'an makes it clear that prior to Adam and Eve's descent to earth, religion had not yet been ordained:

"We said, 'Descend together. When guidance comes to you from Me...""11

As such, it is incorrect to speak of sin, for sin is a violation of religious law. In this light, the prohibition on eating from the forbidden tree was not binding; it was an advisory warning, which God made out of His love for Adam.

This friend argues that all human beings were present with Adam and abetted him in the primordial sin. The reason is that they are also bearing the burden: expulsion from Paradise and banishment to earth; God would definitely not commit such an injustice as punishing the innocent. But this line of reasoning is, once again, false.

The truth is that God meant for humankind to live and procreate on the earth from the very start. When God intended to create Adam, he thus addressed the angels:

"...Indeed I am going to set a vicegerent on the earth..." 12

The angels also knew that the human being was meant to live on the earth. This is evident from the following verse:

"... Will You set in [the earth] one who will cause corruption in it, and shed blood... "13

Even Satan knew that Adam and Eve's presence in Paradise was not permanent and that they had to leave in order to procreate:

"Said [Satan], 'Do You see this one whom You have honored above me? If You respite me until the Day of Resurrection, I will surely destroy his progeny, all except a few."14

Thus, the stratagem he contrived for deceiving them pertained to their procreative aspect:

"Then Satan tempted them to expose to them what was hidden from them of their nakedness [i.e., their genitalia]..." 15

Thus, the human being's presence in Paradise was a preparation for his descent to the earth, for ordainment of religion, and for his acquaintance with religious discipline. The degree of perfection that the human being can achieve in the earth with guidance from divine religion is much higher than what he had in Paradise before coming to the earth. Though life in the earth is afflicted with hardship (the Qur'an says,

"...do not let [Satan] expel you two [Adam and Even] from Paradise, or you will be miserable..."16

Also, He said:

"Certainly We created man in travail." 17

But it is the prelude to the eternal life of the Hereafter. Life in this world is a test:

"... We will inflict on you good and ill as a test..." 18

Through this test, the human being can achieve such a level of perfection as would be impossible without it.

- 1. In the tragedy of Karbala, the officer of Yazid's army who beheaded the Prophet's grandson, al-Husayn. [trans.]
- 2. Surah al-Baqarah 2:28; according to this verse, the human being is brought to life, then he passes into the Intermediate World [barzakh], then he is resurrected on the Day of Judgment, and finally he attains to the final abode. Thus there is only one life in this world. [trans.]
- 3. Surah al-Ghafir (or Mu'min) 40:11.
- 4. Please note that 'Allamah's intention here is only to prove that we are responsible for every action we perform.

 Otherwise, Islam's penal code is very civil. For the execution of any penalty, there are a number of provisions that must be fulfilled. An extensive treatment of Islam's penal code is way beyond the scope of this book. [trans.]
- 5. The following verse is one instance where the Qur'an mentions the doctrine of intervention:

"He knows that which is before them and that which is behind them, and they do not intercede except for someone He approves of..."

(Surah al-Anbiya' 21:28)

- 6. Surah Hud 11:106-108.
- 7. Surah al-Tawbah (or Bara'ah) 9:106.
- 8. Surah al-Waqi'ah 56:7-11.
- 9. See Surah al-A'raf 7:172-3. [trans.]
- 10. Surah al-Nisa' 4:1.
- 11. Surah al-Baqarah 2:38.
- 12. Surah al-Baqarah 2:30.
- 13. Surah al-Baqarah 2:30.
- 14. Surah Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:62.
- 15. Surah al-A'raf 7:20; in the Islamic tradition, the Forbidden Tree is not a source of knowledge of good and evil as the Judeo-Christian tradition has it (Genesis 2 and 3) but a source of sensual debauchery. Thus the Qur'an states that when Adam and Even ate from its fruit, they saw one another's private parts, of which they had previously been unaware. [trans.]
- 16. Surah Ta Ha 20:117.
- 17. Surah al-Balad 90:4.
- 18. Surah al-Anbiya' 21:35.

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