

Theodicy

Theodicy is a theological construct that attempts to answer the question why a benevolent and loving deity allows evil to exist and permeate the world. It also attempts to reconcile the apparent contradiction between a benevolent and merciful God and the presence of suffering and evil. In searching for an Islamic perspective of the topic, it is essential to first examine how Muslims have discussed it at the theological level. This is important because Islamic theological articulation on theodicy is interwoven to jurists' legal opinions on issues like responding to pain and suffering.

Islamic theodicy affirms God's munificence and absolute power. According to the Qur'an, the all-powerful God does not wrong people but that they wrong themselves. As the Qur'an states "God does not do even an atom's weight of injustice. A good deed is multiplied by God and richly rewarded. (4:40)" Other verses impute afflictions to human agency by stating that human beings suffer due to their acts of disobedience or wrongdoing. As verse 42:30 states, "Whatever hardship befalls you is the result of your own deeds. God pardons many of your sins." Thus construed, evil is seen as divine punishment for human moral and social transgressions.

According to the Qur'an, evil as a form of divine wrath can occur in this world or in the next. God has punished disbelievers by sending a flood (29:14), an earthquake (29:37), a violent storm (29:40), or a roaring wind (69:6). Such calamities have destroyed disbelievers because of their persistence in unbelief even after a prophet had been sent to warn them. However, there are verses in the Qur'an which suggest that God may be the source of evil. For example, verse 64:11 states, "No disaster strikes except by the permission of Allah. And whoever believes in Allah - He will guide his heart. And Allah is Knowing of all things."

The Mu'tazilites, one of the main theological schools in ninth/tenth-century Islam, argued

for the primacy of human reason and free will. The principle of divine justice was central to their theology which views the human intellect as capable of distinguishing between good and evil without any need of other forms of guidance like divine revelation. Accordingly, although the intellect may not fathom the reason for the existence of what it perceives to be evil, God has the best interests of His creatures at heart when He permits it.

The view that suffering imposed by God is either because of a punishment or a trial raises the question of why innocent children and animals suffer. Adults of sound mind are required to fulfill their religious and moral duties as they are subject to God's imposition of obligations (*taklif*). Consequently, they will either be rewarded or punished as a result of their deeds. Since they do not have the same rational capacity, children, the insane, and animals are not subjected to such obligations hence their suffering cannot be a punishment or trial. Some theologians believe that children suffer as an advance punishment for sins they will commit as adults. According to the Mu'tazilite scholar 'Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025), God imposes suffering upon children and animals because He wants to warn the adults near them. The children and animals will be compensated for this in the hereafter.

Shi'i theologians like al-Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022) and al-Sharif al-Murtada (d. 1044) held similar opinions about the imposition of suffering and its compensation. Al-Mufid, for example, states that God can do evil but He chooses not to. Other Shi'i theologians like Ibn Babuya (d. 991) state that our reasons for God imposing sufferings like the death of children should not cancel out what we know about Him: that God is wise and does not act unjustly. Since reason dictates that God is good and wise, we also know that all of His acts will be good even if we are not aware of why He does what He does. Thus, like the Mu'tazilis, Shi'i scholars acquit God of any wrongdoing.

The Ash‘arites, on the other hand, accentuated the absolute will and power of God. To uphold the belief in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity, they claimed that good and evil are not categories that can be rationally deduced; rather, they are based on what God decrees them to be. Accordingly, God’s decrees cannot be discerned by the human intellect; on the contrary, they must be extrapolated from the revelatory sources like the Qur’an and the Prophet’s paradigmatic conduct, the Sunna. Ash‘arites upheld the primacy of revelation over reason. For them everything in this world, good or bad, happens in accordance with God’s will. Based on this, they argued that God was the author of evil but since He was omnipotent He was free to act as He wills.

The Ash‘arite theodicy of determinism also claims that God intends poverty or illness for certain individuals, just as he intends wealth and well-being for others. Ash‘arite theologians like al-Ghazali (d. 1111) further maintained that humans do not have the right to ask God for an explanation of His actions. As God is the master of all things, He is entitled to impose pain without it being deserved or compensated for. Al-Ghazali declared that although we cannot know the reasons for God's actions, believers should be convinced that all afflictions from God in this world may contain secret blessings

Through state patronage and support, the Ash‘arites overcame the Mu‘tazilites in the eleventh century. Their theological opinions have, until modern times, dominated the Sunni religious landscape and have greatly impacted contemporary Islamic bioethics. This was largely in the form of an attitude of resignation, a byproduct of their belief in predestination.

Islamic Theodicy and Bioethics

To understand the influence of theodicy on Islamic bioethics, it is essential to comprehend the Islamic attitude toward pain and suffering. Since Islam is believed to be pervasive and comprises rules governing all of human conduct, the Islamic view of dealing with pain and human suffering has been deployed to discern rulings in the domain of Islamic bioethics. To start with, suffering is not viewed as incidental or evil; it has divine wisdom. It is construed as part of the divine plan in human spiritual and moral development and to test the resolve and faith of those who believe in God. As the Qur'an states, "Do people think that they will be left alone because they say: "We believe," and they will not be tested?" (29:2)

Other verses state that afflictions and calamities will come in different forms. God tries people by restricting their sustenance (89:16). According to verses 2:155-7, "We shall test you through fear, hunger, loss of life, property, and crops. (Muhammad), give glad news to the people who have patience who say, when afflicted with calamity: "To Allah We belong, and to Him is our return" They are those on whom (descend) blessings from Allah, and Mercy, and they are the ones that receive guidance." Being tried by these afflictions, people should exhibit their belief in God by patient endurance (Q 2:156, 177; 22:35; 31:17).

Islamic theodicy tries to reconcile human suffering with God's benevolence and grace by explaining that the trials and tribulations serve several purposes. They remind people of human fragility and that they should be grateful for good health. It is for this reason that when a Muslim is asked how s/he is, the normal response is, "Thanks be to God (*alhamdulillah*)." It is also argued that God imposes suffering to purge people of their sins, test their faith and patience. In Islam, theological issues like theodicy are intertwined with submission to God's will. Muslims are taught acceptance and submission in the face of pain, and to inculcate a sense of *tawakkul* or

acceptance of God's decree. The afflicted is also supposed to reflect on the positive role that suffering can play in self-development. Suffering is also seen as playing an important role in the process of developing the soul because, by placing complete trust in God, it helps align the human will with that of the divine.

Suffering is also seen as an opportunity to foster a closer relationship with God since it enables one to unveil and unfold spiritual qualities like inner strength through exercising patience (*sabr*) and developing a sense of complete trust in God's will (*tawakkul*) thereby deepening and strengthening the relationship with the divine. If there is no suffering then there is no chance to develop inner attributes like *sabr*. Thus, it is correct to say that, in the Islamic understanding, affliction in any form is seen as an indispensable component of a much greater plan, a good that will accrue to the afflicted one. The Qur'an frequently mentions the rewards for those who bear calamities with patience. Due to the fortitude and trust in God they exhibit, God sends His salutations to them (2:157); even the angels will salute them when they enter heaven (13:25).

This does not mean that one should accept suffering and illness passively. On the contrary, the afflicted should take all possible measures to seek remedy and remove the ailment. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said "... seek cure because God did not create a disease without creating its cure, except for one disease, senility."

Just as the Qur'an treats evil and human afflictions as the part of an overall plan for human spiritual and moral growth, traditions ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad also elaborate on theodicy and its ramifications on human beings. Traditions state that suffering caused by illness and death is a divinely ordained tool for testing and perfecting human beings. It is reported that Muhammad said that for each harm that a Muslim meets in the form of illness,

tiredness, sorrow, distress and pain, “even if it were the prick of a thorn,” God will grant remission of some of his or her sins. The Prophet is also reported to have said: “If God wants to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials” A closely related view is that those who are most loved by God suffer most.

The Ramifications of Islamic Theodicy on Islamic Bioethics

The discourse on the need to patiently endure the various forms of suffering is important in understanding the relationship between Islamic theodicy and bioethics. The Qur’an lays down strict ethical standards from which jurists extract rulings to regulate legal and bioethical conduct. For example, euthanasia or physician assisted suicide (PAS), has been prohibited by Muslim jurists since it is construed as suicide. This is despite the possibility that the prolongation of life for a person in a vegetative state may exert considerable financial and psychological burden on the family members.

PAS is prohibited since that is construed as opposing the divine decree that suffering will absolve the patient’s sins or give her/him a chance to develop the qualities of fortitude, patience and trust in God. It is also to be remembered that Islam teaches that human beings are stewards rather than owners of their bodies. Hence, any form of wilful or intentional death is prohibited since that would be violating the gift of life that they have been entrusted with.

Similarly, most jurists have ruled that brain-dead patients have to be kept alive if they have been placed on a life-support machine even if this entails considerable pain for the patient and the close relatives. This is based on the Qur’anic notion of the sanctity of human life. When asked if a person who has been pronounced brain-dead can be considered dead, Ayatollah Seestani, who is widely regarded as one of the most prominent jurists in the Shi’i world, appeals

to the concept of the common understanding of death. For him, the criterion in applying the term dead in so far as the application of religious laws are concerned is the common perception of the people, in the sense that they would call her/him “dead.” Since the patient is not technically dead, s/he has to be kept alive. Other jurists, like Ayatollah Fadlallah have ruled that the life-support machine of a brain-dead person whose state is irreversible can be turned off. The difference between the two scholars is based on how they define death. Seestani defines death as the cessation of the heart whereas Fadlallah defines death in terms of the cessation of the functioning of brain.

In determining how to deal with pain and suffering, Muslim jurists have invoked numerous principles established in Islamic legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*). These include the principles of no harm or injury is allowed in Islam (*la darar wa la dirar fi'l-Islam*), the principle of public good (*maslaha*), necessity (*darura*), and the principle that God wishes ease, not difficulties on humans (2:185).

The principle of *darura* (necessity) can be invoked in numerous cases. Despite the embarrassment psychological trauma it may cause, a female patient is permitted to be diagnosed and operated by a male physician, even if this requires him to operate on her private parts. Such a procedure would not be allowed under normal circumstances as male-female interaction and the exposure to the sexual parts of the opposite gender are strictly prohibited in the Islamic ethics of inter-gender relationships.

Based on the Qur’anic verses “One who kills an innocent soul has killed the whole of humanity” (5:32) and “Slay not your children for fear of poverty; We will provide for you and them. Surely the slaying of children is a grievous sin” (17:31), Muslim jurists have ruled that it is prohibited to abort a foetus unless the life of the mother is in danger. According to some jurists,

this ruling applies even if the foetus is defective. However, other jurists have opined that this ruling is contingent on when ensoulment occurs. Hanafi jurists have claimed that abortion is allowed until the first trimester, since, in their estimation, this is the time of ensoulment. Most Sunni jurists have denied personhood to the pre-ensoulment fetus and have permitted abortion at that stage. This is also premised on the tradition that no pre-ensoulment fetus will be resurrected on the day of judgement.

Shi'i jurists and some Sunni jurists have disagreed. They have ruled that since ensoulment occurs at conception, abortion is not allowed unless the life of the mother is in danger. Hence, even if she is raped, most jurists rule that the mother is required to give birth to and wean an innocent child and patiently endure the social torment of bringing up a child out of wedlock. This is also seen as God's test on her resolve to protect an innocent life.

Most jurists opine that abortion is not allowed even if it is known that the child will be deformed since that is a state that has been decreed by God which the parents have to patiently endure. Here, the principles of bearing sufferings and resigning one's will to God's decree and the need to honor the sanctity of all human life will override the difficulties of caring for a deformed child. Interestingly, the Islamic Juridical Council has recently approved abortion of embryos that have been known to suffer from Down's syndrome.

In the case of organ donation, jurists who have permitted it have had to contend with two competing considerations: the psychological trauma of the relatives to see organs removed from their loved one and the benefit it may give to one receiving the organ. In this case, jurists have ruled that the *maslaha* (benefit) outweighs the suffering. However, jurists have also argued that it is permissible to donate an organ as long as it is not detrimental to one's health and well-being. This is based on the Qur'anic verse stating that saving one life is equivalent to saving humanity (5:32). Even here, the right of discretion (donating an organ) has to be measured against the

possible harm (*darar*) to oneself or to the family (e.g. if the donor is the breadwinner) that could be inflicted by donating an organ. However, he loses this right under the principle of no harm nor harassment if there is a possibility that he will be harmed by such an act. This overrides the principle of right of discretion over one's organs.

The question of whether to end the life of a terminally patient or endure considerable financial expenses and personal trauma by keeping him/her alive artificially is an issue that has yet to be resolved among Muslim jurists. Whereas Islamic revelatory sources talk of saving life and accepting death with patience they have very little to say regarding ending the life of a patient who is terminally ill or one who is in a vegetative state. For some jurists, since God gives life and takes it away at the appointed time, any suffering until the appointed time comes has to be born patiently. Life is seen as a divine trust and cannot be terminated by human intervention since this would be violating the sanctity of life and challenging the divine decree. A person dies when it is written for him/her to do so (3:185; 29:57).

Bibliography

‘Abdul Hadi al-Hakim, *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West in Accordance with the Edicts of Ayatollah al-Udhma as-Sayyid Ali al-Husaini as-Seestani*, translated by Sayyid

Muhammad Rizvi. London: Imam ‘Ali Foundation, 1999.

Heemskerck, Margaretha “Pain.” *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe.

Leiden: Brill, 2004

McDermott, Martin. *The Theology of Shaykh al-Mufid*. Beirut, 1978.

Al-Mufid, Muhammad b. Muhammad. *Al-Amali. Awa'il al-Maqalat fi al-Madhahib wa'l Mukhtarat*. Tabriz, 1950.

Sachedina, Abdulaziz. *Islamic Biomedical Ethics: Principles and Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Watt, Montgomery. *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 1973.

Liyakat Takim

McMaster University