

Religion and the World

In the Nome of God the Merciful, the Compassionate

The subject of the present discussion is the view of religion towards "the world". Of course, our discussion will be limited to the view of Islam and, in particular, to the line of logic with which this subject is treated in the Holy Quran.

That this line of logic be understood is crucial, for of all the subjects of religious sermons and lectures, the most common are those which relate to "the world", and which can be grouped under the headings "**the evils of the world**", "**advices to reject and refrain from the world**", and so on. Whenever a person feels the urge to become a preacher and deliver lectures to the people, the first thing that comes to such a person's mind is the need to learn a few lines of poetry or prose or a few holy sayings about the world.

Thus it is that the ears of mankind have listened to no subject as they have listened to this one. And, being linked to morals and ethics and to the way in which people must face their daily affairs, this is a subject of prime importance. It is a subject that, when properly interpreted in a reasonable manner, is effective in producing a balanced ethical refinement – that includes the blessings of self-respect, a noble outlook, prosperity, and good relations within society. When, however, it is misinterpreted, it becomes the cause of stupification and complete abandonment of the senses; the source of all kinds of misfortune, helplessness and individual and social misery.

Misinterpretations of Asceticism

It is a matter of great regret that it is the second of these two interpretations that has prevailed. Advices and sermons and historical poetry and prose on this subject have almost always been of the second form. And there are two reasons for this. The first is the influence of certain non-Islamic ideas and philosophies based on a pessimistic outlook towards the world and towards material existence and worldly affairs, which became prevalent amongst the Muslims due to the assimilation of so many different peoples within the Muslim community. The other consists of unpleasant historical events and particular social causes that have occurred throughout the Islamic environment over the last fourteen

hundred years.

We must overlook all this, however, and directly inspect the logic of the Holy Quran. We must look to see whether these pessimistic philosophies are to be found in the Quran, or whether they are mere pretensions.

In the Holy Quran, "the world" has been introduced as a temporary abode not worthy of being made the subject of human hopes and aspirations. This verse for example, tells us that,

"Wealth and sons are an adornment of the worldly life, and the eternal – the good deeds – are better in the view of your Lord (as regards) reward and hope." (18:46)

Yet, although the world is considered by the Quran as being unworthy of human hopes and aspirations, still we are not told that all existence and all creation – the skies, the earth, the mountains, rivers, seas, plains, forests, deserts, the vegetable, animal, and human spheres of existence and all their systems, movements, and currents of development are all bad, futile and in vain.

On the contrary, the Quran presents the systematic order that is creation as being a right and just order, and God tells us:

"We did not create the heavens and the earth and what is between them in play." (44:38)

Furthermore, oaths are sworn in the Quran by parts of the creation, and this stresses the point that the physical world itself is very meaningful. Oaths such as:

"By the sun and its radiance, and the moon which succeeds it." (91:1-2)

By the fig and the olive, and Mount Sinai and this secure city (Meccah)," (95:1-3)

"By the charger panting ... " (100:1)

"By the (human) self . . . " (91 :7).

We are also told in the Quran,

"You see no incongruity in the creation 'of the All-compassionate (Rahman), so return your gaze; do you see a gap?' (67:3)

Essentially, a pessimistic view of creation and of the currents and systematic order of the world is incompatible with the school of thought of Islam; i.e. with the essential essence of Islamic thinking, the principle of **Tawhid** (monotheism). These pessimistic theories can only be based either upon materialism and the denial of a source of truth, justice and reason, or upon the principle, maintained by certain philosophies, of dualism, i.e. of two opposing sources of existence, one the source of good and the other the source of evil.

In a religion based on monotheism, however, on the belief in an All-compassionate and Merciful, Knowing and Sensible God, there exists no place for such pessimistic thinking, as has been made clear in many of the Quran's verses.

That which has been stated in the Quran about the world being finite and perishable, and the world being likened to plants that spring from the ground after a rainfall and grow, then become yellow and dry and gradually disintegrate altogether, in reality, raises the value of the human being. In this method we are told not to situate the world at the pinnacle of all our hopes and aspirations. This material world does not have such a value as to be worthy of being our highest goal. But this provides no reason for anyone to suppose that the world is totally ugly and evil.

Thus it is that no Islamic scholar of merit has ever presented the Quranic verses about the world in terms of pessimism towards the world, or towards its currents and movements.

Attraction towards the World

Regarding the Quranic verses about the world, many interpretations have been made. One of these is the view that the world itself is not bad, since it consists of all the earthly and celestial things that are mentioned in the Quran and which themselves are not bad, for they are all signs of our Creator Who exalts us with them, and thus they cannot be bad. What is bad and reproachable, according to this view, is affection and desire for these things. Love of the world is bad, according to this view, not the world itself. And we know that this interpretation has been expressed in poetry and prose to an extent that is beyond reckoning.

And this is the interpretation that has become the most prevalent. Most Muslims, if asked about the evil of the world, would reply that love of the world is bad, and that the world itself is good, for otherwise God would not have created it. However, when we examine this interpretation carefully, we find that, despite its popularity, it is not without its problems, and that it is not in exact accordance to the explanations of the Quran.

Firstly, we must look to see whether the attraction which man has for the world is a natural and instinctive attraction i.e. an attraction that has itself been created and placed amongst man's instincts? Or whether it appears in man as the result of later, special causes like habit, inculcation and imitation. For example, parents love their children while children love their parents. Men and women are both attracted to the opposite sex. Everyone is attracted to wealth and riches, to respect, popularity and so on. Are these attractions and affections natural and instinctive for all human beings? Or are they the incidental effects of a bad upbringing?

These attractions and affections are without doubt both natural and instinctive. How, therefore, is it possible for them to be bad and evil? And how can it be our duty to put them aside? These attractions are inherent in the human soul and, in the same way as it cannot be said that any part of the universe

around us is essentially bad or evil or that its creation was without Divine wisdom (*hikmah*), in the same way that it cannot be said that any part of the human body is essentially evil or that its creation was without the same wisdom – since no tiny vein or limb or even a hair can be found that is excessive or futile – so it is with the forces, instincts, parts of the human soul.

Of all the human desires and attractions, no natural, instinctive desire or attraction exists that was created without wisdom, that has no point or purpose. All natural, instinctive desires exist according to Divine wisdom. Love of one's parents, love of one's children, love of one's husband or wife, love of wealth and riches, love of progress and advancement, love of respect and popularity; all of these accord to Divine wisdom, and if they did not exist, the basis for all human life would fall apart.

Furthermore, these affections are mentioned as being signs of the Divine wisdom, or *hikmah*, in the Holy Quran itself. In one Surah, for example, amidst the creation of man, sleep and some other things being mentioned as signs of the Divine wisdom, we are told:

"And of His signs is that He created for you from your selves spouses, for you to find comfort in them, and placed between you love and affection. Verily in this are signs for a people who reflect." (30: 21)

If love for one's husband or wife is a bad thing, it would not have been mentioned in this verse as being one of the signs of the glory of God.

It is obvious that these affections have been placed in human nature, and it is also clear that they are the means for worldly affairs to have their order and systematic currents. If these affections did not exist, neither would generation succeed generation, nor would life and civilization ever advance, nor would there exist in the instincts of man any reason for work, industry, or struggle. In short, mankind would not have remained on the face of the earth.

Deliverance

Having looked at these two interpretations and views about the world – one, the view of those who see the world with its pleasures as being evil and corrupt, the other, the view of those who consider the world itself to be good but attraction to it and love of it to be bad let us now look at what means they provide for the felicity of man and his deliverance from misery.

Those who have a pessimistic view of the world and existence as a whole, considering existence and life to be evil and corrupt, have no solutions to offer except the despair of nihilism and suicide. This is the weakest of views and the most miserable people in the world are those who hold it.

On the other hand, those who see the world as being good, but view attraction and love towards it as being bad, say that building and burning, construction and destruction, is all the same and futile and that the road to man's happiness and deliverance lies in him combating his desires and affections, and

plucking them out of his being by the roots. According to this view, the human then becomes freed from the jungle of vice and corruption and the bearer of happiness in his breast.

The first of these views needs scant reply, but the answer to the second is that, firstly, according to a precise philosophical theory that has lately been confirmed by the science of psychology, the natural, instinctive desires and loves which exist in the human soul cannot be suppressed or eradicated. The most that can be achieved is that, by the process of self-mortification, they can be driven to the depths of one's inner consciousness to appear later in a dangerous form through an unnatural channel, producing as a side-effect serious disorders of the nerves and soul. Secondly, even if it could be done, to do so would be hundred percent harmful, exactly like any unnecessary amputation of a limb or organ.

Each and every natural, human instinct is a force that has been placed within us to stimulate action and movement. There is no play or futility in the creation; for what reason should these generators of energy be ignored, ruined or destroyed?

The Quranic Logic

That which is derived from the Quran is that desires and affections towards the world are not essentially bad, and neither has the Quran appointed any path to felicity entailing that our natural desires and attractions be pummeled and crushed.

What the Quran criticizes and reproaches is such an overwhelming affection the reality of which would mean being totally dependent on the material world and content and satisfied solely with it. The Quran tells us:

"Wealth and sons are an adornment of the worldly life while the eternal -- the good deeds - are better in the view of your Lord (as regards) reward and hope." (18:45)

And the word "hope" at the end of this verse makes it clear that the verse is about aims and ideals.

The Holy Quran describes worldly people in these terms:

'... those who have no hope in Our meeting and are satisfied with the worldly life and find peace with it; and these are they who are mindless of Our signs.' (10:7).

This verse reproaches being content and satisfied with only material existence, sparing not a thought for the hereafter or for God, and finding peace solely in the material life. So these are the qualities of worldly people in the reproachable sense.

In another place we are told:

"So turn away from whoever turns his back on Our Reminder and who desires nothing except the worldly life. That is their extent of knowledge." (53:29-30).

Again, the people who are discussed and reproached are those who desire nothing and have no goal other than the material world, and whose thinking goes no higher than this.

Or yet again:

"Love of desires is made attractive for man; (desires) of women, of sons, of gold and silver in hoarded treasures, of finely bred horses, cattle and farms. These are the provisions of the worldly life; but the best destination is towards God." (3:13)

This verse, too, does not simply reproach natural desires and loves, it reproaches the fact that love of the objects of desire are made beautiful in the views of some people, and have been presented as greater and more beautiful than they really are, and have fascinated and totally occupied some people, and have become some people's sole ideals. Similarly, we are told:

'Are you content with the life of the world instead of the hereafter? The provisions of the worldly life compared to the hereafter are but little.' (9:38)

The point of all these verses is to criticize and reproach being satisfied solely with worldly attractions.

There is a difference between love of wealth, children and other factors of worldly life on the one hand, and being content and satisfied with them alone and with placing them at the centre of one's hopes and aspirations on the other. When it is the aim to prevent mankind from being monopolized by worldly aspirations, from being limited to worldly aspirations, the solution does not lie in condemning, attacking and trying to uproot all the natural, worldly impulses of the human being. On the contrary, the solution lies in freeing and benefitting from another chain of natural desires which come to the surface later than material desires, and which are in need of being brought into life and instigated.

Therefore the purpose of religious teachings must be to awaken these higher feelings of man, feelings which are themselves high and noble and originate from a high and noble source in the human being, and, because of this, manifest themselves later than material feelings and need to be provoked. These feelings are spiritual feelings and the instigation and provocation they need must be provided by religion.

Each and every love and affection is like a spring flowing from the soul. The purpose of religion is not to block the springs of material attractions; the purpose of religion is to open and set flowing other springs, spiritual springs. In other words, religion must not limit and reduce the sensual forces that have been created, along with the rest of creation, with Divine wisdom. What religion must do is free a different chain of spiritual forces which are in dire need of being freed.

This matter can be clarified with a simple example: assume that a man has a son whom he sends to school, and then he sees that all his son's interests lie in playing and eating. In such a case, the man naturally becomes unhappy and gives his son a good talking to. He reproaches him, and perhaps calls him a glutton and a good for nothing. He does this because he wants his son to be interested in lessons

and books, in reading, writing, arithmetic, and so on. And interest in these things, as a matter of human nature, manifests itself in children later than interest in playing and eating.

In addition, these higher interests are in need of instigation, of encouragement. An instinctive desire for knowledge exists in each and every human being, but until it is awoken, it lies helplessly dormant. However, there is no reason to suppose that the father wants his son to give up playing and eating. If one day he was to discover that his son had lost all interest in games and food, he would quickly feel disturbed and would assume his son's state to be the manifestation of some illness, and would probably refer him to a doctor. The father realises that while his son is healthy, he must take an interest in school and in books, but must also have happiness, play and food at their proper times.

The Quranic Logic and its World View

The line of logic that the Quran displays towards the world and the prohibition of devoting all one's interest to the world is the cause of a certain type of Quranic view towards the world and towards the human being. About the world, the view of the Quran is that the happiness of existence is not limited to material, worldly existence. While admitting the magnificence of this world to the proper degree, the Quran maintains the existence of another, far greater and more extensive sphere, in comparison to which this world is almost nothing.

Similarly, about the human being, the Quran maintains that life is not limited to this finite, worldly existence, and that the human being also has a life in the hereafter. According to the Quran, the extent of human life stretches beyond the life of this world to infinity. In the light of this, therefore, it is clear that the human being must not place the world before his eyes as the pinnacle of all his aspirations.

So, just as one branch of the Islamic world view and philosophy, i.e. monotheism, does not, as previously stated, allow us to look pessimistically at the world and at sensual existence, so there is another branch of Islamic thinking which necessitates that the highest goal and hope of the human being be above the world and worldly affairs; and this is the branch concerning knowledge of the hereafter.

Materialism and Ethics

Besides this, another important branch of Islam's school of thought also necessitates the diminution of the importance given to the material world, the branch of ethics and moral refinement.

Also accepted by other schools of thought, this branch holds that in order for human society to become civilized society, there must be some means of neutralizing greed and of persuading people to adopt spiritual, ethical aspirations. The stronger the fire of lust and greed becomes, not only does it add nothing to the strength of society, but society also becomes easier to be ruined and destroyed.

As for felicity, although the individual should not go to extremes and, like some philosophies, imagine

that happiness and prosperity lie in refraining from almost everything, still there is no doubt that a natural disregard of the world and its pleasures is a prime condition of any real felicity, both of the individual and of the society.

Here we must deal with another point that needs to be explained. From what has been stated about preventing human desires and attractions from being limited to the material world, it is possible that someone will conceive the misgiving that both the world must be loved and also God, that the ideal of the well-balanced human being must be the material world and also God; a kind of polytheism.

Certainly not! This is not the aim of Islam. The aim of Islam is that the human being has a chain of attractions for things. Attractions that God has created within the human according to His wisdom. The Prophets and Imams were blessed with these same attractions, and they thanked their Lord for them. These feelings are neither capable of being stopped nor would it be good to stop them if they were.

A human being has another capacity which goes beyond these worldly affections; the capacity to have ideals. The material world must not become the human being's ideal. This is the type of love and affection which is bad. Desires and affections are a kind of talent that are at the level of being one of the necessary means of life. The talent of having ideals, however, is a special talent which finds its source in the profound essence of humanity, and is uniquely human. The Prophets did not come to destroy desires and affections, or to dry up their source. What they came to do was to displace the material world from its position at the pinnacle of man's ideals and present and establish in its place God and the hereafter.

In reality, the Prophets worked to prevent the world and sensual existence from leaving their natural position as the subject of interest, attraction and desire – which are kinds of links between the human and the things around him – and being transferred to that sacred location which is called the human heart, that nucleus of a human being's existence and his very capacity to be human. The Prophets came to prevent the world and material existence from occupying that holy place and, as a consequence, blocking man's flight towards the perfect infinite.

So when we read in the Quran that

"God has not made for man two hearts in his body" (33:4)

we must not assume that the verse signifies that we must either be attracted to God or to things other than God such as one's husband or wife, children, wealth, and so on. No, the point is that man must have one high aim and one focus for his aspirations. Having affections towards several things in one essence is certainly possible, and this is self-evident, but two things that cannot possibly accompany one another are having God as the centre of one's hopes and aspirations and also the world.

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