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The shi'i standpoint

In this lecture it is necessary to briefly explain the Shi'ite views on the issues current among the Muslim *mutakallimun.* Earlier, while explaining the Mu'tazilite viewpoint, we stated that the Mu'tazilah considered their five doctrines, viz., *tawhid*, *'adl, al-wa'd wa al-wa'id, manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn,* and *al-'amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar,* as being fundamental to their school of thought.

We have also said that the reason for giving prominence to these doctrines above all other Mu'tazilite beliefs lies in the fact that they characterize their school and distinguish it from the schools of their opponents. It should not be construed that these five principles constitute the basic doctrines of the faith (*usul al-Din*) in the eyes of the Mu'tazilah, and that all the remaining beliefs are regarded as subsidiary.

The Shi'ite scholars - not the Shi'ite Imams (A) - from the earliest days, have also introduced five doctrines as being characteristic of Shi'ism. They are: *tawhid, 'adl, nubuwwah, imamah,* and *ma'ad* (Resurrection). It is generally said that these five are the basic tenets of the faith (*usul al-Din*) and the rest have a subordinate significance, or are *"furu' al-Din"*. Here, inevitably, the question arises that if by *"usul al-Din"* we mean the doctrines belief in which is essential for being a Muslim, they are not more than two: *tawhid* and *nubuwwah*.

Only these are the two beliefs contained in the *Shahadatayn* ("*'ashhadu 'an la ilaha illallahu wa 'ashhadu 'anna Muhammadan rasulullah*") Moreover, the second testimony is related in particular to the prophethood of Muhammad (S), not to prophethood in general, and the prophethood of other prophets is not covered by it. However, belief in the prophethood of all the other prophets (A) is a part of the *usul al-Din,* and faith in it is compulsory for all believers.

If by *usul al-Din* we mean the doctrines faith in which is an essential part of the faith from the Islamic viewpoint, then belief in other matters, such as the existence of the angels - as explicitly stated by the Qur'an - is also essential for faith[1]. Furthermore, what is special about the Attribute of *'adl* (justice) that only this Divine Attribute should be included in the essential doctrine, to the exclusion of all other attributes, such as Knowledge, Life, Power, Hearing or Vision? If the belief in the Divine Attributes is necessary, all of them should be believed in; if not, none ought to be made the basis of the faith.

Actually, the fivefold principles were selected in such a manner so as, on the one hand, to determine certain tenets essential to the Islamic faith,and on the other to specify the particular identity of the school. The doctrines of *tawhid, nubuwwah,* and *ma'ad* are the three which are essential for every Muslim to believe in. That is, these three are part of the objectives of Islam; the doctrine of *'adl* being the specific mark of the Shi'ite school.

The doctrine of *'adl,* although it is not a part of the main objectives of the Islamic faith – in the sense that it does not differ from the other articles of faith pertaining to Knowledge, Life, Power, etc –, but is one of those doctrines which represent the specific Shi'i outlook with regard to Islam.

The article on *imamah,* from the Shi'ite viewpoint, covers both these aspects, i.e. it is both a part of the essential doctrines and also characterizes the identity of the Shi'ite school.

If faith in the existence of the angels is also, on the authority of the Qur'an, essential and obligatory, then why was it not stated as a sixth article of the faith? The answer is that the above-mentioned articles are part of the objectives of Islam. That is, the Holy Prophet (S) called the people to believe in them. This means that the mission of the Prophet (S) prepared the ground for the establishment of these beliefs. But the belief in the angels or in the obligatory duties, such as prayer and fasting, is not a part of the objectives of the prophethood; it rather forms an essential accessory of it. In other words, such beliefs are essential accessories of faith in prophethood, but are not the objectives of prophethood.

The issue of *imamah*, if viewed from a socio-political standpoint or from the viewpoint of government and leadership, is similar to that of *'adl*. That is, in that case, it is not an essential part of the faith. However, if viewed from a spiritual viewpoint – that is from the viewpoint that the Imam, to use the terminology of *hadith,* is the *hujjah* (proof) of God and His *khalifah* (vicegerent), who in all periods of time serves as a spiritual link between every individual Muslim and the perfect human being – then it is to be considered as one of the articles of faith.

Now we shall take separately each of the particular doctrines of Shi'ite *kalam,* including the above-mentioned fivefold doctrines:

(i) Tawhid

Tawhid is also one of the fivefold doctrines of the Mu'tazilah, as it is also one of the Asha'irah's, with the difference that in the case of the Mu'tazilah it specifically means *al-tawhid al-sifati,* which is denied by the Asha'irah. On the other hand, the specific sense of this term as affirmed by the Asha'irah is *al-tawhid al-'af'ali,* which is rejected by the Mu'tazilah.

As mentioned above, *al-tawhid al-dhati* and *al-tawhid al-'ibadi,* since they are admitted by all, are outside the scope of our discussion. The conception of *tawhid* upheld by the Shi'ah, in addition to *al-tawhid al-dhati* and *al-tawhid al-'ibadi,* also includes *al-tawhid al-sifati* and *al-tawhid al-'af'ali*. That is,

in the controversy regarding the Attributes, the Shi'ah are on the side of *al-tawhid al-sifati,* and in the debate on human acts, are on the side of *al-tawhid al-'af'ali.* Nevertheless, the conception of *al-tawhid al-sifati* held by the Shi'ah is different from the same held by the Mu'tazilah. Also, their notion of *al-tawhid al-'af'ali* differs from the notion of the same held by the Asha'irah.

The conception of *al-tawhid al-sifati* of the Mu'tazilah is synonymous with the idea of the absence of all Attributes from the Divine Essence, or is equivalent to the conception of the Divine Essence being devoid of all qualities. But the Shi'i notion of *al-tawhid al-sifati* means identity of the Attributes with the Divine Essence[2]. For an elaborate discussion of this issue one should study works on Shi'ite *kalam* and philosophy.

The Shi'i conception of *al-tawhid al-'af'ali* differs from the one held by the Asha'irah. The Ash'arite notion of *al-tawhid al-'af'ali* means that no creature is of any consequence in the scheme of things, and everything is directly ordained by God. Accordingly, He is also the direct creator of the deeds of the human beings, and they are not creators of their own acts. Such a belief is similar to the idea of absolute predestination and has been refuted through many an argument. However, the notion of *al-tawhid al-'af'ali* upheld by the Shi'ah means that the system of causes and effects is real, and every effect, while being dependent on its proximate cause, is also dependent on God. These two modes of dependence do not operate in parallel but in series. For further clarification of this subject see my book *Insan wa sarnewisht* ("Man and Destiny").

(ii) 'Adl

The doctrine of *'adl* is common between the Shi'ah and the Mu'tazilah. *'Adl* means that God bestows His mercy and blessings and so also His trials and chastisement according to prior and intrinsic deservedness of beings, and that Divine mercy and trial, reward and punishment are determined in accordance with a particular order or law (which is also of Divine origin).

The Asha'irah deny this notion of *'adl* and such an order. In their view, the belief in *'adl* in the sense of a just order, as outlined above, necessitates God's subjection and subordination to something else and thus contradicts His Absolute Power. *'Adl* in itself implies several corollaries which shall be referred to while explaining other doctrines.

(iii) Free Will and Freedom

The Shi'ah doctrine of free will is to some extent similar to that of Mu'tazilah. But the two differ with regard to its meaning. Human freedom or free will for the Mu'tazilah is equivalent to Divine resignation (*tafwid*), i.e. leaving man to himself and suspension of the Divine Will from any effective role. Of course, this, as proved in its proper place, is impossible.

Freedom and free will, as believed by the Shi'ah, mean that men are created as free beings. But they,

like any other creature, are entirely dependent on the Divine Essence for their existence and all its multifarious modes, including the mode of action, all of which are derived from and are dependent on God's merciful care, and seek help from His Will.

Accordingly, free will and freedom in Shi'ism occupy an intermediate position between the Ash'arite (absolute) predestination (*jabr*) and the Mu'tazilite doctrine of freedom (*tafwid*). This is the meaning of the famous dictum of the Infallible Imams (A:): "*la jabra wa la tafwida bal 'amrun bayna 'amrayn*":

Neither *Jabr* nor *tafwid;* but something intermediate between the two (extreme) alternatives.

The doctrine of free will is a corollary to the doctrine of Divine Justice.

(iv) Inherent Morality or Immorality of Deeds (Husn wa Qubh Dhati)

The Mu'tazilah believe that all deeds are inherently and intrinsically either good or evil. For example, justice is intrinsically good and oppression is inherently evil. The wise man selects the good works and abstains from bad deeds. And since God the Almighty is Wise His Wisdom necessitates that He should do good and abstain from 'evil. Thus the inherent goodness or badness of acts on the one hand, and the Wisdom of God on the other, necessitate that some acts are "obligatory" for God and some "undesirable."

The Asha'irah are severely opposed to this belief. They deny both the inherent goodness or badness of acts and the applicability of such judgements as "obligatory" or "undesirable" to God.

Some Shi'ah thinkers, under the influence of the Mu'tazilite *kalam,* accepted the Mu'tazilite view in its above-mentioned form, but others, with greater insight, while accepting the doctrine of inherent morality or immorality of acts, rejected the view that the judgements of permissibility or undesirability are applicable to the Divine realm[3].

(v) Grace (lutf) and Choice of the Best (intikhab al-'aslah)

There is a controversy between the Asha'irah and the Mu'tazilah whether or not Grace or 'choice of the best' for the good of human beings is a principle which governs the universe. The Mu'tazilah considered grace as a duty and obligation incumbent upon God. The Asha'irah denied Grace and 'Choice of the best.'

However, the principle of grace is a corollary to the doctrine of justice and the doctrine of the innate goodness or badness of deeds. Some Shi'ite *mutakallimun* have accepted the doctrine of grace in its Mu'tazilite form, but others who consider it absolutely wrong to apply the notion of "duty" and "obligation" to God, advance another version of the doctrine of the "choice of the best," which it is not possible to

elaborate here.

(vi) Independence and Validity of Reason

Shi'ism affirms a greater independence, authority and validity for reason than the Mu'tazilah.

According to certain indisputable traditions of the Ma'sumun (A), reason is the internalized prophetic voice in the same way as a prophet is reason externalized. In the Shi'ite *fiqh,* reason (*'aql*) is considered as one of the four valid primary sources of the Law.

(v) 'Aim' and 'Purpose' of Divine Acts

The Asha'irah reject the notion that the Divine Acts may be for one or several purposes or aims. They state that possession of a purpose or goal is solely applicable to man and other similar creatures. But God is above such matters, since having a purpose and aim implies subjection of a doer to that purpose or aim. God is free from and above every kind of limit, restriction, and subordination be as it may the limit imposed by a purpose.

The Shi'ah affirm the Mu'tazilite belief with regard to purposiveness of Divine Acts. They believe that there is a difference between the purpose of the act and the purpose of the doer. That which is impossible is that God may seek to satisfy some purpose of His own through His Acts; however, a purpose or aim which is directed to the benefit of a creature is not at all incompatible with Divine perfection and the supremacy of His self-sufficing Essence.

(vi) The Possibility of Bada' (Divine abrogation of predestiny)

Bada' is possible in Divine Acts, in the same way as it occurs in the abrogation of the Divinely decreed laws. An elaborate and satisfactory study of the issue of *bada'* may be found in such profound philosophical books as *al-'Asfar.*

(ix) Vision (ru'yah) of God

The Mu'tazilah vehemently deny the possibility of seeing God with the eyes. They believe that one may only have faith in God, a faith which is rooted in the mind and the intellect. That is, one can acquire a firm conviction in the depth of one's soul and mind in the existence of God, and this is the highest kind of faith one may attain. God can by no means be seen or observed. This is testified by the Qur'an when it says:

The sights do not perceive Him, and He perceives the sights, and He is All-subtle (incapable of being perceived) and All-knowing (i.e. perceives the eyes and the rest of things). (6:103).

The Asha'irah, with equal vehemence, assert that God can be seen with the eyes, but only on the Day of Resurrection. They also cite as evidence certain Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions to support their claim. One of the verses they cite is:

(***Some***) ***faces on that Day shall be bright, looking towards their Lord.*** (***75:22-23***)

The Shi'ah believe that God can never be seen with the eyes, neither in this life nor in the Hereafter. Nevertheless, the highest kind of faith is not an intellectual one. The intellectual faith is *'ilm al-yaqin*. A higher level of faith than that of the intellect is *'ayn al-yaqin* - certitude of the heart. *'Ayn al-yaqin* (*lit.* certitude by sight) means witnessing God with the heart, not with the eyes.

Thus, though God cannot be seen with the eyes, He is 'visible' to the heart. 'Ali (A) was once asked, "Have you seen God?" He replied, "I have not worshipped a god whom I have not seen. But He is visible to the hearts, not to the eyes." The Imams (A) were asked whether the Prophet (S) saw God during his Ascension (*mi'raj*). Their reply was: "With the eyes? No. With the heart? Yes." In this matter only the Sufis have a viewpoint resembling the Shi'ah position.

(x) The Faith or Infidelity of the Fasiq

On this issue, which has often been referred to earlier, the Shi'ah position is in agreement with that of the Asha'irah, but is different from the views of the Khawarij (who believe that a *fasiq* is *kafir*) and the Mu'tazilah (who believe in *manzilah bayna al-manzilatayn*).

(xi) The Infallibility ('ismah) of the Prophets and the Imams

This belief is characteristic of the Shi'ah who hold that the prophets (A) and the Imams (A) are infallible and do not commit any major or minor sin whatsoever.

(xii) Forgiveness (maghfirah) and Intercession (shafa'ah)

On this issue, also, the Shi'ah differ from the cut-and-dry Mu'tazilite position that anybody who dies without repentance cannot possibly get the benefit of Divine forgiveness or (the Prophet's) intercession. Similarly, their position is also at variance with the indulgent and extravagant notion of *shafa'ah* held by the Asha'irah4.

1. Al-Qur'an, 2:285
2. This is the stand on sifat which is usually attributed to the Mu'tazilah. Hajji Sabzawari (in Manzumah, his philosophical poem) says:

al-Ash'ari bizdiyadin qa'iluhu

wa qala binniyabati'lMu'tazilahu

However some Mu'tazilah, such as al-Hudhayl, have held a position exactly similar to the Shi'ah position.

3. Murtadha Mutahhari, 'Adle Ilahi (Divine Justice).
4. Ibid., the discussion on shafa'ah.

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