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Freedom versus Predestination

Wilson: There is an important issue which has a bearing on the concept of the Divine justice, and it is highly controversial in philosophy as well as religion; namely: man's freedom. The philosophers as well as the religious scholars differ on this question. Some of them advocate man's freedom, and that whatever he does he does by his free will; some of them deny this freedom, and think that what appears to be a free action or inaction of man is pre–arranged or a result of a certain cause or chain of causes.

I have read in some Islamic literature that Islam advocates predestination, and that all man's works were predestined by God, and that man cannot change the courses which he takes. I read, also, a different Islamic view which advocates man's freedom and denies the concept of predestination in man's action or inaction. I would like now to discuss with you this question and find out what Islam, actually, teaches in this important issue.

Chirri: To define the subject of our discussion, it would be necessary to make clear that our discussion does not include certain conditions not caused by man's own will, such as sickness, blindness, and death. In this area the absence of man's freedom is obvious. No one should claim that man has freedom in having such conditions, because these things do not come by man's choice. Our discussion includes only the area of man's work and action where man seems to be acting by his own choice and will. It is here that the old controversy is still burning and dividing the people into two camps: the camp which advocates man's freedom, and the camp which advocates predestination or Determinism.

Islam, as you know, informs us that God has revealed certain commandments; that He will reward the obedient of His commandments; and that He will punish the disobedient who do not comply with these commandments. A religion which preaches this can be consistent only if it advocates man's freedom, unless such a religion denies the concept of justice of God.

A religion that advocates both God's justice and predestination would clearly contradict itself when it states that God will reward the obedient of His commands and penalize the disobedient. When man's actions or inactions are pre-arranged by God, man will be unable to change his course. He will not be able to do one thing when he is predestined to do something else. Man would be like a machine. A machine is not able, by itself, to change its course, and it would be ridiculous to tell a machine to comply

with a certain order or to reward a machine or penalize it.

Remove man's freedom, and the whole concept of religion is destroyed. As a matter of fact, if we deny man's freedom, there will be no need for any heavenly revelation. It would be futile to send prophets to teach and lead mankind. When a person is predestined to be an atheist, he shall not be a believer, and no prophet will be able to change his heart. A predestined criminal is not going to be a good citizen, regardless of any teaching he may receive.

Man's freedom, in fact, underlies the whole concept of religion, and Islam clearly advocates man's freedom.

Wilson: From our past discussions, I know that Islam advocates strongly the Doctrine of the Justice of God. Islam, therefore, is expected to advocate man's freedom and oppose the idea of predestination or what is called, in philosophy, "Determinism". I would like to know if the Holy Qur'an indicates man's freedom clearly.

Chirri: The Holy Qur'an has indicated, in more than one way, that man is a free agent. It declares that man is capable of changing his condition.

"Surely the Almighty changes not the condition of a people unless they change that which is in themselves." 13:11

Were man predestined to take a certain course, he would not be able to change that course. Whatever he does or avoids will be done or avoided, not by choice, but by necessity.

The Holy Qur'an has, also, declared that God does not ask the individual to do the impossible, nor does He place hardship on His servants:

"The Almighty imposes not on a soul a duty but to the extent of its ability." 2:286

"The Almighty desires not to place a hardship on you but He desires to purify you and to complete His favor upon you, so that you may be thankful." 5:8

For example, if man were predestined not to pray or to commit a murder and God tells him not to kill or to pray, He will be placing the greatest hardship on him, and He will be asking him to do what is impossible for him. He will not be asking him to do what is within his ability because he was predestined, before he was born, to kill and not to pray. Thus, He would not be able to comply with the order of God. The very fact that he is commanded to pray and prohibited from killing indicates that God views His human servant as a free creature, and that whatever he is commanded to do or not to do is within his ability.

The Holy Qur'an has, also, indicated man's freedom by stating and stressing the responsibility of every individual for what he does:

"Whoever goes aright, for his own soul he goes aright; and whoever goes astray, to his own detriment he goes astray." 39:41

"And no bearer of a burden bears another's burden " 53:38

"Say: O people, the truth has come to you from your Lord; So whoever goes aright, goes aright only for the good of his own soul: and whoever errs, he errs only against it." 10:108

The very concept of responsibility of the individual indicates clearly that the individual is a free agent. Otherwise, he cannot be held responsible for anything that may be produced by him. Responsibility is inseparable from freedom.

Wilson: The verses which you have quoted from the Holy Qur'an truly indicate that man is endowed with a sufficient amount of freedom that makes him responsible and deserving of reward or punishment for his work. However, there are some verses which were quoted from the Qur'an by the advocates of predestination. These verses indicate that man's action is controlled by God. Of these verses are the following:

"Surely this (the Qur'an) is a reminder; so, whoever is willing, he may take a path to his Lord. And you do not will unless God will..." 76:29–30

"It is naught but thy trial. Thou causest to err thereby whomever Thou pleasest and guidest whomever Thou pleasest..." 7: 155

These verses indicate the opposite of what the verses which you quoted indicate. This leads to confusion and creates a dilemma.

Chirri: To a Muslim, the Holy Qur'an is the accurate record of revelation. It contains only the truth, and all the contents of the Holy Qur'an must be true. A truth never contradicts another truth. Whatever may seem to be a contradiction could not be genuine. It would only be an apparent contradiction.

When there are two groups of Qur'anic verses appearing to oppose each other, they have to be treated in a certain manner. When one of the groups has a clearer indication on one side of the issue than the indication of the other group on the opposite side of the same issue, the clearer group will be followed. The other group ought to be interpreted in a way that will not disagree with the first one. This treatment would be obviously necessary when the clearer group is in accordance with the logical side of the issue. And this is the case in the two above quoted groups.

Keeping this in mind, we may be able to understand the two groups and interpret the latter one in a way that it would not disagree with the former. We may understand from the first of the two verses in the second group that man's ability to choose is from God. Man may choose a certain course, but his capability of choosing is the gift of God. God is able to deprive him from this capability and interfere in His will. But God does not usually do that.

The second of the two verses, also, can be interpreted in a way that will not disagree with man's freedom: God may guide an individual to the right path, and He may leave another individual in error. But we cannot expect God to grant guidance to someone and to leave another in error on a random basis.

He may help a person by granting him a clear guidance when such a person is trying to find the truth and willing to follow it. He may leave a person in error when that person is not willing to accept the truth. By this interpretation, there will be no dilemma. The first group of verses would remain without opposition, indicating clearly man's freedom.

Wilson: God is the Creator of the whole universe, all its segments and all its events. No event in this world is outside His creation. Man's will is one of the events which take place in this world. Man, therefore, has no free will.

Chirri: If this is true, we have to ascribe to God all the injustices, aggressions and crimes which man commits. But no believer in God would ascribe to Him our vices and sins.

The truth is that God has created in man the power of choosing, and this means that He granted him a free will. God can direct man's will and make him choose a certain course if He wants to, but nothing in our life indicates that God usually interferes in our will. Since He granted us the power of choosing, we should expect Him to leave us without intervention. This means that He expects us to use our power of choosing and make our own decisions and have our own choices.

Wilson. God knows our future as well as our present and past. He knows what I shall do in the distant future as well as what I am doing right now. He knew before we were born what course we would take after our birth and in the future. Since everything is known to Him in advance, our action must have been predetermined long before we act.

We would be unable to take a new course that is not known to God, nor can we fail to take the course which has been foreseen by Him. Our failure to take the very course which He knew, would be a failure in His knowledge. The knowledge of God never fails.

Chirri: Our knowledge of certain events does not determine those events, nor does our knowledge cause those events to happen. I know, for example, that all the workers at a particular factory eat their lunch at noon. This does not mean that my knowledge or expectation has caused them to take their lunch at that time. God, no doubt, foresees our future, but this does not necessarily mean that all our future actions are caused by His knowledge. Each and every one of our actions has its own cause, and the main factor is the particular human will which calls for such an action.

In addition to this, God knows that I will do a certain thing by my own free will. Since the knowledge of God does not fail, my action has to be a free action caused by my free will. Should my action prove to be a product of compulsion, the knowledge of God would fail. The knowledge of God never fails; therefore, I

will not fail to make my own decision, by my own free will.

Wilson: This discussion has made the issue entirely clear. The last point which you stated is very important. As a matter of fact, the last argument which I introduced confuses the knowledge of an event with its cause, but every event usually has its own cause. We know that God knows that every particular action of ours is to be the product of our own will. And since God has given us the power of choosing, our will must be a free product of that power. The knowledge of God will never fail. Therefore, we will not fail to have our actions as the products of our own free will.

When we subscribe to the doctrine of man's freedom, we will be consistent and safe from contradiction. The Doctrine of the Justice of God could not be reconciled with the Doctrine of Predestination. We cannot say that man's action is necessitated by God, unless we deny the Divine justice. Since we are not willing to give up the Doctrine of the Justice of God, nor are we willing to believe in contradiction, we have to deny, categorically, the Doctrine of Predestination.

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