

Chapter 5: Religious Pluralism (Part 3)

[A Review of the Psychological Motive in Presenting Pluralism](#)

In the previous session, we pointed out that one of the motives in presenting and promoting pluralism is a psychological motive which is in the mind of many individuals, especially the youngsters. When they see that there are different religions and sects in the world and that there are individuals who in outmost sincerity, truthfulness and seriousness believe in these religions and faithfully observe their ordinances, this question comes to their minds: Is it possible for all of these people to be dwellers of hell and only a few Muslims from a particular sect (Shi'ah) be the inhabitants of paradise?

This is true if it is taken into account that among the Shi'ah, only those who we are sure to be admitted to paradise are those who have either not committed any sin or in case of committing any sin they have repented afterward. Since this matter is, in a sense, so improbable for people and could not accept it, the same thing gives more credit to the notion that the followers of other religions, at least those who are faithful to their own religion and abide by its commands, are also people of salvation and will be admitted to paradise.

We explained during the previous session that in order to remove this probability, we have to bear in mind that when we say that the only true religion is the religion of Islam and following it will lead to the felicity and salvation of man, it does not necessarily follow that all other human beings will be thrown to hellfire. In general, other people (non-Muslims) can be divided into two groups. Of course, as to which of these two groups is in majority or in minority is a statistical discussion which has nothing to do with our concern.

The first group refers to those who have strived hard in recognizing the truth and really wanted to attain it but for whatever reason they have failed. The second group consists of those who, in spite of the presence of the suitable conditions to search for the truth, they have not pursued it, or in spite of their recognition of Islam as the true religion they have decided not to accept it. Those who will be thrown to hellfire are the latter group, but the former group that has strived in searching for the religion of truth but committed errors in identifying it or failed to attain it shall be dealt with differently.

In case those who in the science of jurisprudence [*fiqh*] and scholastic theology [*kalam*] are technically called “downtrodden” [*musta’af*] that is, mentally downtrodden abide by the truths they have found through their own intellects or through the teachings of a certain faith, they will receive the reward of their good deeds. Of course, as to whether on the Day of Resurrection these people will be placed at the lowest level of heaven or in an intermediary world between heaven and hell, or the scene of trial on the Day of Resurrection will be held for this kind of people is another issue. At any rate, this group will not be subjected to the eternal punishment.

Explaining the verse, “Should anyone follow a Religion other than Islam, it shall never be accepted from him”

The question which is posed here and the reason behind reviewing a part of the previous session’s discussion is actually to deal with this question is this: The Holy Qur’an states, thus:

وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

Should anyone follow a religion other than Islam, it shall never be accepted from him, and he will be among the losers in the Hereafter. (3:85)

This Qur’anic verse is explicit in stating that no religion other than Islam shall be accepted from the people. This is while your line of argument maintains that the other religions, more or less, will somehow be accepted also. How will you solve this problem?

This verse has an exegesis–related discussion and if we lengthily embark on it here, we will drift away from the main discussion. Nevertheless, the general point is that the religion sent down by God the Exalted to the people during the time of Ibrahim (Patriarch Abraham) was the religion of Islam and the people were obliged to act upon its commandments until such time that a new set of laws [*shari’ah*] would be revealed. When Prophet Moses was commissioned to the apostleship, the law of Abraham was abrogated, but the religion of Moses was the same religion of Islam with the only difference that some of its laws abrogated the pertinent ones in the *shari’ah* of Abraham (‘a).

The *shari’ah* of Musa (Moses) was also abrogated with the coming of ‘Isa (Jesus) and the people were commissioned to act upon the new *shari’ah* which was different from that of ‘Isa (‘a), but the religion of ‘Isa (‘a) was the same Islam (which is submission to God’s will). And finally, with the advent of the Prophet of Islam (S), all the previous *shari’ahs* were abrogated and thereafter the people were ordered by God to act upon the *shari’ah* of Muhammad (S), and as we know, the *shari’ah* of Muhammad (S) is the same Islam. Of course, this *shari’ah* has peculiar laws, decrees and features which makes it superior to the past *shari’ahs*. Here, Islam acquires a certain meaning as we refer to it today. Given this explanation, it became clear that Islam is conceived differently.

It was once referred to as the *shari'ah* of Ibrahim (‘a); at another time as the *shari'ah* of Musa (‘a), and so with the other *shari'ahs*. The meaning of the verse, “*Should anyone follow a religion other than Islam, it shall never be accepted from him*” is that every person at the time of any of these representations of Islam must follow it and any religion other than it shall not be accepted from him. Anyhow, there is no doubt that the religion of those who have accepted the religion of Ibrahim, Musa or ‘Isa (‘a) will be accepted by God the Exalted. So, the meaning of this verse that at this time, any religion other than Islam will not be accepted is that at this time, you have to accept whatever God has sent down through the other prophets (‘a).

Besides, you have to accept as well the particular laws brought by the Prophet of Islam (S). Of course, abrogation of laws is not only confined to a certain *shari'ah's* abrogation of some laws of the earlier *shari'ah*. In fact, it is also possible in a certain *shari'ah* for a new law to abrogate an old law. For example, in Islam, as you know, during the early years of the Prophet's prophethood, Muslims used to pray facing Bayt al-Maqdis (in Jerusalem) and this decree remained even after the Prophet's migration [*hijrah*] from Mecca to Medina. However, after sometime and during his lifetime, the *qiblah* [direction in prayer and other rituals] was changed from Bayt al-Maqdis to the Ka‘bah (in Mecca). Therefore, the abrogation of some laws [*ahkam*] does not change the essence of a religion, which consists of the belief in monotheism, prophethood and the Day of Resurrection. Belief in prophethood means to believe in all the prophets (‘a):

﴿ آمَنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴾ كُلُّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْ رُسُلِهِ وَقَالُوا سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا ﴿ غُفْرَانَكَ رَبَّنَا وَإِلَيْكَ الْمَصِيرُ

The Apostle has faith in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and all the faithful. Each [of them] has faith in Allah, His angels, His scriptures and His apostles. [They declare,] ‘We make no distinction between any of His apostles’. (2:285)

We do not have the right to deny any of the prophets (‘a) as we regard it as obligatory to obey [*wajib al-ita‘ah*] all of them. Of course, if Musa or ‘Isa (‘a) would have lived at the present time, they would have definitely behaved according to the *shari'ah* of the Prophet of Islam (S).

[Our Responsibility toward Freedom of Religion and the Ruling on the Followers of Other Religions](#)

Thus, during this time, we are obliged to act upon the injunctions of the Qur’an, and the orders of the Holy Prophet (S) and the Immaculate Imams (‘a) and if we do anything other than this, it will not be accepted from us. But this does not mean that our religion is in essence different from the previous religions. Rather, all of these are (monotheistic) religions. If individuals do not have the power of discerning and recognizing the truth, they are (mentally) downtrodden [*mustadh‘af*] and they have to act

upon the extent of their understanding and they are blameless in the sight of God. But those who have recognized the truth at any time and in spite of it, they have opposed and been hostile to it, such individuals shall abide forever in hellfire, and this is the purport of the statement we read in the *Du‘a‘ Kumayl*:[1](#)

[O Lord!] *You have sworn that You will fill it (hell) with the unbelievers, both jinn and men, and that You will place those who stubbornly resist therein forever.*

Anyway, eternal chastisement is applicable to those who stubbornly resist. If a person does not have that stubbornness, even if he will ever be chastised, it will only be commensurate to the faults he has done while the mentally downtrodden are excused to the extent of their failure to recognize the truth, and as such, they shall not incur punishment. The important point is to pay attention to the fact that in any case, if non-Muslim and non-Shi‘ah individuals are not to go to hell, it is because of their being blameless and not because of their respective religion or sect being not the truth and correct one.

Of course, we have mentioned earlier that those who had lived during the times of the previous *shari‘ahs* such as that of Musa and ‘Isa (‘a) were obliged to act according to the *shari‘ah* of their own times. At any rate, the true religion and straight path is not more than one, and the fact that other people outside this path will not be thrown to hellfire does not necessarily mean the multiplicity of the true religion and straight path.

A Psychological Point

Another point is that man is not always such that at the beginning, being a good reason and proof of a thing or subject, or its correctness is clear for him, and in establishing this proof and evidence, he becomes adherent to the thing or idea; rather, it is sometimes the contrary. That is, at the outset, man is attracted to a thing and likes it, and then, he looks for a reason to prove it as good and true. In such cases, man is actually in pursuit of what he likes, which of course sometimes is something really good and correct, while at other times bad and wrong. Many people are like that. Initially, they are attracted to a certain thing. Thereafter, they will try in one way or another to rationalize their liking.

This fact is true in the case of many of those who believed in the Prophet of Islam (S). That is, people were not such that at the beginning they came to conduct research and study about Islam and its doctrines, and as the result of the investigation, the truth about God, monotheism and the like would be proved for, and believed by them. Instead, by merely observing the behavior and manner of the Prophet (S), they wished to be like him and be in his company. First, they accepted him by their hearts and then they looked for reason behind it. This issue is also true in the case of falsehood.

That is, since a person inclines toward a certain false thing and wants it, he tries in one way or another to justify it for himself. Many people are used to commit sin and enjoy unrestrained freedom, and they want to be free in all aspects and do whatever they want. Naturally, such individuals do not want the

reckoning, the book of account, the grave, and the Day of Resurrection to be existed.

They neither want to acknowledge that at every moment and the most trivial act and gesture of theirs are under surveillance and they will be held accountable for it. Therefore, firstly, a person wants to have no reckoning and book of account, and in line with such desire, he tries to coin a justification to deny the Day of Resurrection and the Reckoning. In this regard, the Holy Qur'an says:

أَيَحْسَبُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَلَّنْ نَجْمَعُ عِظَامَهُ بَلَىٰ قَادِرِينَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ نُسَوِّيَ بَنَانَهُ بَلْ يُرِيدُ الْإِنْسَانُ لِيَفْجُرَ أَمَامَهُ

Does man suppose that We shall not put together his bones? Yes indeed, We are able to proportion [even] his fingertips! Rather, man desires to go on living viciously. (75:3-5)

“Does one who denies the Day of Resurrection really thinks that We cannot resurrect him?” If he thinks a bit and makes use of his mind, he will understand well that the One Who at the beginning created man from nothing can also revive him, and incidentally, this work is easier because in the past, He created man from nothing, but there is now at least an array of decaying or decayed flesh and bones.²

Therefore, the human mind easily admits that the same Hand that created man for the first time has also the power to gather the decaying or decayed flesh and bones and revive that man. Thus, why do the deniers of the Last Day insist on their denial? The reason for this is that *“Rather man desires to go on living viciously.”*

That is, he wants to have no restraint and be free to do whatever he wants to do, and that there should be no reckoning and book of account. So, here, the heart suggests that there is no Day of Resurrection and Reckoning, and then, the mind tries to look for its justification. Social issues are mostly like that. Instead of the heart following the mind, it is the mind following the dictate of the heart. An illustrious example of this fact in our present time was some people's inclination toward Marxism. Those people who became Marxists were not such that at the beginning they discussed about the principles of dialectical materialism, and through proof and evidence, it was proved to them that nothing exists beyond matter and that the Marxist conception of economics and other issues pertaining to Marxism are correct. I myself knew persons who were Muslims and used to pray and fast, but were Marxists.

They thought that one might be a Muslim and a Marxist at the same time. Why had they inclined toward Marxism? It is because they had seen these oppressions, discriminations and tyrannies in the society, and witnessed how a clique of the affluent did not know how to spend its wealth while there was a group of people who lived in extreme poverty and starvation. Then, they used to imagine that one has to accept either capitalism or Marxism and that the outcome of capitalism is that wide class gaps and lamentable state of affairs. So, they started inclining toward Marxism. After accepting Marxism, they also gradually conceived of a so-called scientific proof and held fast to materialism and the primacy of matter.

The same is also true about pluralism in many cases and regarding many individuals. Initially, this idea came to their minds: How could we say that the overwhelming number of people will go to hell and only a very few will attain salvation? No, this is unacceptable; we have to look for ways so that the rest will also be admitted to paradise. Along this frame of mind, the issue about the truthfulness of all religions is advanced and effort is also made to coin a basis for this.

Which philosophical or Epistemological Foundation Can Logically Lead to Pluralism?

There are also individuals who begin with certain intellectual and philosophical foundations and then arrive at pluralism on the basis of the said foundations, and it is not that his heart desires for it and then his mind follows the dictate of the heart. Here, we would like to examine which philosophical foundations will end up in pluralism which a person begins with.

In understanding the reality and discovering the truth, if a person believes that the intellect can obtain the truth, he will naturally not accept the existence of numerous truths about a single subject. Instinctively, such a person regards the truth as one, and it is in pursuit of it that he would discover this single truth through proof and evidence. If he is given a mathematical or physics problem, he believes that the correct solution is not more than one, and if ever he solves it, he knows that this solution is either correct or not, and it is possible to have many 'correct' solutions.

In recognizing the truth, if a person believes that man has no way of knowing the truth and no matter which instrument he uses the intellect or experience at most he will become nearer to the truth, but never attain the truth itself, it is here that the way will be opened for the different theories of relativism, agnosticism and pluralism. Today, many people throughout the world advocate the theory that the truth is beyond human intellect, knowledge and understanding, and that no matter how he strives, he will only acquire some manifestations of the reality and only some aspects and dimensions of the truth will be unraveled for him. Various schools such as Kantism, Neo-Kantism, agnosticism, and relativism are common in saying that "We can never grasp the truth as it is."

According to such a philosophical foundation, the correctness or falseness of accounts will become relative. That is, every account shows only a certain percentage of the reality and embodies only a certain part of the truth, and the account that shows the truth completely simply does not exist. All scientific accounts possess such characteristics and, in essence, knowledge is actually nothing other than this. One should not imagine that knowledge exists in order to say, "This is it and there is nothing but this."

No, knowledge does not have this claim and it can never be such. In scientific theory, the point is to confirm and falsify, and not to ravel and unravel the reality. At most, what could be claimed by a scientific theory is that "So long as no gross defect is found in me, I am acceptable. The moment a gross

defect is found in me, I shall be falsified and another theory will replace me.”³ Thus, this trend continues unabated. Scientific theories evolve one after another, and the theory that does not change and is fixed at all times does not exist at all in science.

Those who, in the discussion of epistemology and the value of understanding, advocate such a way of thinking somehow despise the so-called metaphysical logic, philosophy and arguments, regarding them as unscientific and devoid of any credibility. Whenever such discussions are raised in a certain sarcastic manner, they will say, “Let them be; they belong to the domain of philosophy.” They say, “We only give value to science and science does not mean that it will unravel the reality in totality.” Rather, every theory shows one aspect, and not all aspects, of the reality. Newton’s law on gravity unravels for us one aspect of the reality, while Einstein’s law of relativity shows another aspect. None of them unveils to us the whole reality and since it is such, both of them are correct.

It is in this manner that we arrive at a sort of pluralism in epistemology which in itself is a kind of relativism or agnosticism. Of course, some people do not will to associate this theory to agnosticism, saying that it logically belongs to relativism and not agnosticism (or skepticism). At any rate, it is not important whether we shall call it relativism or agnosticism. The main premise of this theory is that reality will not be attainable by us and science can never give us a certain belief (in the sense of total discovery of the reality).

Explaining Pluralism by Using the Similitude of a Prism

As we have said, this theory can serve as the intellectual foundation of pluralism because, according to this interpretation of science, every scientific theory is like a reflection and angle of a prism that shows a part of the reality. Depending on the angle he is looking at, a person can only see that part of the reality. The whole reality cannot be seen by anyone as it is distributed in the different sides of the prism. If we interpret pluralism in this way, we can then say that the truth is one; of course, the only truth as it is manifested to every person. That is, the only truth is actually the whole prism which has different sides and angles, and every scientific theory is like one of these sides and angles. And the final conclusion is that none of these sides and angles embodies the whole truth.

If we consider the same similitude and allegory of the prism and want to have a clearer exposition of pluralism and its various interpretations, one interpretation is for us to say that there is only one truth but there are various ways of arriving at it. Similarly, prism is no more than a thing but since every person looks at it from a certain angle, one’s perception of the reality may possibly be different from that of the others, because its different angles may possibly have diverse colors and properties.

Take for example a prism whose one angle is convex, the second one concave and the third one neither convex nor concave. If three persons look at the prism from these three different angles, they will definitely have three distinct imageries of it. This is while we as outside viewers know for certain that all of them are a portrait of the same thing. Because of the difference in the angles of perspective and

where they are standing, they imagine that they are looking at three different things.

In any case, this is the same pluralism's interpretation of the 'straight paths' while arguing that we have nothing more than a single truth though there are various ways of arriving at it. The aspiration and goal of all religionists, nay all humanity, is nothing more than one thing, and everybody is looking for the identical truth. The only difference is that one does it through the path of Christianity while another through the path of Islam, and yet another through the path of Judaism. Finally, all these ways will end up in a single point of destination.

The other interpretation of pluralism is for us to say that there is no such thing as a single truth. Rather, it is as numerous as the angles of a prism. For every person, the truth is whatever he sees of the prism from any angle he is looking at. The diversity of colors and properties of the different angles of the prism is the reason why one person sees the truth as green and convex; the second blue and conclave; the third yellow and neither convex nor conclave. And the truth is nothing but these imageries, and imageries are also extemporaneously diverse. Accordingly, the truth is also diverse. It is evident that this interpretation of pluralism is different from the interpretation of straight paths leading to a single truth.

The third interpretation of pluralism is that we should not treat as separate from the other accounts the truthfulness or falsehood of any account of a religion or science. Rather, we have to judge all its accounts as a whole. For example, once we ask whether the Shi'ah school is the truth or not, we have to keep in view the totality of Shi'ah beliefs. On the basis of this interpretation of pluralism, we cannot give judgment on the truthfulness or falsehood of any religion because accordingly, all religions embody both true and false accounts. In other words, all religions are right and wrong at the same time. They are truthful due to some of their precepts (which are correct) and they are false owing to some of their precepts (which are false). As such, since every religion consists of a set of correct and incorrect, true and false doctrines, ideas, laws, and values, it follows that all religions are equal in terms of value, and there is no difference in choosing any of them.

The Theory on the Unity of Truth in the Realm of Religious Knowledge

In contrast to religious pluralism with its various interpretations, the other notion is to say that there is a set of religious accounts which are all correct and true, and to believe in their opposite accounts is sheer falsehood. This theory holds that there is only one truth and there is no difference between this and that person, this and that society, and this and that time. According to this theory, we have a set of beliefs, values and laws which are all true while the other sets are either totally false or an amalgamation of true and false accounts.

That which is in our mind, we the Shi'ah, is this theory. If you survey people in the streets and bazaars, you will observe that their belief is that the only truthful and correct one is the Shi'ah belief and

knowledge that emanate from the spotless and pure members of the Prophet's Household [*Ahl al-Bayt*] ('a) and the fourteen Infallibles while the rest of religions and schools of thought are either totally false or partly so depending on the proximity and concordance of their doctrines to Shi'ism. This is the thing which exists in the mind of each of us prior to the emergence of pluralism. No one had a certain notion of the truthfulness of religion and school of thought other than this.

The Difference of the Maraji' At-Taqlid's Religious Edicts as Nothing to do With Pluralism

At this juncture, the question that comes to the mind is that in the Shi'ah school, there are also differences of opinion whether on the issues of beliefs or jurisprudence and laws. Given these differences, how could a set of coherent laws and beliefs be attributed to the Shi'ah? The difference of the religious edicts [*fatawa*] of the Shi'ah '*ulama*' and *maraji' at-taqlid* is something which is proverbial to all and sundry. For example, a *marja' at-taqlid* says that in the third and fourth *rak'ahs* of prayer, it is enough to recite once the *tasbihat al-arba'ah*⁴ while another *marja' at-taqlid* says that the same must definitely be recited thrice. Another example is about the issues pertaining to the purgatorial world [*'alam al-barzakh*] such as the first night in the grave and others, or regarding the descriptions of the matters pertaining to the Day of Resurrection. There are differences of opinion among the Shi'ah '*ulama*' concerning these issues. Among these diverse opinions, which one is true and which one is false?

On religious matters, it is said that we have to imitate or follow [*taqlid*] the most knowledgeable [*a'lam*] *marja' at-taqlid*, and in identifying the most knowledgeable there is a difference of opinion among people and authorities. Everyone regards a certain person as the most knowledgeable and follows him, but anyway, it is not so that only the followers [*muqallidin*] of a certain *marja' at-taqlid* will be admitted to paradise. Rather, anyone who acts upon the religious edicts of any *mujtahid*⁵ whom he regards as really the most knowledgeable shall be among the people of salvation and be admitted to paradise. It is here that this skepticism comes to the mind: If we do not accept the existence of 'straight paths' among the different religions, at least within the Shi'ah school of thought, we are supposed to believe in the existence of 'straight paths' and consider as correct and truthful the different sets of beliefs and laws. Therefore, we again end up in professing pluralism.

To answer, in this context, the domain of theory has been confused with the domain of application. Admittance to paradise does not necessarily follow proper obtainment of the real and true decree of Islam. What exists in the case of emulating the religious scholars is that if you regard anyone as the most knowledgeable and emulate him, in case some edicts of this *mujtahid* have been contrary to the true decree of God, you are excused and shall not be thrown to hellfire on account of not acting upon the true decree of Islam.

Regarding the issue of *tasbihat al-arba'ah*, the truth is not more than one and the true decree of God is either to recite it once is enough or to recite it thrice is obligatory. The religious edict of any jurist [*faqih*]

whose edict is consistent with the real decree of God is the correct one while that of others are definitely incorrect. However, it is a mistake for which both the *mujtahid* and his followers will be excused because they have strived hard in identifying the true decree of God but failed to do so for some reasons. At this point, the issue is similar to the discussion on the mentally downtrodden which we mentioned earlier.

Absence of Difference in the Domain of the Essentials and Fundamentals of Islam

In Islam, we have a set of axiomatic, fixed, absolute, and inalterable truths, which are technically called the “essentials of Islam.” Sometimes also the scope of these truths is extended to include the definite and certain points in Islam. These are things about which all Muslims have no difference of opinion. For example, all Muslims regard the dawn [*subh*] prayer as having two *rak'ahs* and this issue is not in need of (further) investigation. It is rather among the essentials and it is also for this reason that the jurists [*fuqaha*] say that there is no need of practicing *taqlid* in matters of laws pertaining to the essentials of Islam. Some even believe that there is no place for *taqlid* in absolute things as it is only applicable to disputable matters. Everyone knows that in Islam the dawn prayer consists of two *rak'ahs*.

The issue of incumbency of prayer in Islam is something indisputable not only among Muslims but even among non-Muslims who accept neither Islam nor the Islamic prayer [*salah*] and prayer refers to the same knelling down [*ruku'*], prostration [*sujud*] and other actions [*af'al*] and recitations [*adhkar*]. Today, is there anyone who does not know that the *Hajj* of Muslims is the same set of acts that Muslims are doing in going to Mecca on the days of the lunar month of Dhu'l-Hijjah? If one says that the prayer and *Hajj* are not parts of Islam, his claim will not be accepted and it will be said to him that they are among the essentials and fundamentals of Islam, and there is no doubt about them.

They are not bound by time and space; they are inalterable; and there is no place for *taqlid* in them, because every Muslim knows each of them (prayer and *Hajj*). For this reason, it is also said that denial of the essentials of Islam leads to apostasy [*irtidad*]. Of course, the late Imam did not say that denial of the essentials is tantamount to apostasy, which in turn is tantamount to the denial of apostleship [*risalah*], but some jurists do not regard as necessary this condition as they consider denial of the essentials as absolutely leading to apostasy.

Difference in the Domain of the Disputable Matters in Islam and its Explanation

There is no controversy in the domain of the laws and doctrines of Islam which are called “essentials” or “absolutes” of Islam. Anyone who does not believe in any of the laws and doctrines within the boundary of this domain is not considered to be a Muslim. We have also a set of matters in Islam which are not absolute. In the domain of the non-absolutes of Islam, the authorities and *mujtahids* may have

numerous edicts and opinions. According to the reason [*‘aqli*] and religious text [*naqli*], the duty of those who are not *mujtahid* is to refer to the *mujtahids* and to emulate [*taqlid*] them.

Of course, the truth behind *taqlid* is the non-expert's referral to the expert, which is a general rule and is not confined to the realm of religious laws and issues. In fact, in every affair, if a person is not an expert, he should refer to an expert of a certain field. For example, if you are sick, you will consult a physician who is expert in diagnosing and curing diseases. In religious laws, people also refer to the experts who are the same *maraji' at-taqlid*, and there is no way other than this. Of course, when the religious edicts of the *maraji' at-taqlid* differ with one another, the practices of their respective followers [*muqallidun*] will not also be identical. It must be borne in mind, however, that the difference among religious edicts of the *maraji' at-taqlid* is like the difference among the prescriptions of doctors. If two physicians gave two different diagnoses of the same ailment, one of them is wrong, provided that both of whom are not wrong. Similarly, regarding a physician, not all his diagnoses and prescriptions are correct. Instead, among the hundreds of prescriptions he is giving, one may also be incorrect.

If the religious authorities have different opinions, assuming that all their opinions are not wrong, naturally only one view is correct while the rest are wrong. Similarly, among the hundreds of religious edicts issued by a jurist [*faqih*], it is possible that some of them are incorrect. It is true that such is the case, but there is no alternative either. Once we have no direct access to the infallible Imam (*‘a*), there is no way other than this. Should medical science be totally discarded on account of some mistakes in the prescriptions of doctors? It is evident that no reasonable person will give a positive answer to this question.

So, if what is meant by pluralism in Islam is the difference among the religious edicts of the *‘ulama’* and religious authorities regarding the non-absolutes in Islam, then this is a definite and acceptable matter. In the domain of non-absolutes, the authorities may have differences of opinion while one may follow the religious edict of any *mujtahid* whom he regards as the most knowledgeable [*a‘lam*]. And it cannot be said to any *mujtahid* that “Your opinion is definitely wrong” because our assumption is that the issue is a non-absolute one and we do not know for certain the truth of the matter. Of course, the condition in expressing opinion is that the person must be an expert or authority in religious issues. It is not the case that since the issue is a non-absolute one, everyone may come to the front and say that my opinion is so-and-so. Do the people and the Ministry of Health give permit to everyone to open a clinic and engage in treating diseases?

At any rate, if someone calls it pluralism, we have to say, “Yes, we have also pluralism in Islam.” Yet, it must be noted that no one has ever called it “pluralism” because pluralism means that the truth or the ways of reaching it are numerous whereas regarding the difference of opinion of the *mujtahids*, we said that the truth and the real decree of God is not more than one. If a *mujtahid* arrives at this decree, his opinion is correct while any religious edict apart from this is definitely wrong. Yet, as we have said earlier, it is a mistake about which both the *marja' at-taqlid* and his followers [*muqallids*] are excused.

Therefore, this cannot be called “pluralism.”

Negation of Pluralism in the Declarative Accounts and Acceptance of it in Ethical and Moral Issues

The other issue here is related to the difference between declarative and imperative accounts. In the epistemological discussion, it is said that the cases to which knowledge belongs are of two groups. One group is the declarative accounts, which are technically described as “beings and not-beings.” That is, the accounts which talk about the realization and existence, or non-realization and non-existence of an affair. The second group is the accounts which are technically called “must and must-not” and not including the reports about the realization or non-realization of an affair. This kind of accounts is also called “imperative accounts.”

Possibly, one would not dispute that declarative accounts could be proved and falsified and have truths and lies, but concerning the imperative accounts, he would say that this group of accounts could not possess truths and lies, and there is no such thing as incorrect or correct about them. Just as in our present discussion, it is sometimes said that in the sphere of religious doctrinal issues, truth and untruth, correct and incorrect have no meaning. An opinion can be regarded as correct while the others as incorrect, but this ruling is not true about the category of religious accounts which bespeak of values and encompassing “must and must-not” and are not revealers of objective reality for us to say that there is only one correct view and the rest are wrong.

All the laws and decrees as well as moral values of Islam are of this kind. For example, one must pray; one should not tell a lie; one should not infringe upon the rights of others; and the like. We cannot say about such things that they are true or not, correct or not, because they do not contain any objective reality for us to compare their contents with the objective realities and see if they are consistent with them or not. In principle, the truth of such accounts is nothing but taste, credence and contract. If one says that green is beautiful while another says that yellow is beautiful, each of their statements is nothing but the taste and temperament of the person which are consistent with the green color while the taste and temperament of the other person are more consistent with the yellow color. However, it cannot be said that the first person tells the truth while the other tell a lie and that, for example, green is really and truly attractive while yellow is not. In this case, to talk about truth and falsehood, correct and incorrect is totally pointless.

Anchored in this epistemological basis regarding the accounts on moral values, the way for relativism and the acceptance of different views about a single matter is opened.

One may just say that green is good and so are yellow, pink and violet, and it depends on which color a person accepts. Concerning religion or at least a part of religion (laws and issues pertaining to the moral values), such a view can also be held. When what is at stake is the issue of dos and don'ts, we can

have different acceptable pluralisms according to the diversity of time, place and persons. During the first century AH, a certain matter was treated as good but during the fourth century, the same thing is deemed as bad and both of which are correct according to their respective time.

One thing is good for the Japanese while another is good for the Britons, and both of them are correct. In the societies, we know, to be totally nude in public is regarded as an abominable act, but possibly, one day in a society, the same practice may be considered as common, desirable and even valuable practice. This issue depends on the social contract and custom and it makes no difference whatever form it assumes. The same is true in the case of the good and bad things in Islam or any other religion, and it cannot be said that the laws and values of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism are the most correct ones. Rather, whatever a person accepts is correct.

In sum, even if we accept pluralism in beliefs and the part of religion which encompasses the “being and not-being”, in laws and subjects pertaining to religious moral values, definitely we have to accept and uphold pluralism and multiplicity.

As we have indicated, in the epistemological discussion some people regard as relative all human sciences and knowledge in whatever field but some others believe in relativism only in the realm of values and ethics, or basically regard the moral and ethical accounts as true or false, correct or incorrect. Now, we have to examine whether relativism and subjectivism in moral values are correct or not.

Critique of Pluralism in the Realm of Ethics and Moral Values

There are undoubtedly things whose goodness or badness changes, and are good at a certain time but bad at another, good in a certain environment but bad in another, good under a certain condition but bad under another. Even telling the truth or telling a lie, for example, is such and it is not that telling the truth and telling a lie are always good and bad, respectively. Kant believed that telling a lie is always bad while telling the truth is always good and there is no exception about it. But we all know that it is not so and, for example, if saving the life of a faithful [*mu'min*] requires us to tell a lie, in that case telling the truth is not only bad but even forbidden [*haram*], and one should tell a lie in order to save the life of a *mu'min*.

During the time of the *taghut*,⁶ if the SAVAK⁷ agents come and ask from you the whereabouts of a person, would you tell the truth so as for them to go and arrest the said person and send him to prison or execute him? It is very clear that in this context one should not tell the truth to the SAVAK agents. An Islamic precept maintains that if a certain practice causes humiliation and embarrassment to a *mu'min*, he is not supposed to do so. The logic behind this precept is that a *mu'min* should behave according to the customs and mores of the society he lives in of course, so long as it does not impinge on the religiously obligatory [*wajib*] and prohibited [*haram*] and he is not supposed to do any practice which is repugnant to the norms and customs, and causes humiliation and embarrassment to him.

At any rate, there are many instances similar to the case we have mentioned, whose outcome is seemingly the acceptance of a sort of pluralism and relativism in the moral and social principles and values of Islam. To tell a lie and to tell the truth are good as well as bad; it depends upon the situation. Of course, it must be borne in mind that the logical consequence of this proposition is only relativism and not skepticism. That is, it is not that, for example, we have skepticism as to whether telling the truth is good or bad; rather, we certainly know that telling the truth under a set of circumstances is good while the same is bad under a different set of circumstances. In any case, by citing this kind of cases, there are those who want to say that there is moral and ethical relativism even in the Islamic thought and it has been an accepted matter. Of course, the technical and scientific statement in elucidating this issue has its own peculiar exposition, which is beyond the scope of our present discussion.

What we can say at this point is this: The truth is that if we take into account every case in all its properties and conditions, all cases are absolute, and relativism has no place in them. For instance, in issues pertaining to chemistry and physics, if you are asked, "At what degree does water boil?" you will answer, "At 100 degrees." Then, a very salty amount of water is brought to you, or let us say, a certain amount of water is brought to a place where the air pressure is more or less than the usual one and is boiled, you will see that it does not boil at 100 degrees. Its boiling point is rather greater or less than 100 degrees. In this case, the outcome of the work is not relativism. Instead, the issue is that you have made shortcoming and deficiency in stating exactly the case as you have not stated it exactly with all its conditions and properties.

The complete and exact account of the case is for us to say, for example, that in a certain percentage of salts and in a specific degree of air pressure, water boils at 100 degrees. All physicists and chemists know that under certain circumstances, water boils at 100 degrees. But in writing and stating this subject, they are usually negligent and by not mentioning those properties and conditions, they generally and briefly say that the boiling degree of water is 100. There are similar cases in many fields of science, and as we have explained earlier, the existence of such cases is not the proof of its relative nature and the lack of its general characteristic. Instead, it is merely the result of negligence in completely stating the case and mentioning all its conditions and properties. The same is true in the case of moral issues. In this kind of cases, even if we state every case with all its conditions and properties, the ruling about it will never change, and if it is good, it will be always so, and if it is bad, it will be always so.

The reason why we see that the ruling on telling the truth and telling a lie changes and sometimes it is good while bad at another time is because we have been negligent in mentioning all their conditions and properties. But ethical pluralists and supporters of relativism on moral values say that even if we mention all the conditions and aspects of moral accounts, we still do not have absolute good and absolute bad. Rather, goodness and badness are varied, depending on the taste, temperament and choice of individuals and societies, and the reason for this is that in essence, issues pertaining to values have no concordance with the reality. As indicated earlier, they are similar to the attractiveness of the green and yellow colors, which merely bespeak of the taste and choice of people, and no truth is hidden behind

them.

It is here that there is a foundational and essential debate between us and others. We have to discuss whether pluralism is applicable to values conceived as such or not. That is, can we have different and conflicting moral rulings regarding a particular issue and regard all of them as correct and truthful, or that if we state all the conditions and aspects of the case, the ruling of it will be always consistent and identical anytime and anywhere?

Moral Decrees of Islam as Consonant with the True Expediencies and Corruptions

What we understood from Islam and we believe that to dispense with religious discussion can also be proved through rational proof is that regarding values and dos and don'ts, like the declarative cases encompassing "being and not-being", the truth is nothing but one, and as such, it cannot be treated as multiple and diverse. We have also an array of good and bad things, which are purely based on social contract and have no real and true foundation, but not all good and bad are like that. The morally and ethically good and bad which are credible in Islam are all consonant with expediencies and corruptions.

For example, telling a lie is unacceptable and not permitted because it brings about people's mistrust to one another, and as a result, it will end up in the collapse of the social order, and man can never live in such a society. Imagine a community whose members are liars and they all tell lies in one way or another. In such a community, the social bond will loosen and the system of living will shatter. The edifice of social life is founded on trust in one another. If lies are supposed to be rampant and everybody tells lies, you can no longer trust anybody ranging from your spouse and child to your relative, friend, neighbor and colleague, and life will break down. It is because of this tremendous and irreparable social loss that telling a lie is prohibited in Islam and is considered as a major sin.

On the contrary, telling the truth wins the trust of one another and people can enjoy the benefit of social life. If students of schools and universities do not trust what their teachers and professors tell them and have written in books, all sessions in schools and universities and textbooks there will be rendered useless. Therefore, the goodness of telling the truth and the badness of telling a lie are consistent with the expediencies and corruptions associated with them, and it is through their association with expediencies and corruptions that Islam has considered honesty as good and lying as bad.

The point we have to add is that according to Islam, goodness and badness of things are not only related to the material and worldly goodness and badness. In fact, there is a set of good and bad things which are related to the spiritual and otherworldly affairs of man. In the good and bad things that Islam has promulgated, in addition to the material and worldly good and bad things, it has also taken into account the spiritual and otherworldly welfare and perdition.

Summary

In conclusion, religious knowledge, whether pertaining to the doctrines or to the ethical and moral laws and issues, is consonant with the realities, and in all these fields the truth is not more than one and the true religion is only one and has no room for multiplicity and plurality. In the section about laws and values, it can occasionally be seen that the ruling about a certain thing changes; for example, telling the truth is sometimes good while at other times it is bad. The reason behind it is that we have not taken into account and stated the subject in all its dimensions. And if it is done and we consider certain limits and conditions, to be honest will be always good or bad and it will never be changed.

From the viewpoint of philosophical and epistemological foundation, we also said that the source of pluralist thought can be one of these three isms: positivism, skepticism and relativism. If, like the logical positivists, we said that metaphysical and non-empirical cases such as “There is God,” “There is the Day of Resurrection” and the like are essentially meaningless accounts, or if we became advocates of relativism in human knowledge in totality or on particular ethical and moral cases, or if we embraced agnosticism and said that no part of human knowledge is definite and certain, and all of them with varying degrees are inseparable with doubt and skepticism, through one of these three philosophical and epistemological foundations, one could lead to pluralism and the acceptance of the multiplicity of truth in human knowledge, including religious knowledge.

Of course, at the outset of the discussion we have also noted that it does not mean that everyone who has turned pluralist had initially accepted positivism, relativism or agnosticism. Rather, it is also such that at the beginning one had inclined toward pluralism, accepted it and then sometimes looked for evidence to justify and prove it. But, at any rate, if one wants to follow the logical conclusion, at the outset, he has to accept one of these three foundations in epistemology and then arrive at pluralism through it. And in essence, we have to bear in mind that the logical conclusion is that all scientific issues are in one way or another anchored in philosophical principles and premises and the philosophical issues in turn are based on epistemological issues. That is, from the viewpoint of logic, at the beginning we have epistemological discussions and then philosophical discussions and thereafter current scientific issues.

For example, when a physician or a researcher tries to invent medicine for curing a certain ailment, initially he does not come to deal with philosophy and prove the philosophical rules, but this research is definitely based on a philosophical principle; namely, the principle of causality. This researcher goes to the laboratory and spends many hours for research to invent a medicine means that he has believed that illness does not come into being spontaneously and without a cause; whenever there is a disease, there must certainly be a cause. And he also believed that there is another cause and factor that could affect and eliminate the factor leading to the disease and thus cure the same.

In this manner, without accepting the principle of causality, no researcher can conduct research. But this does not mean that initially, he has studied philosophy and used the principle of causality by indisputable

evidence and has then gone to the laboratory and conducted research. Rather, belief in the principle of cause and effect unconsciously and half-consciously exists in his mind.

1. Du'a' Kumayl [Supplication of Kumayl]: The supplication taught by Imam 'Ali ('a) to one of his loyal companions and staunch supporters of Islam, Kumayl ibn Ziyad. Usually said on every night preceding Friday [Laylat'ul-Jum'ah] individually or in congregation after the Isha' prayers, this supplication envisages divine teachings and solid foundations of religion in order to enable everyone to follow the right path for becoming a worthy Muslim. The Arabic text, English translation and commentary of this famous supplication are available online at

<http://www.al-islam.org/dua-kumayl-a-translation-and-commentary-husein-a...> [1] [Trans.]

2. This is for argument's sake only vis-à-vis the disbelievers because in reality, as God is Omnipotent to create a thing from nothing and to create a thing from something else are both easy for Him. The existence or non-existence of a transient agent in His Act does not make it 'easier' or 'harder', as the case may be. [Trans.]

3. See the classic book on the history and philosophy of science, Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) in which the author argues that science is not a steady, cumulative acquisition of knowledge; instead, it is "a series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions", which he described as "the tradition-shattering complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science," and after such revolutions, "one conceptual world view is replaced by another". [Trans.]

4. Tasbihat al-arba'ah: literally, the four tasbihs; it refers to the recital of "Subhan Allahi wa'l-hamdulillahi wa la ilaha illallahu wallahu akbar" [Glory be to Allah; praise be to Allah; there is no god but Allah; Allah is the great]. [Trans.]

5. Mujtahid: an authority on the divine law who practices ijthad, i.e. "the search for a correct opinion in the deduction of the specific provisions of the law from its principles and ordinances." Here, it is used as synonymous with marja' at-taqlid. [Trans.]

6. Taghut refers to the Pahlavi regime in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution. [Trans.]

7. In 1957 (1335 AHS), the Shah ordered the establishment of the State Information and Security Organization (SAVAK) and in 1971 (1350 AHS) on his orders a joint committee of SAVAK and the Town and City Police was organized. Agents of this organization arrested the opponents of the regime and took them away to political prisons. In these penitentiaries, prisoners were subjected to various forms of physical and psychological torture which included abuse; whipping and beating; long periods of interrogation; sleep deprivation; extraction of nails and teeth; tying to a metal table heated to a white heat or an iron frame like a bed-frame covered with wire mesh which was electrically heated like a toaster; breaking of limbs; electric shocks; beating the soles of the prisoner's feet with an electric cable; hanging to the roof and broadcasting the screams of torture victims by means of tape recorders. Another of SAVAK's heinous methods of torture was placing the legs of prisoners in boiling oil. For more information on SAVAK's activities and abuse of human rights, refer to Fred Halliday's *Iran, Dictatorship and Development*, pp. 78-90. [Trans.]

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