Beyond Ethical Theism

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Essay

Beyond ethical theism: Islamic morality as a service to God

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ABSTRACT

That ethics is a derivative of Divine Being itself, there is no doubt among Jews, Christians, or Muslims. *But in Islam, morality is the right thing to do because it exists in the nature of God Himself!* In the following brief essay, we will examine the origins and perimeters of Islamic ethics as explicated in the thought of Jamal Badawi and Majid Fakery. Though Badawi does not bother to make the distinction between "ethics" and "morals" which I have made here, namely, that "ethics" is a code of behavior and "morals" are the behavior itself. He does points out, however, that "morals can either be classified as secular or religious". Whereas secular morality tries to establish an ethical system that is independent of both God and faith, religious morality, on the other hand, is fundamentally based on two things. First, it is the belief in God as the Creator of the universe, and second, it is the belief in life after death.

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ESSAY

As radically divergent as ethical theism is in its Judaic, Christian, and Islamic expressions and formulations, the overarching affirmation in all three traditions is that ethical authority is derived from a transcendent source, namely God. That Catholics and Protestants differ radically in their understanding of the relationship between the Church (*magisterium*) and Scripture (*Sola Scriptura*) regarding ethics does not alter the fact that ethical authority derives from the God of the Bible for all Christians. Though Judaism is content to embrace a doctrine of God which includes a repertoire of anthropocentric behavior, there is never any doubt that all authority resides in the Creator of Heaven and Earth. For Muslims, however, monotheism is relentless in its claim for the total and uncompromising authority of God alone. That ethics is a derivative of Divine Being itself, there is no doubt among Jews, Christians, or Muslims. *But in Islam, morality is the right thing to do because it exists in the nature of God Himself!*

In the following brief essay, we will examine the origins and perimeters of Islamic ethics as explicated in the thought of Jamal Badawi [1] and Majid Fakery [2]. Though Badawi does not bother to make the distinction between "ethics" and "morals" I have made elsewhere [3], namely, that "ethics" is a code of behavior and "morals" are the behavior itself. He does points out, however, that "morals can either be classified as secular or religious". Whereas secular morality tries to establish an ethical system that is independent of both God and faith, religious morality, on the other hand, is fundamentally based on two things. First, it is the belief in God as the Creator of the universe, and second, it is the belief in life after death. "Religious morality," however, is not a uniformly used term because the fundamentals of religious morality are not the same for all religions.

Islam is quite profoundly the "monotheistic" religion because it is outspokenly non-compromising when it comes to the unity and sovereignty of God. Though we know many attributes of God, there is no hint of human beings "becoming God" or even being a "co-creator with God" as suggested in the theology and mystical writings of both Judaism [4] and Christianity [5]. The Will of God is singular, uncorrupted with humanlike emotions, and is constituted of His divine attributes. Whereas in Judaism and Christianity, we see a God who is jealous, gets angry, takes revenge, etc., Islam has no such notions. The Will of God is undifferentiated in its singularity, consistency, and applicability. The notion of an intermediary between God and man is abhorrent to Muslims for it breaches the one-to-one relationship which God offers to every single individual in the world. Furthermore, there is a genuine opportunity for the oneness of God to be decidedly compromised by the idea of an intermediary between God and every individual [6].

Islamic scholars are frustrated but patient with the naïveté common among Jews and Christians that their idea of God is the same as the Muslim concept of God. For a Muslim, the notion that God is simply a further and later interpolation of the Biblical God is not only wrong but offensive in its simplemindedness. The potential or latent polytheism implied in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (three gods in one!) is matched by the naïve portrayal of the Jewish God as tribal or merely sometimes super-human in character. All such notions are alien to Islam. The purity and singularity of God is never questioned, never adulterated, never compromised. "These descriptions," explains Badawi, "that depict God as a super-human being contradict Islam's emphasis on God's transcendence, His total freedom from all human defects, and that He is not human-like because He is not 'physical' in the sense that He can be perceived". Seeing God, touching God, being familiar with God as portrayed in Jewish and Christian writings are both alien and offensive to Muslims. The sovereignty of God is never questioned, never altered, and always present in any discussion of the God of Islam.

"If the Islamic concept of God," suggests Badawi, "is compared with the Biblical concept of the 'God of Israel,'" we find that the first chapter in the Qur'an describes God as 'Lord of the universe' (Al-Fatihah 1:2), and the last chapter of the Qur'an describes Him as 'Lord of mankind' (An-Nas 114:1). The Qur'an does not say 'God of Arabs' or 'God of Muslims' or God of any ethnic group, but God is the God of all humanity". Once again, the Jewish notion of God, and by extension the Christian notion, is that God is the God of Creation but in some special sense is first and foremost the God of the Israelites. The doctrine of God as expounded by the teachings of Islam is that God is the God of the universe, he is not a tribal God nor a God who could even conceivably imagine a preference of one peoples over another. An ethnic or nationalistic God is alien to Islam.

Muslims take the day when arguing for the singularity and oneness of God. Whereas Christians have their special ways of accessing to God through Mary, the Holy Spirit, the saints, etc., Muslims affirm and embrace the universality and singularity of God. Islam is radical, pure monotheism. To

propose that Jesus is the "Son of God" other than like all human beings are God's children is quite decidedly offensive and heretical to Muslims.

"This concept of God in Islam," Badawi has pointed out, "affects its ethical system in many ways". Divided loyalties between God, His Son, the Holy Spirit, the Saints, Mary the Queen of Heaven and Mother of God(!), etc., are inconceivable to a Muslim. God is one. There is no God but God. All others and all else are less than and will never be equal to God. The attribution of human frailties to the character and behavior of God is blasphemy! To propose that a human being is the Son of God is blasphemy! Jesus is a prophet and teacher of men. He is not God, nor any part of God more than any other human being participating in the love and Will of God.

Here, then, is the essence of Islamic ethics. The moral code of conduct is dictated by a belief that God knows all, He sees all, and that every believer in God and obedient servant of God must obey the Will of God. There is no hiding; there is no escape. Salvation earned by doing good and being good. It is not given as a gift for believing in God. Grace is not a central doctrine within Islam, but rather good works and servanthood in service to the Will of God are fundamental. Salvation is to be worked for and not simply expected. The exercise of justice and peace in the world is the means to assure salvation.

As was mentioned earlier, another outstanding Islamic scholar today is Majid Fakery. Fakery extends and elaborates the discussion of morality in Badawi's work and places much more emphasis upon the "systemics of ethical deliberation" as well as their "moral application". He is considered, like Badawi, a major spokesperson for the teachings of Islam and is particularly distinguished in his understanding of the history of Islamic ethics and the moral code [7].

Fakery is refreshingly non-defensive in his recognition and acknowledgment of the historic origins of Islamic thought which drew quite readily from the Greek philosophers (as did many Jewish and Christian thinkers as well). Realizing that no ideas are truly and solely original when it comes to philosophical speculation about ethics and moral behavior, Fakery easily identifies and traces the line of development from one generation to the next and one thinker to the next, including the profound impact of Greek thought on Islamic formulations [8].

The gradual emergence of a philosophically sophisticated concept of right and wrong caused a stir within the Islamic community of scholars. One school was insistent upon the notion that right and wrong are solely and singularly defined by God and doing right and not doing wrong was equated with doing the Will of God. However, the philosophers of the Mu'tazilite school of Basra and Baghdad sought to develop an ontological concept of right and wrong, which in the very essence of being could and does determine right and wrong. Their argument was that by so doing, they were able to demonstrate the philosophical sophistication of the teachings of Islam which argued that the ontological Will of God was ultimately the source of all ethics.

At this juncture, not unlike what happened in the Jewish and subsequently the Christian traditions of theological ethics, Islam came in contact as well as conflict with Greek philosophy [9]. Whereas the traditionalists, namely the Mu'tazilites, sought only to stay within the framework of the Qur'an and the hadiths of the Prophet, Al'Kindi, the first truly philosophical ethicist within Islam, sought to embrace Greek philosophy and its metaphysical categories for defining and defending ethics and moral behavior.

As a result of these disputes and struggles, Islam for centuries wrestled with the problematic caused by the introduction of Greek philosophy into Islamic teaching. The high profile of Plato is not to be questioned here for he was acclaimed by many Muslim scholars as the apex of wisdom and philosophical insight into the nature of being. Plato's psychology, his definitions of the soul and the components which make up the human person, were embraced by many Muslim scholars, particularly and early by Abu Bakr al-Razi, and this movement towards Platonic categories has characterized much of Islamic theology ever since.

Al'Razi's emphasis upon "reason" as the paramount human characteristic suggests the influence of Plato on Islamic philosophical thought [10]. It is "reason," not passion or the hedonistic life of self-indulgence which determines the direction of a person's life towards God. But here we encounter a notion not fully embraced by the major schools of thought in Islam, namely, the notion of reincarnation. Yet, al'Razi and al'Kindi do not discount the possibility of individuals returning to this world after death. Death, however, they argue is a defining characteristic of the human person and this becomes a central teaching within Islam. Death is as characteristic of the human person as life and love. But in death, the human person meets God and answers to God for the life he has chosen to live, whether good or bad.

Whereas al'Kindi was the first philosopher of ethics in Islam, al'Farabi was the first systematic philosophical thinker, one who particularly set out to create a philosophical system of thought conversant with the Greeks and compliant with Islam teaching. He is particularly dependent upon, or at least obliged to, the work of Aristotle as relates to the fundamental human virtues, both practical and intellectual. The reliance upon the Greeks, especially Aristotle, has always been both evident and acknowledged by Islamic scholars. Al'Farabi, for example, is most dependent upon the nuancing of the concept of justice in the works of Aristotle and his insights proved most valuable to the political leaders of Islam well after his disappearance from the scene.

Ibn Sina, the spiritual successor of al-Farabi, came troublingly close to the Judaeo-Christian notion of an intermediary between God and man when he suggested, in the tradition of the Shi'ites, that the role of the caliph, who is indispensable to the distribution of justice within the state, is that of a "vicegerent" of God on earth! This approached heresy in the traditionalist's mind as encroaching upon the fundamental belief in the oneness and singularity of God in His relationship to every individual. This notion was defended as a logical extension of the psychological model of human personality devised by Plato.

The creative ingenuity of Islamic scholars during this time of transition is astounding. That they were willing, even eager, to employ and explore the Greek philosophical system and manipulate it, modify it, and adapt it to fit the Islamic understanding and experience of man and the world is both fascinating and admirable. Ibn Rushd, though at odds with many Muslim philosophers of the day, was keen to employ the popular Platonic understanding of the human person. The human soul, he explained, was comprised of the rational, the irascible, and the concupiscent, and these, in terms, corresponded to the fundamental virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance. The confluence of these does not, however, bring about true happiness but only a coupling of the contemplative life with the life of the intellect [11]. This is the unique Islamic contribution to the Platonic notion of human happiness. The contemplative life is not sufficient for a believing, practicing Muslim. A faithful Muslim must also be actively involved with his mind and his deeds for only therein can true fulfillment be found. Only in thinking and doing, only in a convergence of mind and action, can God be truly served. Service to God is the ultimate expression of happiness and fulfillment in this life which carries with it the promise of the life to come. And the supreme virtue of justice, says Ibn Miskawayh, comes from God Himself. It comes by way of submission to the holy law. Justice must be rendered by the faithful Muslim to all people everywhere as an expression of worshipful obedience to the Will of God Himself. This is man's duty to God and the world.

Al'Ghazali, the quintessential philosopher and ethicist, builds boldly upon the psychological model of Plato in his construction of an Islamic worldview. For al'Ghazali, happiness is the highest good and can be achieved in the form of either worldly good or otherworldly good. The latter is the highest for it is our ultimate goal in life in service to God. However, otherworldly good cannot be achieve alone, it must be accompanied and nurtured by worldly good which is constituted of the four fundamental virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. When combined with the bodily virtues, external virtues, and divine virtues, these virtues converge in the life of the servant of God to create the final virtue which is "divine support," nurturance from God for the virtue embodied in the life of the believing servant. The great mystic, al'Ghazali, recites the path to this fulfillment. It is found in the life of the faithful servant in his search for God. "Seeking after God" is the highest calling of all and must conform to two guiding principles, namely, the seeker must always be governed by the "divine law" of God, and the seeker must hold the search for God perpetually in his heart. *To obey the law of God and to forever seek after Him is the true road to fulfillment*. The passion for and of human love is the analogy for this quest for God and here the Jewish mystical tradition of the Hassids and the Christian mysticism of the medieval Carmelites find their fulfillment in the ethical theism of Islamic morality.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John H. Morgan, Ph.D. (Hartford Seminary), D.Sc. (College of Applied Science, London), Psy.D. (Foundation House, Oxford), is the Karl Mannheim Professor of the History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences at the Graduate Theological Foundation (IN) and Senior Fellow of Foundation House, Oxford (UK). He has held postdoctoral appointments to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, and has been a National Science Foundation Science Faculty Fellow at the University of Notre Dame. Three times he has been appointed postdoctoral Research Fellow to the University of Chicago. In 2010, he was a Visiting Scholar of the Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University and in 2011 has been

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