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13. The Qur'an: Created or Eternal with God?

Synopsis: The discussion about God's permanent attributes; the question of whether the Qur'an was created or eternal is an extraneous matter that has no connection with the Islamic doctrine; God's attributes of essence and attributes of action; the speech of the soul; the proof of the Ash 'arites in support of the speech of the soul; the imagination about the speech before its genesis is alien to the speech of the soul; the speech of the soul–a matter purely speculative.

No Muslim would ever doubt that the Speech of God that He revealed to His Prophet provided proof of his prophethood and evidence for his community. Moreover, no one doubts that that speech is one of God's permanent attributes, which are regarded as the attributes of beauty (*jamaliyya*). God, the Glorified, has described Himself with this attribute in His Book, where He, the exalted, says, "***To Moses God spoke directly"*** (***Qur'an 4: 164***).

Influence of Greek Philosophy on Muslim Lives

The entire Muslim community used to believe that the Qur'an is the Speech of God and that that speech is an attribute of God. There was no disagreement among them regarding these two things, until Greek philosophy intruded into the community and divided it into factions which accused each other of disbelief. Thus, disputes and argumentation turned into fighting and bloodshed. So many were destroyed and so much blood was shed in Islam, and so many innocent lives were taken in spite of the fact that both the killer and the victim acknowledged the oneness of God, and accepted the prophethood and the Day of Judgment as their creed!

Is it not strange that a Muslim would allow himself to violate the honor of a brother Muslim and to kill him, while both of them profess that there is no god but God, alone; that He has no associate, and that Muhammad is the servant and Messenger of God, who brought the truth from Him [cf. Qur'an 37:37]; and that

"God shall raise those who are in the graves"? [***Qur'an 22:7***].

Was it not the Prophet's practice and the practice of those who followed him, in exercising authority, that they would regulate the traditions of Islam for those who had borne witness to it? Has anyone related that the Prophet, or any of those who succeeded him in his position, asked anyone whether the Qur'an was created or eternal, or questioned them regarding any disputed question besides it, and did not accept the true belief of a person except after he had declared himself on one side of the dispute or the other?

I do not know–and I wish I did know–how a Muslim who creates a dispute among Muslims will exonerate himself, and what he would answer his Lord with on the Day of Judgment when he meets Him, and when he is asked about what he had committed.

"Surely, we belong to God, and to Him we return" [***Qur'an 2:156***].

This problem, which is the dispute over whether the Qur'an was created or eternal, arose when Muslims became divided into two parties: the Ash'ari and the nonAsh'ari. The Ash'arites maintained that the Qur'an was eternal, and that the speech is of two kinds: "speech of the soul" (*kalam nafsi*) and "uttered" speech (*kalam lafzi*). God's speech of the soul subsists in His essence and is eternal in His eternity. Accordingly, it is one of the attributes inherent in the divine essence. The non–Ash'arites, who include the Mu'tazilites and the 'Adliyya [those who believed in the justice of God], upheld the doctrine of the creation of the Qur'an and confined divine speech to the uttered kind. Accordingly, speech is among the attributes of divine action.

God's Attributes of Essence and Attributes of Action

The difference between the two types of divine attributes is that the attributes of essence are the ones the opposite of which are absolutely impossible to impute to God. Therefore, it would be incorrect to deny them of God in any way. For example, the attributes of knowledge (*'ilm*), power (*qudra*), and life (*ayat*): God, the Blessed and Holy, has never ceased, nor will He ever cease, to be characterized as the Knowing, the Powerful, and the Living. Moreover, it is impossible that He would not be thus at any moment.

As for the divine attributes of action, they are those with which God can be described and the opposite of which can be ascribed to Him at one time or another. For example, the attributes of creation (*khalq*) and giving sustenance (*rizq*): It can be said that God created such and such a thing, and did not create such and such a thing; God provided so–and–so with a son and did not provide him with wealth. Accordingly, it becomes obvious that speech is among God's attributes of action because it can be said that "God spoke to Moses and did not speak to Pharaoh," or that "God spoke to Moses on the Mount of Sinai, and did not speak to him in the Nile Valley."

The Speech of the Soul

All the Ash'arites agree about the existence of a kind of speech other than the wellknown uttered type. They call this speech *al-kalam al-nafsi*. But beyond that they disagree. A group of them maintains that the speech of the soul is the purport of the uttered speech and its meaning. Others maintain that it is a substitute for the uttered speech, and that the meaning of the utterance in regard to it is derived from a sense other than the situational mode. As such, it resembles the way that voluntary actions reflect the will, knowledge, and life of the doer.

At any rate, what is well established among them is that they regard the speech [al-kalam = the Word = the Qur'an] as eternal. Nevertheless, al-Fadil al-Qushji ascribes to some the opinion that the pages and the cover of the Qur'an are also eternal.[1] As stated earlier, those other than the Ash'arites scholars are in agreement that the Qur'an was created, and that the uttered speech of God is like His primordial commands: They were created by Him and a sign among His signs. No useful purpose is attained from the theological debate on this question and from the analysis of the views regarding it, because it is outside the domain of the fundamental principles of religion (*usul al-din*) and their derivatives; nor is it relevant to religious questions and divine gnosis. However, I wish to discuss it in order to clarify to our Ash'arite brothers, who happen to constitute the majority of Muslims, that what they maintain in this connection, and regard as a necessary part of the creed, is nothing more than a speculative matter, with no basis for it in reason and revelation.

To elaborate on this last point, [it should be noted that] there is no difference of opinion [about the fact] that the customary speech made up of the prevalent alphabetical letters in existence is a created thing, and hence impossible to ascribe to God eternally or otherwise. The dispute is, however, over the existence of another kind of speech, whose parts have come together all at once in actuality. The Ash'arites attest to this kind of speech and consider it one of the attributes of the divine essence, just as it is of other beings. In contrast to the Ash'arites, scholars reject this and confine the divine speech to the uttered one. They maintain that its subsistence in the speaker is the same as the subsistence of the action in the doer. The sound opinion is the latter one [because scholars do not believe in the existence of any speech other than the uttered one]. Our argument in support of this is that a statement is either declarative (*khabariyya*) or creative (*inshai'iyya*). As for the declarative sentences, if we were to analyze their components, we would find nine of them that are necessary in ascribing something to another or denying the ascription:

1. Words of the sentence, with their substance and forms;

2. The meanings and signification of the words;

3. Constructional organization of the sentence;

4. That which is indicated by the constructional organization;

5. The speaker's conception of the substance of the sentence and its forms;

6. The speaker's conception of the signification of the sentence, including its structure and form;

7. The conformity, or lack thereof, between the meaning of the sentence and the actuality;

8. The speaker's knowledge about the conformity or the lack thereof, or his doubt about it; and,

9. The speaker's will to create the sentence in the actuality, which is anticipated by its premises.

The Ash'arites concede that the speech of the soul does not have any of the abovementioned elements. Thus, there does not remain any existence whatsoever for the speech of the soul. As for the purport of the declarative sentence, even that cannot possibly reflect the speech of the soul. The reason is that the purport of the declarative sentence, as it is commonly understood, attributes a characteristic to a thing or denies its attribution. It aims, properly speaking, at confirming or denying the existence of a thing. We have established that the structural organization of the declarative sentence, in accordance with its situation, is indicative of the purpose of the speaker in the narration in regard to the attribution, whether affirmative or negative, to the situation. Accordingly, its significance [like the declarative sentence, consists of] nothing but the utterances that are made up of the conceived signs.

We have established, in another study,2that coining a word is an undertaking that makes a particular utterance or a specific form convey the thing the speaker wishes to convey. This is the purport of the declarative sentence. The speech of the soul, according to those who maintain its existence, is similar to an uttered speech but is different in that it lacks external existence for the purpose of the narration.

As for the creative statements, they, too, resemble the declarative sentences. The distinction, however, between the two is that the creative sentences arc not made up of elements which either conform or do not conform with an actual reality of speech. Accordingly, the indispensable elements of such a statement are seven in number. They are exactly the same as the nine elements we identified for the declarative sentences, but with the exception of the seventh and eighth. As pointed out earlier, none of these elements make up the speech of the soul, as maintained by the Ash'arites.

It is possible that someone may ask, What is the purpose of the organization of the creative sentence? It is common knowledge among scholars that its purpose is to create a specific idea, such as one suitable for the outside world (*'alam al-insha'*). Thus, in the writings of many of these scholars, it is repeatedly mentioned that insha' (construction) means the creation of an idea by means of words. We treated this subject in our theoretical discussion of the legal foundations of Islamic law, in which we argued that there is no basis for the constructive existence (*al-wujud al-insha'i*) in relation to the postulate that meaning comes into existence through verbalization. In addition, even though an expression and an idea share the same external form, originating from the relation creted between them by the originator, the existence of the expression is a self-subsistent one, whereas the existence of the meaning is incidental and figurative. It is for this reason that the good or bad sense of the idea is passed on to the expression.

In this sense it is correct to say that the idea comes into being through verbalization, but this is not limited to creative sentences; rather, it includes the declarative sentences as well as the terminology.

As for the idea existing without verbalization, this is limited to two kinds [of existence], and verbalization has nothing to do with either of them.

The first [is the idea's] real existence (*wujud haqiqi*), in which it emerges in the order of existing essences and accidents. For this existence to be realized, it is necessary that the idea's causes and events be fulfilled, and that the expressions that convey the idea's meaning not be regarded as natural causes that would have any role in its fulfillment.

The second kind is perceived existence (*wujud i'tibari*). It is a kind of existence for something from a subjective point of view, and not in the objective sense. This kind of existence, however, depends on the existence of the one who possesses that point of view. The view of every object is self-subsistent, and originates from itself directly, without depending at all upon the external existence of a particular term. As for the endorsement, by the lawgiver or by rational persons, of contracts (*'uqud*) or one-sided dispositions (*Iqa'at*) emanating from the people-even if it depends upon the issuance of the words, or something to the same effect, from the promulgator, and even if its terms do not have any binding effect if they are not explicit, in word or action-that endorsement in these matters nevertheless depends upon the issuance of terms, with the intention of setting up or bringing about the contractual agreement. The subject of discussion, however, is the purport of the words brought to bear in the stage preceding the endorsement.

In short, the real or perceived existence of a thing does not depend on the words. As for the endorsement given by the lawgiver or the rational persons to the perceived existence of the words, although it is dependent on the wording in the contracts and one-sided dispositions, still [a thing's existence] depends on it. This dependency is due to the fact that the wording is used to convey the same meaning in establishing the terms of the contract. Verbal existence appertains to any idea that may be signified by speech. Consequently, there is no sense in the dictum "Construction (*insha'*) is designed to bring about the meaning through verbalization."

The correct opinion in this regard is that the created structures are brought into being to manifest a mental matter of some kind. Such a mental matter could be subjective, such as in commanding and in prohibiting, or in contracts and one-sided dispositions; or it could be a characteristic such as ambition or hope. In this way, the forms of the sentences are pointers to a mental proposition: In the declarative sentence it is the intent of the narrative, whereas in the creative sentence it is something else.

Moreover, use of the accentuating sentence for a mental proposition may indeed be due to the need to accentuate this proposition, or it could be due to something other than that. Whether, in this latter form, the sentence is applied figuratively or actually, this is not the place for its elaboration. We have treated the subject in our lectures on juridical methodology.

It appears, from the application of the term *talab* (quest), that it has been coined to indicate an undertaking to attain a particular goal. Hence, one does not say, "He sought a long-cherished wish," nor, "He sought the Hereafter," except to indicate undertaking the quest for attaining them. In the lexicon *Lisan al-'Arab* [by Ibn Manzur], *talab* is defined as "an endeavor to find something and to attain it." On this basis, it is correct to apply the term *talib* (the one who seeks) to *'amir* (the one who demands and commands) because he endeavors to fulfill the task he was asked to perform. This is because a command is that which calls upon a person to fulfill that which has been commanded. "Command" (*amr*), then, is in itself a confirmation of the quest (*talab*), and not an utterance of which the quest is the meaning. Accordingly, there is no basis for the opinion that a command is designated to express a demand; nor is there any basis for saying that a quest is a "mental speech" that is indicated by the "uttered speech."

The Ash'arites are correct in their view that *al-talab* means something other than *al-irada* (will). Nevertheless, they are certainly wrong in regarding it as a mental characteristic, and in considering that it is indicated by the uttered speech.

Refutation of the Thesis about the Speech of the Soul

In light of the above discussion, it is obvious that there is nothing in the instances of the declarative or creative sentences that might be considered a kind of speech inherent in the mind, and that might be called a "speech of the soul." True, it is necessary for the speaker to conceive of his speech before bringing it into being. The act of conceiving a thing is its creation in the mind, in what is called "mental existence" (*wujud dhihni*). If this is what the Ash'arites mean by a speech of the soul, then it is correct. However, we have shown that this is not peculiar to speech only; it covers all voluntary acts. The speech should be understood in this vein because it is a voluntary act of the speaker.

Ash'arite Arguments in Support of the Thesis about the Speech of the Soul

The following are some of the arguments advanced by those who claim the existence of the speech of the soul.

First, all speakers conceive the speech mentally before speaking. That which exists externally in the form of a speech is actually an indicator of a similar thing existing in the mind. This mental speech is detected by every person in his mind. It is to this that al-Akhtal [the Arab-Christian poet of the Umayyad court] alludes:

Surely the speech [of a person] is in the heart, and the tongue is made to evince that which is in the heart.[3]

The answer, as has already been noted, is that the formation of the speech in the mind is its conception and its presence there. It is the mental existence that applies to all voluntary actions. A writer or a painter, [e.g.], must first conceive of his objects before he creates them. This mental process has no relation to the speech of the soul.

Second, one can apply the label "speech" to that part of it that exists in the mind. This application is sound without any need to prove it. Thus, a person says, "I have in my mind words that I wish not to reveal." Moreover, God, the Exalted, says: ***"Be secret in your speech, or proclaim it; He knows the thoughts within the breasts"*** (***Qur'an 67: 13***). The answer to this is again apparent from what was noted above. Speech can be such in its mental existence just as it is in its external form. For everything there are two forms of existence---external and mental--and a thing is the same thing in both forms of its existence. The thing is named without any attention to this conformity between the two forms. However, this situation is not peculiar to speech only. Thus, an engineer says, "I have in my mind a picture of a building that I will draw on a chart." Or a believer says, "It is in my mind that I fast tomorrow."

Third, it is appropriate to apply the term "speaker" to God. The form here is a verbal noun used to indicate the presence of a principle [of speech] in the divine essence, but only in a predicative sense. It is for this reason that the attributes involved in moving, standing still, or sleeping are applied only to the one performing these functions, and not to the one who created them. It is evident that it is not possible for uttered speech to be attributed to God, for it is not possible for the Eternal to be characterized by a created attribute. Consequently, it is inevitable that the speech of God will be regarded as eternal so as to describe God as the Speaker, by virtue of the characterization of Him with that term.

The response [to this is as follows]. The principle involved in the use of the term "speaker" (*mutakallim*) is not the speech, because it does not subsist in the speaker the way an attribute subsists in the thing characterized by it. This is true even in the case of beings other than God. After all, speech is an accidental property for the voice which results from the vibration of the air. As such, it subsists in air and not in the speaker. The principle involved in the application of the word in this situation is the "speaking" (*takallum*). It does not make sense to understand [this in any sense] other than the sense of causing speech to occur. Hence, it carries the same meaning whether applied to God or to any other being.

As for the claim of one who says that "the verbal noun is used to indicate the presence of a principle [of speech] in the divine essence, in the same way that an attribute subsists in the one to whom it is ascribed," this is a manifest error. The reason is that the form indicates only some kind of subsistence of the principle [of speech] in the divine essence. As for the specific characteristics of this subsistence--and whether they constitute a form of existence, dwelling within somebody, or some other form these characteristics cannot be determined from the purport of the form, for they change according to the context. Hence, they do not come under one general rule. The terms *al-'alim* (knower) and *al-na'im* (sleeper), for instance, are not applied to the originator of knowledge and sleep, whereas the terms *al-qabid*, (withholder), *albasit* (bestower), *al-nafi'* (beneficent one), *al-dar* (causer of hurt) are applied to the

originator of the conditions. Accordingly, the incorrectness of applying the term "moving" to the originator of motion does not necessitate the incorrectness of ap plying the term "speaker" to the originator of speech.

To conclude, the thesis about the speech of the soul is merely a speculative matter that does not have a basis for supporting its existence, whether rationally or demonstratively. It is appropriate that we end this section by quoting the Imam al-Sadiq on this subject. The report has been related by al-Kulayni through a transmission going back to Abu Bakr, who said:

I heard Abu 'Abd Allah [al-Sadiq] say: "God, our Lord, the Almighty and Glorified, has never ceased to exist. Knowledge was His essence before there was anything to be known. Hearing was His essence before there was anything to be heard. Seeing was His essence before there was anything to be seen. Power was His essence before there was anything over which to exercise power. When He created things and knowable things came into being, His knowledge embraced all that is knowable; His hearing, all that can be heard; His sight, all that can be seen; and His power, all that can be subject to power." [At that point] I asked him, "Was God moving from eternity?" He replied, "Exalted is God above that! Motion is an attribute that comes into being with the act of moving." I said, "Was God speaking from eternity?" The Imam replied, "Speaking is an attribute that comes into being and is not eternal. God, the Almighty and Glorified, was when there was no speaker."4

1. Qushji, Sharh al-Tajrid , p. 354
2. See Ajwad al-Taqrirlit, on the subject of Usul in jurisprudence.
3. Diwan al-'Akhtal (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1981) p. 184.
4. Kulayni, al-Kafi, vol. 3, pp. 314-15.

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