

Indescribability of the Human Being

The terrestrial world in which we live is a world full of existing activities and innumerable potentialities yet to appear. In the parlance of philosophy, this world's phenomena possess two facets of 'present' (*being*) and 'potential' (*becoming*). If we take into account a date stone, it is a fruit stone with all its peculiarities, having a particular weight, volume and colour. But it is not merely a fruit stone. Rather, given all the necessary conditions, it can become a big date-palm, which in turn can produce thousands of other dates, date stones and date-palms. This feature can be witnessed in all phenomena of this world, whether living or non-living things. The gap between what is considered as the present state of a phenomenon and what it can become being always wide.

This movement of the phenomena from *what they are* toward *what they can be* (from *being* to *becoming*) and the realization of the potentialities, like removing an old garment and wearing a new one, or like wearing clothes over other clothes, which in the parlance of philosophy is called 'putting off' and 'putting on' [*khal' va labs*] or successive donning [*labs pas az labs*], respectively, has no ending at all. The appropriate divine wisdom is that every phenomenon should attain its own possible state of perfection and to reach whatever is reachable.

The human being, too, is not an exception to this transcendental and immutable law, and like other phenomena, is subject to change and transformation. He sets foot in this world with the greatest potentialities and talents and with the least activity, and in the beginning when he is born; he is more hapless compared to many of the other creatures. Yet, during the short or long span of his life he always tests himself, shows his capabilities in the sphere of good and evil, and moulds and shapes himself. He then abandons his previous form, obliterates himself, and adopts another form. He is like a portraitist who often draws an object, erases it, and then draws another one.

This possibility of change exists in all stages of life. Although the changeability of man in the initial part of his life and his formative years are strong, this transformation becomes more difficult with advancing age; however, the principle of such a possibility does not disappear. Therefore, the possibility of changing oneself exists for everybody until the end of his life.

In other words, there is no certain conclusion and end of every person's life story and his destiny cannot be considered as being predetermined. Here, we proceed to another issue and that is, the indescribability of man.

Every phenomenon, in our analytical view, possesses two facets: one is its 'being' ("is") and the other, its 'manner' ("what is"). For instance, an apple as a concrete reality has subsistence and along with this subsistence, the essence of its nature can be included and expressed in its description.

Therefore, all terrestrial things possess subsistence and disposition, which in philosophical jargon are called 'existence' and 'essence'. Now, let us see what the nature of man is. The existence of various explanations on the essence and nature of man only indicates the divergence of views on this issue. For example, after stating the manner of man's creation, God, the Most Sublime, praised and named Himself as the most Excellent Creator.[7]

Yet, at the time of giving account to the trust, which the heavens and the mountains trembled for taking responsibility but which man shouldered, God introduces him as iniquitous and imprudent.[8]

If we pursue this trend, we will encounter other descriptions and explanations. As a result, we can say that man has various explanations, or is essentially indescribable. Man is all of these; but at the same time he is beyond all descriptions. In a sense, man is the only terrestrial creature that has neither definite essence nor a specific limit, and he has such potentialities and capabilities that one's nature cannot be foretold before their realization.

According to the existentialists, all beings possess a definite nature that could be made known to them in advance. However, a human being is the only creature whose existence takes priority over his nature, or he 'builds' his own nature. John Paul Sartre,[9] the most famous expounder and exponent of existentialism, opines on this matter thus:

Man's conception of himself is not only what he has in his mind; it is also what he wants of himself. It is the concept (of himself) that he exhibits after its manifestation in the world of existence. It is that which he seeks from himself after moving toward existence. Man is nothing but what he makes of himself. This is the foremost principle of existentialism. [10]

This point is part of the incontrovertible principles of Islamic philosophy and gnosticism which has been asserted differently, the most prominent formula of this viewpoint being thus stated by Shaykh Ishrāq—Shahāb ad-Dīn Suhrawardī:[11] "The self and the creatures superior to it are mere beings." [12]

The Imām articulates this principle in this way:

Man cannot be confined to one of the worlds—the higher and the lower worlds. For, the people as well

as the people of Yathrib [13] has no position and from the descension point of view have *hay'at* [14] rank which can manifest their God's power, and from ascension point of view they have a high horizon and the station of annihilation at the Threshold of Unity. Thus, the chief of the Illuminationist [*Ishrāqī*] School [15] says that vocal self has no nature and it has the station of unity and union of all the truths of the world of creation and affair. [16]

Understanding and comprehending these explanations requires familiarity with Islamic gnosticism. Nonetheless, the end result of this discussion is that the essence of man is not determined and fixed; he can traverse all the spheres of existence.

As such, any attempt to present a specific and absolute explanation of man is an exercise in futility. It is only after the realization of all the potentialities and aptitudes of man that we can offer a perfect explanation of him. From these indisputable principles of philosophy, the Imām arrives at the following three ethical inferences:

1. The possibility of nurture and training in all conditions;
2. Coexistence of fear and hope; and
3. Suspension of judgment.

The possibility of nurture and training in all conditions

A teacher asked his student: "Who has created you?" Contrary to the expectation of the teacher, the student answered: "My creation has not yet finished." [17]

Ethics and education holds meaning only if we admit that the 'creation' of man is not yet completed and that man has still a long way to go so as to consider his creation as having been completed. What is meant by 'creation' is not only the appearance of that earthly and ephemeral body since it is indubitable to many that such an aspect of 'creation' is not the termination of human perfections; it is only part of the things that should take place for man.

Thus, the 'creation' of man has not yet ended, and this is the starting point of any philosophy of education and system of morality. We can only talk of ethics and education when we accept that man is a changeable, imperfect and incomplete creature.

Once we deny this principle or have an iota of doubt about it, then we can no longer talk about ethics, and thereby closing the way to any sort of omission and reform concerning man's existence. Anyone who believes that human nature is wicked and that there is no possibility for it to change, or who likens

man to a bitter tree the irrigation of which with sweet and honeyed water is worthless, will not be able to derive benefit from ethics and is traversing this path to no avail. This approach which is against nature can be well seen in the following couplets of Firdawsؒ (Ferdowsؒ):[18]

درختی که تلخ است وی را سرشت گرش برنشانی به باغ بهشت

ور از جوی خُلد ش به هنگام آب به بیخ، انگبین ریزی و شهد ناب

سر انجام گوهر به بار آورد؟ همان میوه تلخ بار آورد

*A tree which by nature bears bitter fruit,
Even if it is located in the garden of paradise,
If in the paradise when watering it instead of water
You pour grape juice and pure milk,
At the time of fruit-bearing, will it produce sweet fruit?
Nay, it will bear the same bitter fruit.*

Our literature (i.e. Persian literature) is replete with such allusions and metaphors, all referring to one point which is the negation of the fundamental and undeniable essence of man's changeability and indescribability. At times, the manifestations of this qualm on the essence of changeability are disclosed in proverbs such as, "What is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh" or "a walnut on a dome".

And sometimes while admitting the essence of changeability, the time constraint serves as a pretext in negating it. For instance, it can be asserted that so long as the twig is wet (i.e. small and weak), its curve can still be straightened. In like manner, so long as a human being has not yet fully grown up and is still flexible, he can be moulded, but when he passes a particular age, he becomes like dry wood and no amount of nurture will work in his case.

Occasionally, this type of understanding in the sayings such as, "Our time has already passed" signifies the same approach wherein the speaker, in stating it, passes up any possibility of reform and shuts the door to any sort of growth and progress. If man is changeable and unpredictable so long as he is alive, it then follows that he can choose a path whenever he wants or he can change his past ways and set out in a new direction.

In our religious culture, repentance [*tawbah*] essentially implies the same thing. That is, man turns back

from the path he has taken and rebels against himself. The Imām has time and again emphasized on this fact, and asserts that one can always speak of nurture and reform. Therefore, as long as man remains in this world, which is the source of the tree of primal matter with its substantial, formal, and accidental changes and transformations, he can deliver himself from all levels of deficiency, wretchedness, polytheism [*shirk*], and hypocrisy and attain the higher levels of perfection and spiritual felicity.[19]

This teaching is anchored on the same definite philosophical principle of man's changeability. More importantly, if we doubt this principle, it follows that all the missions of the prophets (‘a) and the revelation of all heavenly books would be fruitless since they only make sense if we accept the fact that man is transformable. Taking this reality into account, the Imām states:

All habits [*malikāt*] and psychic dispositions are capable of change. As long as the soul remains in this world of change and transition, it is subject to time and renewal; and as long as it is associated with matter [*hay’at*] and potentiality [*quwwah*], the human being can change all his dispositions and transform them into their opposites. This claim is affirmed, besides metaphysical proof [*burhān*], by experience, as well as by the summons of the prophets (‘a) and the true religions to noble dispositions and their restraining people from the opposite qualities.[20]

From the Imām's vantage point, doubt on the possibility of nurture springs from the satanic insinuations [*waswās*; sing. *waswasah*] and guiles of the carnal self [*an-nafs al-ammārāh*]. These two are the brigands along the path of human perfection who, by bringing excuses such as, “Our time has already passed,” deter man from reforming the self:

Do not think that psychic, moral, and spiritual vices are not curable; this is an erroneous notion that has been inspired in you by Satan and your carnal self that want to keep you from treading the path of the Hereafter and to frustrate your efforts at rectifying your self. As long as man exists in this realm of transition and change, it is possible for him to transform all his attributes and moral characteristics.[21]

Of course, this is not to say that reforming the self and cultivating psychic perfections are always easy. We cannot deny the fact that the degrees of educability in various ages are different, and that the human being, in the initial stage of his life, is more educable and shows more flexibility. The Commander of the Faithful [*amīr al-mu’minīn*] ‘Alī (‘a) points out this reality, thus: “The young heart is like an unsown land which accepts whatever you plant in it.”[22]

The more a person advances in age, the less is he able to control his annoying habits and increasingly becomes a prisoner of his own unbecoming behaviour because with every day that passes, his disagreeable attributes become more deeply rooted while his power diminishes.

Mawlānā[23] has a story which conveys this reality. There was a person who planted a bramble along a public way. The thorny shrub took root, grew and became a nuisance to the wayfarers, so much so that they complained to the ruler. The ruler summoned him and asked him to uproot the bramble. The person promised to do so but kept on procrastinating. In this manner, as the days passed by, the plant became stronger while the person became weaker and older:

خارکُن در قوَّت ویرخاستن خارکُن در پیری ویدرکاستن

خارکُن هر روز و هر دم سبز و تر خارکُن هر روز زار و خشکتر

او جوانتر می شود، تو پیرتر زویدباش و روزگار خود مبر

The thornbrush (is) in (process of gaining) strength and (in) ascent;

Its digger (is) in (process of) aging and decline.

The thornbrush every day and every moment is green and fresh;

Its digger is every day more sickly and withered.

It is growing younger, you older:

Be quick and do not waste your time! [24]

With respect to his habits and characteristics, the human being is like that thorn pricker. Thus, as time passes by, uprooting those habits becomes more difficult. According to the Imām, as long as man exists in this realm of transition and change, it is possible for him to transform all his attributes and moral characteristics. However strong his habits may be, as long as he is living in this world he can quit them. The only thing is that the effort required to throw them off varies with the degree of their strength and intensity. A bad habit in the early phase of its formation, of course, requires only a little self-discipline and effort to eradicate it.

It is like uprooting a young plant that has not run its roots deeply into the ground. But when a quality becomes firmly rooted in one's nature, becoming a part of one's spiritual makeup, it is not easily uprooted, but requires much effort, like the tree that becomes old in age, having sent down its roots deep into the earth; it cannot be easily extirpated. The more you delay the decision to eradicate the iniquities of the heart, the more time and effort it will require.[25]

Hence, one must guard against any misunderstanding about this, and must realize that the possibility of transformation for man is always there and that the difficulty of doing anything does not mean that it is impossible. On the other hand, it is this danger or insinuation [*waswasah*] that we accept unconditionally

as the entire principle of changeability and deem it an excuse for procrastinating and not reforming ourselves. We are oblivious of the fact that it is itself one of the insinuations of Satan which dissuades man from acting on time, encourages him to ruin his precious opportunities, and promises him the chance of many tomorrows. So, man must always be wary and not give himself the promise of the never-to-come tomorrow:

هینمگو: فردا که فرداها گذشت تا بکلی ننگرد ایام کشت

*Beware! Do not say ‘Tomorrow’—for (many) tomorrows have passed
Let not the days of sowing pass away altogether.*[26]

This imaginary tomorrow has no reality and it is the greatest snare laid by the brigand Satan to trap the new seeker of the way. Thus, the Imām draws attention to this issue and warns us, thus:

If the tree of sinfulness growing in the orchard of the human heart reaches maturity and fruition, its roots becoming strong, the results are calamitous, one of which is to turn away man totally from repentance. Even if once in a while it comes to his mind, he keeps on postponing it from day to day and from one month to another... Don’t imagine that man can perform *tawbah* [repentance] after the strengthening of the roots of sinfulness or meet its conditions. Therefore, the springtime for *tawbah* is the time of youth when the sins are fewer, the inner darkness of the heart incomplete, the conditions of *tawbah* easier, and their fulfilment less difficult... Even if it be admitted that man can succeed in performing *tawbah* in old age, there is no certainty of reaching old age and of not meeting one’s death in youth in the condition of habitual disobedience.[27]

In a nutshell, from the Imām’s viewpoint the possibility of moral refinement always exists and is present as long as man is alive. Although this possibility of reform diminishes gradually, it never ceases to exist. Thus, the insinuations of Satan, which at times consider reform as impossible and at the other times promise plenty of opportunities for this to be done, must be eschewed, and time (one has) must be used to full advantage.

Coexistence of fear and hope

If there are thousands of possibilities and potential ways for the human being and the realization of every possibility and traversing of every path yields specific results for him, in that case, man would be full of hope and self-confidence in relation to his future, because he can choose a path and select anew

whenever he wants to do so. On the other hand, this sense of freedom entails a responsibility for him and he does not know what ensuing consequences these choices and selections would have, and what his action would lead to. This circumstance makes him abhorrent of the future and dreadful of freedom.

It is this very point which makes many people heartily abhorrent of freedom; they are always waiting for somebody else to chart their destiny. Erich Fromm[28] labels this psychic propensity as 'escape from freedom' and discusses its psychological causes. With regard to this issue, one of the contemporary Arab thinkers named Muhammad at-T lib  says, "If I had found a flawless person, I would have followed him and relieved myself of thinking; but the flawless person does not exist." [29]

Although all claim freedom and seek it, in reality they run away from it. It is because to be free means acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of one's choice, and there are only a few who have attained awareness to such an extent.

The inevitable outcome of the logic of change in the terrestrial world is that nobody is able to express a definite opinion about his own future. The Glorious Qur'an unequivocally stresses this point and states: *"No soul knoweth what it will earn tomorrow, and no soul knoweth in what land it will die. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware."* [30]

Absolute knowledge and awareness of all things including the future which is yet to happen belongs to God and to Him alone. As such, to live without the certainty of the future is a reality that must be accepted; nevertheless, this state of affairs gives hope to some while making others fearful. A group regards the uncertain future as their achievement and the product of their deeds, and they move forward with high spirits and enthusiasm.

On the other hand, this sense of hope makes them inebriated and overflowing with selfishness to which they succumb after some time and roll in the pit of destruction. People become anxious and dejected by such a state of affairs; they entrust themselves to the storm of events and behave like a log which is a captive of the stormy waves of the sea of existence.

Both fear and hope are necessary in the life of man and are regarded as essential for his felicity. If fear and hope did not exist in the life of man, he would quickly claim divinity and forget his being mortal. And if it were not for hope, nobody would take a single step nor do anything even to the extent that "not a single mother would breastfeed her baby." [31] In all spheres of man's actions, hope—manifest and hidden—exists and without it, life would be void and meaningless.

Thus, the Glorious Qur'an, on one hand, cautions us against becoming proud of ourselves, feeling secure from God's scheme and the deceptions of the world, regarding these as symptoms of the losers and the wretched. It states: ***"Are they then secure from Allah's scheme? None deemeth himself secure from Allah's scheme save folk that perish."*** [32]

On the other hand, God Almighty warns man against despair and depression, which are the roots of

unbelief [*kufr*] and summons him to hope, stating: ***“And despair not of the Spirit of Allah. Lo! None despaireth of the Spirit of Allah save disbelieving folk.”***[33]

Anyhow, these two attributes are essential for living properly. But in what proportion should each of them be in man’s existence? How much of each is essential for him? This issue has been discussed in the books of ethics under the heading, “Fear and Hope” [*khawf wa rajāʾ*]. By citing Qur’anic passages and Prophetic narrations, scholars of ethics are of the opinion that these two attributes must be in equal proportion in a human being so as to urge him to move, as well as to dissuade him from pride, self-conceit [*‘ujb*] and selfishness.

It has been recorded in the Prophetic narrations that fear and hope are two lights glowing in the heart of a believer and neither of which is more intense than the other.[34] It is only in such a case that man seeks the path of moderation in life, while refraining from going to extremes and from overindulgence or negligence. For this reason, Imām ‘Alī (‘a) states: “The best course is (to have) an equiponderance of fear and hope.”[35]

Hope and fear should be so pervasive in man as to induce him to perform every worthy and meaningful deed, however serious it is, and keep him away from every contemptible act, however trivial and small it is. It is with this in mind that the sage Luqmān used to say to his child:

“Have such a fear of God, the Sublime and Exalted, that were you to come to Him with the virtues of the two worlds [*thaqalayn*] He would still chastise you, and put such a hope in God that were you to come to Him with the sins of the two worlds He would still have compassion for you.”[36]

Accordingly, another consequence of the principle of man’s indescribability is his coexistence with fear and hope, in such a way that these two attributes are equiponderant in him. Imām Khomeinī has devoted a whole *hadīth* chapter in *Forty Hadīth* to this issue of fear and hope, and has examined the station of these attributes from the aspect of gnosticism. According to his view, the cause of fear and anxiety of a believer is that since he evaluates the relation between himself—one that is utterly in want—and God Almighty—Who is Absolute Self-Sufficiency—and sees one side as total deficiency and shortcoming and the other side as All-Beauty and Splendour, and as he fails to acknowledge and respect the right of God as He deserves, he experiences dread and apprehension. His hope also stems from the fact that he discerns that God, the Most Sublime, has bestowed everything upon him without the least claim, and given him the promise of excessive forgiveness and clemency. In short, he is hopeful of the perpetual mercy of God.

Hence, man should always be moving back and forth between these two views: neither should he ever close his eyes to his defects and shortcomings in fulfilling the duties of creaturehood [*‘ubūdiyyah*], nor should he ever take his eyes off the expansive and all-encompassing mercy, love and compassion of God Almighty.[37]

But, why must these two attributes be equiponderant without either one of them prevailing over the other? The Imam's mystical reply is thus:

The gist of the matter is that the self is in a state of utter imperfection and shortcoming, and God at the height of greatness, glory, all-embracing mercifulness and grace, and the devotee is always in a median state of fear and hope between these two views. And since the Divine attributes of glory and perfection cast their light simultaneously on the wayfarer's heart, none of the two, fear or hope, exceeds the other.[38]

Suspension of judgment

In view of the fact that the human being has no specific nature and builds his own self, and also, that nobody has seen the future, no one can pass a definite judgment regarding himself. As a matter of fact, since no one knows what his end would be, how his life story would turn out and come to a close, he is neither able to have a correct picture nor express a proper opinion of himself.

Of course, anyone who earnestly engages in self-meditation and desists from offering lame excuses for himself will be able to perceive his existing condition and present a relatively precise account of himself. The Glorious Qur'an, therefore, states: ***"Oh, but man is a telling witness against himself."***[39]

But our remarks concern the judgment that is final, conclusive and all-embracing. At any given moment, nobody can accurately predict his future state as well as the consequences of his deeds, and as a result, give a verdict concerning it.

Those who are negligent of this fact, by relying on their past and present deeds, pruned themselves of their wickedness and considered their future as guaranteed. The Glorious Qur'an rejects this sort of thinking and God, the Most Exalted, concerning such people, states: ***"Hast thou not seen those who praise themselves for purity? Nay, Allah purifieth whom He will, and they will not be wronged even the hair upon a date-stone."***[40]

Similarly, God purges these imaginations—that every individual only through reliance on himself and his act that he can take control of the future—and says: ***"Had it not been for the grace of Allah and His mercy unto you, not one of you would ever have grown pure. But Allah causeth whom He will to grow. And Allah is Hearer, Knower."***[41]

History is replete with the accounts of those who thought themselves to be pure and ultimately prosperous but ended up in a ruined state. Likewise, there were many who regarded themselves as

ruined but turned out to be prosperous in the end. Bal'am son of Bā'ūr was one of the ascetics from among the Children of Israel [*Ban' Isrā'īl*] whose supplications were always granted.[42] Yet, he utilized this spiritual excellence against the Prophet of God, Hadrat[43] Mūsā (Moses) ('a) and, as a result, destroyed himself. The Glorious Qur'an has made an example of the story of his life for mankind:

یٰلَیْمَ یٰعٰوِیْرَ رَا خَلَقَ جِهَانَ سَغْبَه شَدْمَانْدِ عِیْسَای زَمَانِ

سَجْدَه نَاوَرْدَنْدِ کَسْرَا کَوْنِ اَوِ صَحْتِ رَنْجُوْرِ بُوْدَا فِی سَوْنِ اَوِ

پَنْجَه زِدْ بَا مُوْسَیْ اَزْ کَبِرْ وَ کَمَالِ اَنْجَنَانِ شَدْ کَه شَنْدِ دِسْتِیْ تُو حَالِ

صَدْ هَزَارِ اِیْلِیْسِ وَ یَلْعَمِ دَرْ جِهَانَ هَمْچِیْنِ بُوْدَه اَسْتِ پِیْدَا وَ نِهَانَ

اِیْنِ دُو رَا مَشْهُوْرْ گِرْدَانِیْدِ اِلَهَ تَا کَه بَاشَدِ اِیْنِ دُو بَرِ بَاقِیْ گَوَاهَ

To Bal'am son of Bā'ūr the people of the world became subject,

(For he was) like unto the Jesus of the time.

They bowed (worshipfully) to none but him:

His spell was (giving) health to the sick.

From pride and (conceit of) perfection he grappled with Moses:

His plight became such as thou hast heard.

Even so there have been in the world, manifest or hidden,

A hundred thousand like Iblīs and Bal'am.

God cause these twain to be notorious,

That these twain might be witness against the rest.[44]

On the other hand, Fadl ibn 'Ayyūb[45] was a bandit and chief of robbers; yet, by hearing an āyah [verse] of the Glorious Qur'an, he was so transformed such that he became one of the celebrated mystics. The story [concerning him] runs as follows:

One night a caravan was passing. One of those in the caravan was reciting this verse, ***'Has not the time arrived for the Believers that their hearts in all humility should engage in their remembrance of Allah?'***[46] As it was like an arrow shot at a virtuous heart, he said, 'It came! And its time has already passed'.[47]

As such, no one can definitely ascertain his own future; this condition itself entails fear and hope, these being the guides of the faithful. It is the same fear and hope that restrain him from egotism or a feeling of abjectness. Now, if someone is not able to judge himself categorically, can he correctly assess others and pass judgment concerning them? Naturally, the answer is negative. If we do not know our own future, the more oblivious we are of the future of others. One of the secrets behind this is that all of those emphasized in our Prophetic narrations—that it is better to mind one’s own business and to restrain from judging others—is this very point.

The truth of the matter is that we cannot express an opinion about the fate of anyone, whether Muslim or polytheist [*mushrik*]. Judgment in this respect is a divine act and appropriate to God; not terrestrial creatures. As long as a person is alive his account is an open book and nobody can judge him. This principle knows no exception. Of course, taking into account his manifest actions and views, one can assess his present state of affairs; but by relying on the past nobody can ever venture a definite opinion about the future of others.

Therefore, though the past could have far-reaching influences on one’s future, the former can never prevail over, or dominate the latter. A human being can chart his own future differently, change it and lead himself in another direction. In the words of William James,[48] “Among all the creatures on the face of the earth, only is a human being able to change his moulds; only is he the architect of his own destiny.”[49]

Such extensive tendencies of man and his uncertain destiny prevent him from being narrow-minded and from making hasty judgments while affording him the possibility of finding the deeper layers of reality. Similarly, it liberates him from any kind of restriction and predestination, and gives him the opportunity to repent. It is from this aspect that passing judgment even on disbelievers, and considering them to be damned is deemed wrong so long as they are alive and their ‘book of deeds’ is open. Considering the profundity of this point, the Imām has quoted thus from his mentor:

Our great master, the accomplished gnostic [‘*arif*], Shāh bād[50]—may my soul be his ransom—used to say, ‘Do not look down on even a *kāfir* [non-believer] in your heart. It is possible that the divine light of his inner nature may lead him to faith and your rebuke and disdain may lead you toward a wretched life in the Hereafter. Of course to practice *al-amr bi’l-ma’rūf wan-nahy ‘an al-munkar* [enjoining right conduct and forbidding bad behaviour] is something different from the inner feeling of contempt.’ He would even say, ‘Never curse the unbelievers regarding whom it is not known that they will leave the world in the state of unbelief. If they leave the world as rightly-guided servants of God, their spiritual rectitude may prove to be an obstruction in the way of your own spiritual advancement.’[51]

The Imām cautions us against hasty judgments—which are sometimes noticed among some religious people—as well as assaults on, and accusations against, the spiritual wayfarers [*sālikīn*] and mystics.

He warns of the danger of such acts, and considers them to result from incapacity:

If we hear any of the truths from the mouth of a passionate *‘arif* or a heart-broken wayfarer, or a theosopher [*hakīm-e muta’allih*], immediately we make him the target of all kinds of curses and insults, calling him an apostate and a profligate, refraining not from any kind of slander and backbiting in regard to him, because our ears cannot bear to hear his words and self-love prevents us from realizing our own inadequacies. Alas, we bequeath a book as *waqf*, binding its user with the condition that he should curse, hundred times a day, the late Mullā Muhsin Fayd (Kāshānī)! [52] We call Sadr al-Muta’allihān (Mullā Sadrī), [53] who is the foremost of the adherents of *tawhīd*, a heretic [*zindīq*] and do not stop at any insult in regard to him. [54]

Yes, the most optimistic analysis regarding such assertions and indictments shows inadequacy and ignorance. The outcome of possessing such a mentality is that man always remains in complex ignorance and increases his burden. Instead of an accurate understanding of the law of creation and the confession of one’s own unawareness, it covers his ignorance with the cloak of piety. This is while one of the signs of piety is to be cautious about these things and not to pass judgment on others:

Our shaykh, an accomplished *‘arif* that he was (i.e. Shāhābādī), may my soul be his ransom, used to say: ‘Never call down curses [*la’n*] on anybody, though he be a *kāfir* concerning whom you do not know how he made the transit from this world to the next, and unless an infallible *waḥī* informs you concerning his condition after death. For it is possible that he may have attained faith before the time of death. Hence let your curse be of a general character.’ Here is one who has such a sacred spirit that he would not permit anyone who has died an apparent unbeliever to be insulted, for the probability that he might have acquired faith at the time of death, and there are the like of us! [55]

Surely, if we consider this point with its implications as the guide of our deeds in life, how many virtues would we acquire and how many abominations and defects would we rid ourselves of.

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