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Good Deeds of Non-Muslims

Outline of the Discussion

One of the issues which is discussed regarding “Divine justice” is the issue of the good deeds performed by non-Muslims.

Today, the issue of whether the good deeds of non-Muslims are accepted by God or not is under discussion amongst the different classes – whether learned or unlearned, literate or illiterate. If they are accepted, what difference does it make if a person is a Muslim or not; the important thing is to do good in this world.

If a person is not a Muslim and practices no religion, he or she has lost nothing. And if their actions are not acceptable and are altogether void with no reward or recompense from God, then how is that compatible with Divine justice?

This same question can be asked from a Shā‘a perspective within the bounds of Islām: Are the actions of a non-Shā‘a Muslim acceptable to God, or are they null and void? If they are acceptable, what difference does it make if a person is a Shā‘a Muslim or a non-Shā‘a Muslim?

What is important is to be Muslim; a person who is not a Shā‘a and doesn’t believe in the wilāyah (Divinely-appointed guardianship) of the Ahlul Ba‘t (as) has not lost anything. And if the actions of such a person are not acceptable to God, then how is that compatible with Divine justice?

In the past, this issue was only discussed by philosophers and in the books of philosophy. However, today it has entered into the minds of all levels of society; few people can be found who have not at least broached the subject for themselves and in their own minds.

Divine philosophers would discuss the issue from the aspect that if all people who are outside the fold of religion are to face perdition and Divine punishment, it necessarily follows that in the universe, evil and compulsion are preponderant. However, the fact that felicity and good have primacy in the universe not

evil and wretchedness is an accepted and definitive principle.

Humanity is the greatest of all of creation; everything else has been created for it (of course, with the correct conception of this idea that is understood by the wise, not the perception that the short-sighted people commonly possess).

If humanity itself is to be created for the Hell-fire – that is, if the final abode of the majority of humanity is to be Hell then one must grant that the anger of God supersedes His mercy.

This is because the majority of people are strangers to the true religion; and even those who are within the fold of the true religion are beset by deviation and digression when it comes to practicing. This was the background of the discussion amongst the philosophers.

It has been nearly half a century that, as a result of easier communication among Muslim and non-Muslim nations, an increase in the means of communication, and greater interaction amongst nations, the issue of whether being a Muslim and a believer as a necessary condition for the acceptability of good deeds is being discussed among all levels of society, especially the so-called intellectuals.

When these people study the lives of inventors and scientists of recent times who were not Muslim but who performed valuable services for humanity, they find such people worthy of reward.

On the other hand since they used to think that the actions of non-Muslims are altogether null and void, they fall into serious doubt and uncertainty. In this way, an issue which for years was the exclusive domain of the philosophers has entered the general conversations of people and has taken the form of an objection with regard to Divine justice.

Of course, this objection is not directly related to Divine justice; it is related to Islam's viewpoint about human beings and their actions, and becomes related to Divine justice inasmuch as it appears that such a viewpoint regarding human beings, their actions, and God's dealing with them is in opposition to the standards of Divine justice.

In the interactions that I have and have had with students and the youth, I have frequently been faced with this question. Sometimes they ask whether the great inventors and scientists, with all the worthy services which they have done for humanity, will go to Hell.

Will the likes of Pasteur and Edison go to Hell while indolent holy people who have spent their lives idly in a corner of the Masjid go to Heaven? Has God created Heaven solely for us Shu`as?

I remember that once an acquaintance from my city, who was a practicing Muslim, came to Tehran to visit me, and he raised this issue.

This man had visited a lepers' hospital in Mashhad and had been stirred and deeply affected by the sight of the Christian nurses who were sincerely (at least in his view) looking after the patients with leprosy. At

that time, this issue came up in his mind and he fell into doubt.

You are aware that looking after a patient of leprosy is a very difficult and unpleasant task and when this hospital was established in Mashhad, very few doctors were willing to serve there, and similarly, no one was willing to care for the patients.

Advertisements for the employment of nurses were taken out in the newspapers; in all of Iran, not a single person gave a positive answer to this invitation. A small group of so-called ascetic Christian women from France came and took charge of nursing the lepers.

This man, who had seen the humanitarianism and loving care of those nurses towards lepers, who had been abandoned by even their own parents, had been strongly affected by these nurses.

He related that the Christian nurses wore long, loose clothes, and apart from their face and hands, no part of their body was visible. Each of them had a long rosary which had perhaps a thousand beads and whenever they would find free time from work, they would busy themselves in their recitations on the rosary.

Then the man asked with a troubled mind and in a disturbed tone whether it was true that non-Muslims would not enter Heaven?

Of course, right now we are not concerned with the motives of those Christian ladies. Was it truly for God, in God's way, and out of pure humanitarianism that they did what they did, or was another motive in play?

Certainly, we don't want to be pessimistic, just as we are not overly optimistic; our point is that these incidents and events have introduced our people to a serious question.

Several years ago, I was invited to an association to give a speech. In that association, in accordance with their tradition, the participants were requested to write down any questions they had so that they could be answered at the appropriate time.

Those questions had been recorded in a notebook, and that notebook had been given to me so I could choose the topic of my speech from amongst those topics (noted in the book).

I noticed that the question that had been repeated more than any other was whether God will send all non-Muslims to Hell. Will Pasteur, Edison, and Kokh be amongst those who will be punished in the Hereafter?

It was from that time that I realized the importance of this issue inasmuch as it had attracted people's thoughts. Now, in this part of the book, we will discuss this issue. But before we begin, we need to clarify two points in order for the topic at hand to become completely clear.

1. The General Aspect of the Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is not to clarify the status of individuals, for example to specify whether Pasteur will go to Heaven or Hell. What do we know about his true thoughts and beliefs? What were his true intentions? What were his personal and moral traits; and in fact what was the sum of all his actions? Our familiarity with him is limited to his intellectual services, and that is all.

This doesn't apply only to Pasteur. As a matter of principle, the status of individuals is in the hands of God; no one has the right to express an opinion with certainty about whether someone will go to Heaven or Hell. If we were to be asked, "Is Shaykh Murtadhā al-Anḍalūsī, in view of his known asceticism, piety, faith, and deeds, definitely among the inhabitants of Heaven?"

Our answer would be, "From what we know of the man, in his intellectual and practical affairs we haven't heard of anything bad. What we know of him is virtue and goodness. But as to say with absolute certainty whether he will go to Heaven or Hell, that isn't our prerogative.

It is God who knows the intentions of all people, and He knows the secrets and hidden things of all souls; and the account of all people's actions is also with Him. We can only speak with certainty about those whose final outcome has been made known by the religious authorities."

Sometimes people discuss and debate amongst themselves about who was the most virtuous and excellent among the `Ulamā (scholars) in terms of nearness to God. For example, was it Sayyid Ibn ʿUwāys, or Sayyid Bahrul `Ulām? Or Shaykh al-Anḍalūsī? Or sometimes they ask about the most eminent among the descendents of the A'imma.

For example, is Sayyid `Abdul `Adhīm al-Hasanī (as) is superior in God's view, or Sayyidah Faṭīmah al-Ma`ṣūmah (as)?

Once, one of the Mujtahids was asked whether `Abbās Ibn `Alī (as) was superior or `Alī al-Akbar (as). In order to give the question the form of a practical issue so the Mujtahid would be compelled to answer it, they asked, "If someone vows to sacrifice a sheep for the most superior of the Imams' descendents, what is his duty? Is `Abbās Ibn `Alī superior, or `Alī al-Akbar?"

It is obvious that such discussions are improper, and answering such questions is neither the duty of a Faqīh (scholar of Islamic law), nor of anyone else. Specifying the rank of God's creation is not our responsibility. It should be left to God, and no one has any knowledge about the matter except through God himself.

In the early era of Islam, there were instances when people expressed such unjustified opinions, and the Prophet Muhammad (S) forbade them from doing so.

When `Uthmān Ibn Ma`zūn died, a woman of the Anḍalūs named Umme `Alī, who apparently was the

wife of the man in whose house `Uthmān Ibn Ma`zūn was staying and whose guest he was, addressed his bier in the presence of the Prophet Muhammad (S) and said:

هَنِيئًا لَكَ الْجَنَّةُ

“May Heaven be pleasant for you!”

Although `Uthmān Ibn Ma`zūn was an eminent man, and the Prophet Muhammad (S) cried heavily at his funeral and threw himself over the bier and kissed him, the inappropriate statement of that woman displeased him.

He turned to her and with an unhappy look said, “How did you know? Why did you make a statement out of ignorance? Have you received a revelation, or do you know the accounts of God’s creation?”

The woman replied, “O Messenger of God, he was your companion and a brave warrior!” The Noble Messenger (S) answered her with interesting words that are worthy of attention, he said:

إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَمَا أَدْرِي مَا يُفَعَّلُ بِي

*“I am the Messenger of God, yet I don’t know what will be done with me.”*¹

This sentence is the exact purport of a verse of the Qur’ān:

قُلْ مَا كُنْتُ بَدْعًا مِّنَ الرُّسُلِ وَمَا أَدْرِي مَا يُفَعَّلُ بِي وَلَا بِكُمْ

“Say, ‘I am not a novelty among the apostles, nor do I know what will be done with me, or with you.’”^{2 3}

A similar incident has also been related regarding the death of Sa`d Ibn Mu`adh. In that instance, when the mother of Sa`d said a similar sentence over his coffin, the Messenger (S) said to her, “Be silent; don’t make a decision with certainty in God’s affairs.”⁴

2. No Religion Except Al-Islām is Accepted

The other point that must be made clear before beginning the discussion is that the topic of the non-Muslims’ good deeds can be discussed in two ways and in reality, is two discussions:

First, is any religion other than Islām acceptable to God, or is Islām the only acceptable religion? That is, is it necessary only for a person to have some religion or at most follow a religion associated with one of the Divine prophets, without it then making a difference which religion that is, for example, whether one

be a Muslim, Christian, Jew, or even a Zoroastrian? Or is there only one true religion in each era?

After we have accepted that the true religion in each era is only one, the other discussion is whether a person who doesn't follow the true religion but performs a good deed, one that is actually good and is also sanctioned by the true religion, is worthy of reward or not? In other words, is faith in the true religion a condition for one's good deeds to merit reward?

What will be discussed here is the second issue

With respect to the first issue, we can say briefly that there is only one true religion in each era, and all are obligated to believe in it.

The idea that has recently become common among some so-called intellectuals to the effect that all Divine religions have equal validity in all eras is a fallacious one.

Of course, it is true that there is no disagreement or contradiction among the prophets of God. All of the prophets of God call towards a single goal and the same God. They have not come to create mutually contradicting groups and sects among humanity.

But this doesn't mean that in every era there are several true religions, and thus people in each era can then choose whichever religion they want.

To the contrary, it means that a person must believe in all of the Prophets and affirm that each Prophet would give tidings of the Prophet to come, especially the final and greatest of them; and likewise, each Prophet would affirm the previous one.

Thus, the necessary consequence of believing in all of the Prophets is to submit in every era to the religion of the Prophet of the time. And of course, it is necessary that in the final era we act on the final commands that have been revealed by God to the final Prophet. And this is what necessarily follows from Islām, that is, submission to God and acceptance of the missions of His Messengers.

Many people in our day have subscribed to the view that it is sufficient for a person to worship God and be affiliated with and practice one of the Divine religions that was revealed by God; the form of the commandments is not that important.

`Isa (Jesus) (as) was a Prophet, Muhammad (S) was also a Prophet; if we follow the religion of `Isa (as) and go to church once a week, that is fine, and if we follow the religion of the final Messenger (S) and pray five times a day, that is also correct. These people say that what is important is for a person to believe in God and practice one of the Divine religions.

George Jordac, author of the book, *Imām `Alī*; Gibrān Khalīl Gibrān, the well-known Lebanese Christian author; and others like them have such a view.⁵ These two individuals speak of the Prophet

Muhammad (S) and Amḥurul Mo'minīn `Alī Ibn Abī ḥalīb (as) and especially Amḥurul Mo'minīn (as) – just as a Muslim would.

Some people ask how these people, in spite of their belief in Amḥurul Mo'minīn `Alī Ibn Abī ḥalīb (as) and the Prophet Muhammad (S), are still Christian.

If they were truthful, they would have become Muslims, and since they haven't done so, it is clear there is something behind the curtain. They are being deceptive, and they aren't sincere in their expression of love and belief in the Prophet Muhammad (S) and `Alī Ibn Abī ḥalīb (as).

The answer is that they are not without sincerity in their expression of love and belief in the Prophet Muhammad (S) and Amḥurul Mo'minīn `Alī Ibn Abī ḥalīb (as). However, they have their own way of thinking regarding practicing a religion.

These individuals believe that human beings are not held to a particular religion; any religion is sufficient. Thus, at the same time that they are Christians, they consider themselves admirers and friends of `Alī Ibn Abī ḥalīb (as), and they even believe that he himself held their view. George Jordac says, “`Alī Ibn Abī ḥalīb declines to compel people to necessarily follow a particular religion.”

However, we consider this idea void. It is true that there is no compulsion in religion:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

“There is no compulsion in religion.”⁶

But this doesn't mean that there is more than one religion in every age that is acceptable to God, and we have the right to choose any one we please. This is not the case; in every age, there is one true religion and no more.

Whenever a Prophet was sent by God with a new religion, the people were obligated to avail themselves of his teachings and learn his laws and commandments, whether in acts of worship or otherwise, until the turn of the Seal of the Prophets came.

In this (current) age, if someone wishes to come near God, he or she must seek guidance from the precepts of the religion he brought.

The Noble Qur'ān says:

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

“And whoever desires a religion other than Islām, it shall never be accepted from him, and in the

hereafter he shall be among the losers.”⁷

If someone were to say that the meaning of “Islām” in this verse is not our religion in particular; rather, the intent is the literal meaning of the word, or submission to God, the answer would be that without doubt Islām means submission and the religion of Islām is the religion of submission, but the reality of submission has a particular form in each age.

And in this age, its form is the same cherished religion that was brought by the Seal of the Prophets. So it follows that the word Islām (submission) necessarily applies to it alone.

In other words, the necessary consequence of submission to God is to accept His commandments, and it is clear that one must always act on the final Divine commandments. And the final commandment of God is what His final messenger has brought.

¹. Usd al-Gh̄ba, under `Uthm̄n ibn Maz`n

². Al-Qur`n, S̄ratul Ahq̄f (46), Verse 9

³. The objection may come to mind that the purport of this verse is contrary to what is accepted by Muslims as established fact, meaning that the Prophet (S) was informed of his praiseworthy place on the Day of Judgement and of his intercession for various sinners, and is rather contrary to the purport of various verses, like “And verily your Lord will grant you until you are pleased” (S̄ratul Duh̄ (39), Verse 5) and “For God to forgive that which has passed of your mistake and that which is to come.” (S̄ratul Fat̄ (49), Verse 2)

The answer is that the purport of the verse, as is also understood from the preceding tradition, is that the end result of a person’s actions are not known with certainty by anyone; only God has certain knowledge of the final result, and if others come to know, it is only by Divine revelation. So the verse that negates knowledge of the final end relates to the Prophet Muhammad (S) or someone else making a forecast relying on his or her own actions; and the verses that indicate that the Prophet Muhammad (S) has knowledge of his own or other people’s final end are through Divine revelation.

⁴. Bih̄rul Anw̄r, Volume 3, Page 165

⁵. George Jordac’s words about the Prophet Muhmmad (S) indicate he believed in his prophecy and receiving Divine revelation, and he also believed firmly that `Al̄ Ibn Ab̄ alib was a man of God and regarded him as being like `s̄, but at the same time he did not abandon Christianity. Gibr̄n Khal̄ Gibr̄n says of `Al̄ Ibn Ab̄ alib (as)

وَفِي عَقِيدَتِي أَنَّ عَلِيَّ بْنَ أَبِي طَالِبٍ أَوَّلَ عَرَبِيٍّ جَاءَ وَالرُّوحَ الْكَلِيمَةَ وَ سَمَارَهَا

“In my view, `Al̄ was the first Arab to have contact with and converse with the universal soul [of the world].”

He expresses greater love for `Al̄ Ibn Ab̄ T̄lib̄ as̄ than even the Prophet Muhammad (S). He has unusual statements about `Al̄; for example, he says:

مَاتَ وَالصَّلَاةَ بَيْنَ شَفَتَيْهِ

“He died while prayer was between his two lips.”

And he also says of `Al̄ Ibn Ab̄ T̄lib̄ as̄, “`Al̄ was before his time, and I don’t know the secret of why destiny sometimes brings people to the world before their time.”

Incidentally, this point is the meaning of one of `Al̄ Ibn Ab̄ T̄lib̄’s as̄ own statements; he says:

غَدًا تَرَوْنَ أَيَّامِي وَ يَكْشِفُ لَكُمْ عَنْ سَرَائِرِي وَ تَعْرِفُونَنِي بَعْدَ خُلُوقِي مَكَانِي وَ قِيَامِي غَيْرِي مَقَامِي

“Tomorrow you will see my days and my secrets will be exposed to you, and you will know me after my space has become empty and others take my place.”

[6.](#) Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Baqarah (2), Verse 256

[7.](#) Al-Qurʿān, Sūrat ʿAlī Imrān (3), Verse 85

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