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Session 39: An Investigation of the Relativity of Values and Religious Narratives

Religion as absolute or relative

The questions we are facing now are: Are the points we have tried to prove in our series of discussions credible and plausible for all? Do these points have absolute credibility, or relative credibility, for example, do they only express the views of the speaker or do others have different views in this regard which are consistent with his views? In other words, must every Muslim, especially a Shi'ah who follows the school of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (*'a*), accept my arguments in view of the existing evidence and treat them as absolute? Or, can he not accept them on the ground that they only represent a specific viewpoint and on the contrary, there are other viewpoints that might have equal or greater credibility?

Some assert in their speeches and periodicals that these subjects and interpretations are not supposed to be expressed as absolute. They must not even be attributed to Islam. They must only be considered as the viewpoint of the speaker. That is, a speaker must say, *"This is my understanding of Islam," and not present his understanding as the Islamic theory. In similar cases, especially during the past decade some individuals have insisted that one should not consider his understanding as absolute, for there are those who have different interpretations which are in themselves valuable and credible*.

Three approaches to the relativity of knowledge

Some serious questions are posed here. What do "absolute" and "relative" essentially mean? What does the statement "So-and-so subject does not have absolute credibility" mean? Does it mean that no knowledge [*ma'rifah*] has absolute credibility, or some knowledge has absolute credibility while another does not? In such a case, what is the difference between absolute and relative knowledge? Is relativity of knowledge or relativity of credibility of knowledge confined only to the domain of religious matters? Or, is credibility of subjects discussed in every field of science relative?

1. First approach to the relativity of knowledge

The study of the absoluteness or relativity of knowledge is related to a branch of philosophy called "epistemology". Since more than 25 centuries, scholars have differed on whether one's understanding, judgment and beliefs have absolute credibility or not. Sophists, who used to live in Greece approximately 5 centuries before the Common Era and from whom the word "Sophistry" was derived, were of the opinion that man can never arrive at a certain and dogmatic faith as everything can be doubted. After them, the skeptics, agnostics, subjectivists, and relativists also expressed such an inclination.

This inclination towards the relativity of knowledge and understanding has not emerged recently. It is as old as written philosophy. Today, it is true that in the Muslim world we do not know of any prominent philosopher who is a skeptic but in America and other Western countries, there are different types of skeptics and relativists, skepticism being essentially regarded as a source of honor for man!

Undoubtedly, if we really want to academically delve into the inclination towards the relativity of knowledge, skepticism or the notion that man can never acquire certainty in knowledge, we have to spend a lot of time dealing with this broad philosophical subject. The only thing we can do at this moment is to present some subjects which are suitable for our listeners.

By saying to us, "You should not consider your view, understanding and interpretation as absolute," do they mean that one should not have certainty of faith in anything and that the acquisition of knowledge is actually limited for man and we cannot find any knowledge about which we can *logically* be certain [*yaqin*]? Or, do they mean that one cannot have certain knowledge of some cases and accounts? We used the adverb "logically" because sometimes man has dogmatic faith in a thing and he has no doubt about it, but after sometime he realizes that he is wrong.

Such certainty which is actually wrong and inconsistent with reality is called psychological certainty. In this case, man experiences a psychological state in which he develops dogmatic faith in a thing in which he has no doubt although he might be wrong and experiencing complex ignorance,[1] by holding a belief that is falsifiable. But if the dogma or belief is logically certain and correct, it is never falsifiable. For example, the mathematical statement "two times two is equal to four" (2×2=4) is logically correct and absolute and nowhere in the world does two multiplied by two become five or six. So, the credibility of this mathematical statement is absolute and logically correct, and it is not only a personal belief.

If they mean that man cannot acquire certain faith in any case or account, I shall state briefly that this claim is inconsistent with the natural disposition [*fitrah*] of man and all religions. We never hear anyone say: "I am not sure whether planet earth exists or not. Perhaps, its existence is nothing but an illusion!" Or, say: "I am in doubt whether there is any man living on earth or not. I am doubtful whether a country named "France" really exists in the continent of Europe or not. Apart from the fact that I am in doubt,

such a thing can never be proved!" If we really meet such a person, what judgment will we have about him?

Certainly, we will tell him to consult a psychiatrist because a rational and mentally sound person will never entertain such a doubt. So, if by saying, "You must not consider as absolute your opinion and understanding," they mean that no belief or conviction must be treated as absolute and one cannot pass an absolutely accurate judgment concerning any case or account. The concise reply to them is that this claim is clearly against reason and all religions. And I do not think that there is anyone among my audience both inside and outside the country who thinks so. As such, it is futile and senseless to discuss it.

1. Complex ignorance: ignorance of one's own ignorance. [Trans.]

2. Second approach to the relativity of knowledge (relativity of values)

Of course, there are other views on relativity which are not as disgraceful as the abovementioned, among which is the relativity of values. Those who have such a view do not say that there is no absolute and certain case in any field. Instead, according to them, empirical sciences, rational sciences and mathematics to some extent have certain, decisive and absolute cases, and only cases of ethical sciences, viz. fields related to values, ordinances and obligations do not.

That is, wherever good or bad, do's and don'ts are talked about they are relative. In a bid to prove their claim, the proponents of the relativity of values and practical duties give deceitful and misguiding statements. For example, they say: "We can see that a certain thing is considered good and acceptable in a certain country and the same customs and traditions are abominable, detestable and repulsive for the people of another country.

Regarding the manner of expressing respect and admiration for individuals—as I have heard—in some East Asian countries, they smell each other. Perhaps in other countries, such an act is abominable and unacceptable. In Western countries, particularly in Latin America, whenever they want to express utmost appreciation of a prominent speaker, they embrace him or her. But in our Islamic society, for a woman to embrace a male stranger is abominable and deplorable.

So, it is possible that an action is good and acceptable in one society but the same action is abominable and reproachable in another country. From this, it becomes clear that the system of good and bad, do's and don'ts are subjective, and the ruling on them differs from one society to another. It is even possible

that something is considered good at a time and unacceptable at another time.

It is reported to us that around 40 years ago in one of the Canadian cities, a person removed his coat on account of the warm climate and was walking down the street wearing a short-sleeved shirt. Immediately, horse-riding policemen came and asked him why he had removed his coat. To appear in public in a short-sleeved shirt was against public decency! But today, in the same country, i.e. Canada, a man or woman can appear half-naked in public, without being rebuked or reproached or their action being considered detestable.

So, good and bad, indecency and beauty in relation to different times are relative and not the same. They conclude that the sciences that express good and bad, do's and don'ts—such as ethics, jurisprudence and others related to social and civil domains—are relative and subjective. They do not have any absolute basis. We cannot say that a thing is absolutely good everywhere at all times, or say that a thing is absolutely bad everywhere at all times.

The absoluteness and inalterability of some values

In dealing with the claim which has been presented as an affirmative totality [*al-qadhiyyah al-mujibah al-kulliyyah*] whose connotation is that all good and bad, or value-laden cases are absolute and general, one can easily present a negative particularity [*al-qadhiyyah as-salibah al-juz'iyyah*] which will disprove the general case or ruling. That is, when we find value-laden cases that are not absolute and an action is good and acceptable in some societies but considered indecent and reproachable in other societies, we can say that some value-laden cases are relative or subjective.

No doubt, this is the correct and proper judgment. We do not say also that every value-laden case or each of the do's and don'ts is absolute and general, fixed and inalterable for all societies at all times, but this does not mean that no value is ever absolute. That is, proving the relativism or subjectivism of values pertains to the negative particularity and not to the affirmative totality. As such, what we can prove is only the relativism or non-absoluteness of some values.

Our claim is that we can have an absolute value and absolute faith in some value-laden cases. If the essence of this theory is proved, we can possibly have hundred examples of such cases because rational discussion or theory is not based upon numbers and figures. Can we find a person who says that justice in some cases or societies is bad? No sensible person will say that oppression in some places is good and wholesome.

Of course, it is possible to commit a mistake with respect to the manifestations of justice and oppression and sometimes an expression or term is erroneously applied or is used out of context. For instance, one might say that every beating is an act of oppression whereas some cases of beating serve as a punishment or retaliation which is not bad. But the beating which is done as a punishment or retaliation is not an act of oppression. It is rather consistent with truth and justice. The point is that if an action is

indeed an act of oppression, it cannot be good in any case. Similarly, if an action is really consistent with justice, it cannot be said that in some cases it is bad and conclude, therefore, that justice in some cases is unacceptable. This issue is so vivid and clear for all that when the Qur'an wants the people to shun polytheism, it says:

﴿إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ...﴾

"***Polytheism is indeed a great injustice****...*"[1]

That is, there is no doubt in the major premise that "One must shun or keep away from any act of injustice." This case is absolute and general, fixed and inalterable. Since polytheism is one of the manifestations of injustice, it is bad and detestable and it must be shunned.

We do not claim that all value-laden concepts are absolute. We rather say that some values are absolute. Similarly, with respect to knowledge, we do not regard every kind of knowledge as absolute. We do not believe that every perception of a person is correct. Obviously, some perceptions of individuals are not correct. So, some perceptions are relative or subjective, and relativism or subjectivism exists in some accounts. For example, if you asked whether Tehran University campus is big or small, once you compare Tehran University campus to your house you will reply that Tehran University campus is very big. But if you compare Tehran University campus to the planet earth, you will say in reply that it is as small as a grain of sand compared to the desert.

Thus, concepts like big and small are relative or subjective and any case encompassing such concepts shall be relative or subjective. But from the fact that bigness and smallness are relative or subjective it cannot be concluded that everything, including God, is relative or subjective, or that the existence of man, earth and the world is also relative. Bigness or smallness is a subjective and supplementary concept, but there are concepts that are not relative and the cases they encompass can be absolute.

Therefore, we are not of the opinion that every value that every person believes everywhere is absolute. Our point is that as far as affirmative particularity [*mujibah juz'iyyah*] is concerned we can have an absolute value. That is, we have also value-laden cases that are absolute and not subject to change or exception with respect to different places, individuals and times. No doubt, we have absolute values; we have absolute values that are dependent on the circumstances of time and space as well as the preferences of individuals.

We believe that injustice or oppression is always bad and detestable for everyone everywhere while justice is always good and wholesome for everyone everywhere. In objective cases and cases related to the descriptive sciences, we have absolute and certain accounts. For instance, we declare with certainty and conviction that the sky, earth and man exist; that God exists; and the divine revelation and the Resurrection exist. Indisputably, these cases are absolute and not relative or subjective.

The basis of absoluteness of some values

The question posed here is this: How should we know that a case is absolute or relative? The concise reply to this question is that every axiomatic case or case which is correctly derived from axiomatic cases is absolute. But non-axiomatic cases or cases incorrectly derived from axiomatic cases are relative or subjective. The same classification is true regarding values. *The values whose bases are emotion, imagination, customs, and contracts are relative or subjective. But the values that are substantiated by reason and can be rationally justified are absolute.*

For example, worship of God is a value which will always be absolutely desirable and acceptable, and it can never entertain any exception. It is on this basis that we assert that the worship of God is the real and true way of man's perfection. Concerning value-laden social concepts, justice too is always good and this rule knows no exception. In contrast, injustice is always detestable everywhere. So, we can have absolute values.

The relativity of all values and religious narratives in Western culture

Nowadays, there are numerous schools of philosophy in the West that regard values as absolutely devoid of rational and objective basis. They maintain that all values are relative or subjective and subservient to contracts. That is, whatever people agree upon as good is good and whatever they agree upon as bad is bad. One of the important schools of moral philosophy is the positivist school or positivism, which regards acceptance by society as the foundation of value.

On this basis, the positivists hold that value and anti-value, good and bad depend on contract. Anything the people today consider as valuable and good is valuable and good. If tomorrow, the opinion of people changes, the same value will change into anti-value and the good into bad.

We believe, however, that not all values are relative or subjective and not all values depend on contract. It is true that customs and traditions are conventional, alterable and depend on circumstances of time and space, but we have a set of values rooted in the natural disposition [fitrah] of man—natural disposition which is fixed and inalterable:

﴿فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لاَ تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ﴾

"So set your heart on the religion as a people of pure faith, the Creative Essence of Allah according to which He created mankind. There is no altering Allah's creation."[2]

Since the Creative Essence of Allah [*fitrat Allah*] is immutable, values that are based upon *fitrah* are also

inalterable. Hence, we can have an absolute value. If by saying to us, “Do not regard your ideas as absolute,” they mean that we should not regard our ideas on values as absolute on the ground that we believe in a set of values not accepted by others.

On the contrary, they believe in other values and, we are not supposed to impose our ideas because our ideas on values are based on our preference and theirs are based on their preference. Such an understanding is anchored in moral positivism, whose basis or criterion is the people’s preference and desire. This inclination is rooted in corruption and falsehood and it is not consistent with Islam and the correct schools of moral philosophy.

Those who by relying upon positivism say to us that we must not regard our views and ideas as absolute are in gross blunder. We shall remain firm in protecting the absolute values and we will strive to revive and propagate the fixed Islamic values in society. We will never allow them to be blemished in the least.

Since the Renaissance, the Westerners have relegated religious concepts to the realm of values, particularly those religious concepts and narratives that are related to religious ordinances and rituals. Meanwhile, since they consider values as relative and conventional, they also treat religious concepts and narratives as relative and conventional and they do not regard them as having any absolute value. On this basis, they say: “All religions can be good and in truth. This religion is good and true for its followers and that religion is also good and true for its followers. One should not treat as absolute his religious opinion and view and say that only Islam is correct and in truth and the other religions are false.”

The religion of Islam consists of a set of value-laden concepts and an array of do’s and don’ts such as the enjoinment of a certain action and prohibition of a certain action, and the decree to pray and fast, not to tell a lie, not to commit fornication, and not to violate people’s property and honor. Naturally, once values are relative and conventional, religious concepts shall also become relative or subjective. Consequently, Islam is accordingly a set of conventions and contracts.

It is in keeping with the positivist view and the relegation of religious concepts in the domain of value-laden concepts that they tell us: “You have no right to impose your religion on others and to ask them to become Muslims. The religion of Islam is wholesome for the Muslims and the Jewish religion is also wholesome for the Jews because these religions and faiths are relative or subjective and none of them is absolute. Once these religions and values are relative and dependent on a contract, their ruling is different from one society or people to another and from one period to another.

Fourteen hundred years ago, Islam was suitable and good for the people of the Arabian Peninsula but today another religion is desirable and suitable for the modern world! So, one should not regard it as absolute and the Muslims should not impose their Islamic thought upon others. Islam is good for those whose preference and desire are consistent with it but for others who do not like and accept this religion and have chosen another religion according to their preference, it is not good. Thus, we should not

impose our preference of Islam upon others and disregard their preference.

Our reply to the above mentioned view is that we acknowledge that some decrees of Islam—like the secondary decrees—are relative, alterable and change according to the two elements of time and place, but not all Islamic concepts are alterable. In fact, some Islamic laws are fixed, absolute and unchangeable. Besides, none of the Islamic laws depend on social contract or people's preference. Even the alterable laws have specific reasons for their alteration.

So, firstly, we do not accept the basis that regards all values as dependent on social contracts and people's acceptance and preference. We believe that some values and their opposites are absolute, and in accordance with essential interests and corruptions, and thus, they are fixed and inalterable. Secondly, since the fixed values of Islam are consistent with essential interests and corruptions, they are absolute and credible everywhere at all times. We argue that only our Islamic viewpoint is absolute, true and correct. As such, this type of relativism prevalent in the West is also inconsistent with Islam.

1. Surah Luqman 31:13.
2. Surah ar-Rum 30:3.

3. Third approach to the relativity of knowledge (relativity of religious knowledge)

One of the types of relativism is the relativity of religious knowledge. Some people say: "We also acknowledge that religion is immutable and absolute and that religious values are also consistent with the real, essential and permanent interests and corruptions, and we regard the reality of religion as absolute and fixed. However, we have no access to the real and absolute religion and we cannot establish connection with it. What is accessible to us and at our disposal is our knowledge or understanding of religion. What we present to others as religion is actually our understanding or perception of religion, and others may possibly have their own understanding or perception of religion. We recognize the essence of religion as fixed and absolute but we consider our understanding or knowledge of religion as alterable and relative, believing that one must not treat as absolute his knowledge or understanding of religion and impose his ideas upon others."

At this point, this question is raised: Is it possible for some of our religious understandings to be absolute yet accepted or not by everybody, and that there is no absolute understanding in the realm of religious knowledge, and any knowledge of every religious subject is relative or subjective? As a result, it is possible that there is contradiction between two religious understandings and these two are in total opposition to each other. That is, a person totally believes in a religious narrative while another person

totally rejects it, whereas the understanding and perception of religion of both is acceptable and credible!

This third approach on relativism which has been known as relativity of religious knowledge and understanding and whose exponents have labeled it as “the contraction and expansion of the path” has been advanced and promoted in our country for approximately the past two decades. Everyday, it is intensively and extensively discussed more in newspapers and magazines on the basis of which, it is shown that all people do not have equal understanding of religion. One may possibly say according to his belief, “*Subh* [dawn] prayer has two *rak‘ah*s [cycles or units],” and another person would say based on his belief and understanding of religion, “*Subh* prayer has three *rak‘ah*s,” while both of them are credible and acceptable!

According to this view, once we believe that *subh* prayer has two *rak‘ah*s, we have no right to ask others to perform it in two *rak‘ah*s. According to our understanding and interpretation of religion, *subh* prayer has two *rak‘ah*s. There might be another understanding of religion according to which *subh* prayer consists of three *rak‘ah*s. The latter is also an understanding or interpretation of religion. There is no difference between the two interpretations in terms of value. The interpretation of every person is worthy of respect for himself. No one has the right to treat his interpretation of religion as absolute and ask others to understand and interpret religion the way he understands and interprets it!

My understanding or interpretation of religion is that which is pleasing and the truth for me. The same is true for another person. This is in spite of the contradiction between the two interpretations because knowledge and understanding has contractions and extensions such that one of the interpretations or understanding may possibly be on one side of a spectrum while another interpretation on the other side. It is possible that today a person proves a religious narrative and tomorrow another person negates it. The reason behind these differences is that real religion is inaccessible to us and what is at our disposal is our knowledge of religion. This knowledge and interpretation is also alterable and not the same for all persons.

The distinction between the domain of relative interpretations and the domain of absolute interpretations

At the outset, let us pose these questions: Do the proponents of the theory of “the contraction and expansion of the path” believe that every case in religion can have many interpretations, understandings and readings? Do only some religious cases have different interpretations and readings? Most of the reasons they cite prove only the difference of interpretations and understandings of some religious narratives.

But they generalize this specific reason and apply it to the entire domain of religion and all religious narratives. Then, they conclude that all religious narratives are subject to different interpretations and understandings. One of these reasons is the difference in the religious edicts [*fatawa*] of *mujtahid*s and

fuqaha.

Their claim is that in the realm of Islam, its jurisprudence in particular, the *fatawa* of *mujtahid*s are different from each other. One *mujtahid* opines that the Friday congregational prayer is *wajib* (even during this period of major occultation [*ghaybah al-kubra*]) while another says that it is not *wajib*. One decrees that playing chess is *haram* while another considers it *halal* [permissible or lawful]. One declares a certain form of music as *haram* while another says that it is *halal*.

Thus, the *fatawa* and understandings of the *fuqaha* and *mujtahid*s are subjective, alterable and variable such that even a single *mujtahid* can possibly have two different religious edicts on an issue. For example, some *fuaqaha* give a *fatwa* at a given time and after sometime, they recant the said edict and issue another. So, this difference of *fatawa* and understanding is a proof that our knowledge or interpretation of religion is subjective and changeable, and that it is impossible for the knowledge or understanding of religion to be fixed and absolute.

We argue that everybody including an illiterate person living in a far-flung village knows that the *fatawa* of *mujtahid*s are not identical in the sphere of the branches of religion [*furu'ad-din*] and some religious obligations. But this difference of *fatawa* does not warrant you to claim that even the Apostle's (*s*) knowledge of revelation [*wahy*] revealed to him is not absolute on the ground that the knowledge of the Apostle (*s*) also belongs to the realm of human knowledge and subject to be mistaken! That is, when God says in the Qur'an,

﴿قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ﴾

"Say, 'He is Allah, the One'"[1] or

﴿وَإِلَـهُكُمْ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ لا إِلَهَ إِلاَّ هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ﴾

"Your god is the One God; there is no god except Him, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful,"[2]

Can it be said that we do not know if the revelation is from God? It is through the claim of the Apostle (*s*) that we have been informed of divine revelation. But we have no information of divine revelation. What the Apostle (*s*) has introduced to us is not the essence of divine revelation, rather a product of his knowledge and understanding of it, and since he is but human and thus fallible, it is probable that he might have erred in receiving and understanding it. God might have wanted to say something and he might have erroneously understood it otherwise and perceived his knowledge as divine revelation. The outcome of such a view is that none of the understanding of any of the Qur'anic verses is credible, and in all of them there is the possibility of mistake and error!

Is this a new interpretation of religion? Has the scope of interpretations extended to such magnitude and

depth? We acknowledge that there is difference in the *fatawa*, but is the existence of God also doubtful, and can it be accepted that a person will prove the existence of God in the name of Islam and the essence of revelation while another person will negate it, and both claims will be credible as religious knowledge?! Contrary to what the Sunni and Shi'ah *'ulama'* of different schools of thought have declared and stated, can we claim that they have erred and misunderstood it and what they have expressed is their own interpretation, and that we also have our own interpretation?

It is possible to have different interpretations in the domain of issues pertaining to the branches of religion and not in the domain of issues pertaining to any of the roots of religion [usul ad-din]. Moreover, in the realm of secondary and hypothetical issues of religion, only the opinions of religious experts and authorities are credible and not that of any neophyte or amateur.

What are credible are the opinions of those who have studied for more than 50 years under the teachers like the late Ayatullah Burujirdi,[3] Imam Khomeini and 'Allamah Tabataba'i[4] (may Allah be pleased with them) and have undergone hardships and tribulations, have piety in action, understanding, research, and deduction, and are not under the influence of whims and caprice. In the realm of religion, the opinion of any sensual xenomaniac neophyte who studies Islam for only a short period yet introduces himself as a religious expert is not credible.

In sum, the difference of opinion or the existence of various interpretations is acceptable only in the hypothetical and metaphorical [mutashabihat] issues of religion. In its indisputable, definitive [muhkamat], essential, and self-evident issues, Islam has only one interpretation and that is the interpretation of God and His Apostle (s). In that domain, there is no room for difference of opinion, skepticism and presentation of various interpretations. As such, no difference in it has emerged for the past fourteen hundred years since the birth of Islam.

We witnessed that when the eminent Imam issued the death sentence to the apostate Salman Rushdie, all the true 'ulama' of Islam affirmed it without any dissenting opinion. They said in unison that what the Imam issued was the decree of Islam. Of course, some xenomaniacs who are ignorant of Islam condemned the decree, saying: "Such is not our interpretation of Islam." Yet, it is clear that the intelligent people in the world consider as credible and valuable only the opinion of those who are authorities in the pertinent field, conducting research and expressing views by using correct methods of research appropriate to the given field.

1. Surah al-Ikhlas (or at-Tawhid) 112:1.
2. Surah al-Baqarah 2:163.
3. It refers to Ayatullah al-'Uzma Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn Burujirdi (1292-1380 AH). [Trans.]
4. It refers to 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, the renowned author of Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an. [Trans.]

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