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Item Type	Article
Authors	Dağcı, Şamil
Publisher	Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik Universität Frankfurt
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-06 08:43:19
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/193466

Journal of Religious Culture
Journal für Religionskultur
Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad
Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main
ISSN 1434-5935- © E.Weber

No. 65 (2003)

An Analysis of God's Attributes 'The Beneficent' and 'The Merciful'

with Regard to the Philosophy of Islamic Jurisprudence

By

Şamil Dağcı*

"Our Lord! Give us Good in this world And Good in the Hereafter; And defend us From the Torment Of the Fire!"
(Shûra .II.201)

I would like to begin my presentation with the quotation of the first sentence of Shafii's Treatise ***er-Risala,*** the first work which has been reached us until now, concerning foundation of Islamic jurisprudence. "Praise be to God gratitude for one of His favors can only be paid through another favor of him. And this favor generates favor to be bestowed, wherefore, one should feel obliged continuously to pay gratitude to God for each favor."[1]
It is possible to conceive that Mercy (*al-Rahma*), the common expression of all favors granted by the Almighty Creature of human beings, has two salient characteristics: one is vertical that is with regard to the Creator and creatures, and the other is horizontal that is concerning human relations among themselves as well as with other creatures. When the concept of Mercy is evaluated in perspective of God-human being relations in the existing world, it indicates that God's favors, without discrimination, are granted to all human beings. And the same rela-

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The article was presented as a paper to the First International German-Turkish Symposium on 'Life and Religion', Dokuz Eylül Uiniversity, Izmir, Turkey (9th-18th of April, 2003).
I would like to thank my senior colleague Dr. Selahattin Eroğlu who made scholarly suggestions for the betterment of this paper (article) and helped in its translation from Turkish to English.
1 Muhammed b. İdris al-Shâfı'i ***er-Risala*** (ed.Ahmed Muhammad Shâkır) Daru'l-Kutubi'l-Ilmiyye, Bairut. no date, p.7-8.

tionship is to be viewed from human angle. The deeds which were performed through free will is directly associated with the concept of *responsibility* and *liability*. In other words, in the process of love and beneficence of God to His creatures, human beings in particular, and the feeling of gratitude is reflected in the form of love, respect and pure obedience (*worship*) of human beings to the Creator; the natural connotation of *al-Rahma* prevails and manifests itself.

"God is not abstract from His attributes" [2] Surely, the Universe is not only the sign of Allah, the Creator (*Khalıq*) but also manifestation of all other names and attributes. One of these is the attribute of God's Mercy derived from the Arabic root ***r-h-m.*** It means to show mercy, to protect, to become merciful and to give benefit. In its most general and broadest context the concept of Mercy (*al-Rahma*) is expressed in God's exalted names, namely *al-Rahmân* (the Beneficent) and *al-Rahîm* (the Merciful).[3]

It is possible to examine the names of God in the context of attribute of *Rahma*. Such as *Raûf* (the Compassionate), *Kerîm* (the Generous), *Wahhâb* (the Bestower of gifts), *Razzâq* (the Provider with food), *Mucîb* (the One who answers to), *Gaffâr* (the One who is much forgiving), *Halîm* (the Clement) , *Afûw* (the Erasor of sins), *Wadûd* (the Loving one). The attribute of *Rahma* indicates the reason of existence of man as well as its objective.

Although they have some nuances the words derived from the verb '*rhm*' keep their essential meanings such as to be compassionate, to safeguard and to be merciful.[4] However, these conceptions – except the attribute of *Rahman* (compassionate) which is used to mean Allah only - and on the Holy Creator's side have an unlimited and absolute contents. On the creatures' side, as the reflection of the absolute mercy of Allah, the concepts have fragmentary and relative contents.[5] For better understanding of the absolute mercy of Allah, the Prophet illustrates metaphorically an example of a woman whose child had been lost and after the child was found she hugged her child with love . This indicates an important signification in such away that this attribute is also used for human beings.[6]

As the manifestation of Allah's mercy the mother love their children with natural love, and they prefer feeding their children to themselves. Such as they, with their natural instincts of love, never hesitate to put themselves into danger just to save their children when there is no hope, Allah will be only one to appeal for help. Allah helps his servants and orders them not to be in despair: "Say 'O my servants who have transgressed against their soul! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: for Allah forgives all sins: for He is oft-forgiving, most merciful."[7] Those who are relatives naturally help each other; and this is not restricted among the relatives. It further encircles the poor and orphans. People respect the elderly and protect the youngsters. In the society the rich also protect the poor and the weak by supporting them. These values are not static in the innermost feelings of man, but are reflected in the forms of deeds and activities; through which they become a kind of common values shared by the majority of the relevant society; And are presented in different social and cultural institutions (e.g. endowments, hospitals and schools) so much so that they form an inalienable characteristics of the said culture.

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2 Yaltkaya, Şerafettin, ***Vaazlar*** (Preaches), İstanbul, 1994, p.59

3 However these are not God's essential names but they are His attributions. Asım Efendi, ***Kamus Tercümesi Okyanus***. Sometimes, the words beneficent and merciful are used as equivalent for Rahmân and Rahîm. (Marmaduke Picthall, ***The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an***, p.5); It is further considered that these attributions do not meet the same meaning of Rahmân.and Rahîm, and thus in English translation of the Qur'an, the superlative of these words are preferred, that is, the most gracious and the most merciful.(A.Yusuf, Ali, ***The Holy Our'an***, 1983, p.17)

4 Ragib al-Isfahani, *al-Mufradât fi Garibi'l-Kur'an*, p. 191.

5 Muhammed Rashid Riza, *Tafsîru'l-Qur'ani'l-Hâkîm,* Cairo, 1954, I/46; Muhammed Hamdi Yazir, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili*, 1/75; Mutercim Asim Efendi, *Kamus Tecumesi Okyanus,* Matbaa-i Bahriyye, 1305, IV/300.

6 Buharî, *Edeb,* 18; Muslim, *Tevbe*, 66.

7-Qur'an, Zumar, 53.

Naturally these concepts and values are witnessed, though out of instincts, in animal kingdom as a manifestation of these attribute; birds, by their natural instincts, keep their eggs in safe guarded places, feed their young mouth to mouth, and build their nests far away from the reach of mankind. Moreover, animals have the ability of suckling their own young, likewise the young have the same ability for sucking their own mothers. Since they are naturally not just animals but mothers, even the most savages and wild ones care, and protect their young with maternal instincts. However, the animals whose actions are restricted by their instincts, are not capable of going beyond that natural limit; and yet human beings are; because, apart from the instinct, they have a significant power such as intellect. The faith which is derived from the power of intellect takes mankind from the restricted physical world to the meta-physical one.

It is beyond human capacity to determine, even, to imagine the possibility and dimensions of the divine mercy; because the sphere of human knowledge is already limited by what could be discovered and, similarly what have been discovered is also limited. By the statement of the Qur'an it is limitless if you try to estimate the blessings of Allah.[8]

By the attribute of mercy the blessings of the Creator to humankind can be considered in two ways: The first is the blessings of Allah to all humankind without any discrimination. The second, however, some part of the mercy can be obtained in accordance with individual capacity such as "effort" (*sa'y*) and " acquisition" (*kasb*). In the first case, human being is totally on the passive position while in the second is active. This matter has been defined by Islamic scholars on the basis of Allah's attribute of compassion (*Rahman*) and mercy (*Rahîm*). The attribute of *Rahman*, engulfs the believers and unbelievers indiscriminately; accordingly everything has been covered by the mercy of Allah.[9] Whereas, correspondingly the attribute *Rahim* is interpreted in return for the willful actions of mankind whether good or bad[10] (reward or punishment). However, as the concept of mercy in the attribute of *al-Rahman* covers everything, the concept is naturally attributed only to Allah. While, other attributes related to "mercy" is used for Allah, and from the idea that the manifestation of these attributes are also relatively possible for human being, these attributes are used for mankind.[11] In brief, on the one hand, they would express limitless mercy of Allah if they were used in their absolute meaning. On the other hand, they would express the sense of mercy, compassion and tenderness if they were attributed to creatures. Thus, Islam in its complete connotation, that is to say, in its theory and practice is the religion based on the concept of Mercy, Compassion and love. In the context of *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahîm* the relationship of Mercy between God and human beings may be conceived in two ways:

al-Rahmân

Man is the creature honored by God and was born so vulnerable that requires complete protection and care. Man after the incident of birth finds innumerable blessings already surrounded. It is absolutely impossible for a new born baby to survive without the protection of others. For example, when the new born baby is left unprotected on its own, there will be no chance whatsoever for him to remain alive. In fact, this very protection, in its peculiarly mysterious ways, starts in its earliest stages of the birth process. Moreover this protection is not

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8 Nahl, 18.

9 The verse 156 from the Shurah al- A'raf "My mercy encompasses all things" states that divine mercy embraces all creatures; namely it states that divine mercy is general. That is why Ibn Arabi named this kind of Allah's mercy (rahma al imtinân;) that is, the blessing of mercy in return of nothing. See. Toshiko Izutsu, *Ibnu'l Arabi'nin FususundakiAnahtar Kavramlar* (translated in Turkish by Ahmet Yuksel Ozemre) Ist. 1999, p. 170-173.

10 Ragib al-Isfahani, *al-Mufradât fî Garibi'l-Kur'an*, p. 192.

11 The verse 128th of the surah at-Tavba points out this matter.

limited by physical existence of the embryo, but all its rights are guaranteed by the law (i.e. Islamic Law)
On condition to be born alive the newly born is liable to have basic legal rights (*Ahliyya al-Wujub*) that is to say it is considered as a person.
By the perfection of his spiritual faculties he claims "I am independent and free in my actions and deeds and am conscious of my complete responsibility". In legal expression a person with full legal capacity and religious liability that is an addressee of the divine message

al-Rahîm

The Universe is neither a chaos without any governor nor a kingdom governed gods, but it is the cosmos governed by the Absolute Authority, the Owner of all Existence, the Creator of man with free will, thus, nothing could be done out of His Knowledge and Will. It is manifestation of the mercy of Allah, for human understandings, to make clear the cosmological rules which were put forward by Allah in the Universe. Apart from these unchangeable natural laws there have been some social and juridical laws put forward by Allah for mankind. Man attempt out of his divine obligation to understand and comprehend the relevant basic rules of the cosmos whereas they become the liable addressees of the Supreme Lawgiver (i.e. *al-Shârî*) pertaining to social and juridical matters. Although human beings have the ability to comprehend, what grounds these principles are based on in the context of responsibility they are left free to accept or reject these principles on their own will.[12] In fact all the juridical values and norms, laid down by God, aim to achieve certain goals; and only human being who were created in the best of mould by God can put this unique divine concord into reality.
The acts of human are evaluated by the attribute of *Rahim* on the basis of "willful goodness" and "willful badness" (i.e. intentional good deeds and bad deeds) are evaluated by the context of *al-Rahim*. By using the faculty of intellect, willpower and other abilities, human beings discover Allah's blessings to mankind; and make use of those benefits; the more knowledge and experience were developed, the more sphere of discovey extends and the unknown becomes known and scope of blessing increases.
Beside the faculty of intellect and will mankind was further supported by divine revelation and the institution of prophethood. It was very blessing of Allah to send many prophets to mankind in order to guide them into right path, in this connection in some verses of the Qur'an the word *al-rahma* (mercy, compassion) was interpreted as "the prophet"; in some verses the word *rahma* was mentioned together with the Prophet as one of his qualities.[13]
The Revelation is an effective element of the "time" that is conceived by man. It refers to the past, and enlightens the unknown parts of it; and indeed relates to the present, with relevant organization, the rules and regulations and gives human being an effective role in administration of the worldly affairs by establishing the concept of "social justice and social accord" in the society; and in its goals related to the future it emphasizes the everlasting happiness in absolute equilibrium.
Consequently all these peculiar characteristics of divine revelation give human being self confidence with active dynamism for the worldly life.
In other words, the attribute of *al-Rahma* (the mercy) further connotes that human being is not alone unguarded in the Universe. But in this Divine Cosmos he is conscious of his Creator and of His guidance care and protection. Hence, man comprehends through his unique qualities, bestowed by God, that he is exalted among other creatures and given the responsibility to

12 Ebu'l-Hasan an-Nadvî, *Din ve Medeniyet* (trans. Enes Harman), Izmir 1976, s. 72.
13 For example, Qur'an, al-Anbiyâ, 107; az-Zuhruf, 32; al-Hûd, 28, 63; Zamahsharî, *al-Kashshâf*, III/265.

protect them. In this context, therefore, he is considered liable, accountable and responsible for all his deeds as this is stated in the Qur'an as "the trust" assumed by man only.[14]
Because of the distinguished faculties such as intellect, willpower and power of judgment, human being possess religious, ethical and juridical responsibilities with these abilities human being discerned between the good and the bad. And yet, these very qualities make human being liable and responsible (*taklif*) against certain rights, obligations and duties as they are expressed in Islamic Jurisprudence. Furthermore human being enjoy, innumerable blessings which make him ethically, responsible; among those responsibilities servitude (to God) *al-Ubudiyye* is primarily important. This is followed by man's relationship with other people and the concomitant rights and obligations". In the context of servitude; intellect; the power of discretion and freewill bring about "responsibility", and the responsibility brings about liability to worship God. The Supreme peculiarities of man, due, namely, to his power of intellect and free will undergo, in the process of time, natural improvement towards perfection so much so that everything is evaluated and treated from the point of Islamic ethics (*akhlâq*) in the context of "love of God" which leads the believing man to obtain consciousness of mercy to all creatures, as it is beautifully expressed by one of the Muslim ascetic (*zâhid*) Yunus Emre "be tolerant to everyone for the love of the Creator" Thus the believing man enjoys the blessing of perfect balance; i.e. with himself, with the Creator and concomitantly, with the society.
Human beings by exercising supreme qualities reach "consciousness of personality"; through which other fellow beings are identified in their own peculiarities. At the end of such an exalted state of consciousness the concept of "self" or "self indulgence" may naturally be transformed into the concept of "we", together with "others"; and by annihilating all artificial and self-centered barriers of disagreement and conflict, what may be called in the society, common consciousness of humanity is reached.
Human being is considered legally responsible both to his own self as well as to other human beings. In this regard, the concepts of "intellect" and "free will" may be conceived as prerequisites for the existence of "liability" for the deeds performed. In other words "free will" brings about "responsibility" whereas the concept of "responsibility" requires the existence of "free will". It should be pointed out here that liability in legal responsibility in the Qur'an is expressed as "trust" commissioned for man by God.[15] "Lo, we offered the trust (*amanah*) onto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrunk from bearing it, and were afraid of it. And man assumed it ... ."
Muslim scholars in general are of the view that *al-Rahîm* is more related to the Hereafter; that is to say, man will see the consequences of their worldly deeds in the hereafter. Thus, *al-Rahmân* is particularly related to the deeds of man, as general rights and responsibilities bestowed by God irrespective of their belief, denomination, sex, etc. While *al-Rahîm* is more concerned with the concomitant results in the Hereafter, (i.e. reward and punishment) for the deeds committed during the worldly life. In brief, therefore, we may put forward that *al-Rahmân* is more identified with "the right" and *al-Rahîm* with the accountability and responsibility. In other words, the addressee of the attribute *al-Rahmân* is mankind, whereas the addressees of *al-Rahîm*, is the "deeds of mankind". In this way power of reasoning and inner religious spirit (*Qalb*) constitute as one. In its ultimate sense "*al-Dîn*" while leading the believers to divine salvation and prosperity (*falâh*), also emphasizes God's pleasure (*ridallah*) as an expectation from the believing man who, in fact, perform the deeds in congruity with the Islamic Law with his absolute free will.

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14 Ahzâb, 72.
15 *Al-Ta'zim bi amrillah, Ash-shafkatu alâ Khalqillâh* "Glorification for the performance of God's orders and sympathy and mercy with the creatures". Shamsuddin Muhammad b. Abd al-Rahman al-Sahavi, el-Maqasid al-Hasana, Egypt, 1956, p.253; see also Ismail b. al-Ajluni, Kashf al-Hafa, II/11.

In legal context, defining the limits of personal rights and responsibilities are treated seriously together with the relevant background and circumstances. The issue of rights and responsibilities in Islamic Law, when they are examined from the point of view of man we may witness the existence of rights on one side and the responsibilities on the other side of the scale of Divine Justice. However, it should be underlined here that what we call "the rights" come first, as it is clear, that before introducing the concept of responsibility towards the liable persons, the very rights that balance the concept of responsibility are already guaranteed in this context therefore, the status of man may be summed up as the following: The concept of responsibility is subsumed under that of legal capacity. In other words man, under specific conditions and circumstances, is considered liable and accountable for the deeds that have been performed. This shows physical and spiritual competence of man that puts him under certain obligations in order to be liable to get benefit from basic human rights such as the right of existence, personal security, honor, right of property, and the like; the only prerequisite is to be human being. There is no distinction or discrimination amongst human beings like differences of religion, race, language, gender, physical and psychological conditions in attaining the legal capacity (*ahliyya*).

In the methodology of Islamic jurisprudence this is called as *ahliyya al-wujub* (receptive legal capacity which is good for receiving but cannot incur obligations).[16] This is called in modern systems of law as "legal rights". Since *ahliyya al-wujub* is considered to mean same as "personality of human being" the term *zhimmah* (inviolability) is also used as an alternative term for it. Thus it is to be concluded that every human being has the right to enjoy equally from these rights.

Capacity to shoulder responsibility as it is, and the capacity to act and carry out these rights (*ilzâm-iltizâm*) on the other hand is called *ahliyyatu'l adâ* (capacity to act). *Ahliyyatu'l adâ* is ones actions and deeds in accordance with law on one hand, and on the other, it is to be accountable for the deeds that are against the law. This why, one has to have certain prerequisites; such as the power of discretion (*tamyîz*), maturity of the mind (*rushd*).

The issue of man's responsibility is treated in different context. Responsibility and imputability are two closely related terms. The term responsibility is used for persons concerned and yet imputability is for actions or deeds. To ascribe an action to someone is a prerequisite for the said action to hold the perpetrator responsible from his actions, the relevant action is to be imputable to the person concerned. Thus the action is to be ascribed to the offender and the said offender has to attain legal capacity (i.e. reasoning and free will).

Personal responsibility, may also be examined in two ways; moral and ethical responsibility and legal responsibility. Moral responsibility is ones thought and inner feeling about ones own actions and deeds; good (*husn*) or bad (*qubh*), right or wrong and self evaluation of these acts in the light of the sources of religion (i.e. the Qur'an and the Sunna) towards his own self (but not to others), and yet he in one way or another, comes to a personal and inner judgment that may lead him either to the state of satisfaction or the state of discontent, spiritual uneasiness and anxiety. This is so, because the evaluation and possible judgment starts first in one's inner self. In moral context we may put forward the idea that one is responsible for one's all actions and deeds. The sanctions of immoral and unethical actions and deeds emanate from moral and ethical principles of Islam. One is expected to listen to one's own inner judgment and seek for spiritual contentment even after a positive judgment given by jurist about the said issue.

Moral and ethical responsibility is reflected into "worship" in general and social relations as the concept of *ihsân*; The term *ihsân* (lit. performance of good deeds) is defined in its most precise manner by a tradition ascribed to the Prophet. *Ihsân* is a religio-psychological condition of the believer who performed worship to God alone in deep zealous manner as if God

16 Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, Malaysia 1989, s. 509

was seen in presence and yet, God definitely sees the believer.[17] Furthermore the term *ihsân* connotes to do right things in the best manner and to maintain the balance in performance of the deeds by restraining himself from any kind of extremity. In the Qur'an the performance of worship in general and "prayer", which is considered as the pillar of worship to God, in particular is called with a specific term *iqâma* and this very term means to carry out something in its best possible manner i.e. in the state of perfection. We should underline a significant point, here, that the term *iqâma* is used particularly for the performance of the prayer, which is the pillar of worship in general, and furthermore, this physical, environmental and spiritual zeal in performance of worship is enriched and embellished by the term *ihsân* mentioned above (in the relevant tradition ascribed to the Prophet) that underlines the believing man's consciousness of God in performance of the deeds and of the zenith of its sublimity.

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17 For the relevant text of the tradition see: