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ETHICS AND THE DIGNITY OF MAN

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The question of the dignity of man is mainly a problem of religion and ethics. Different branches of science that take man as a subject of inquiry do not - and as a matter of fact cannot - busy themselves with man as a spiritual being. Science has no means to dwell upon the spiritual inherent in man. It tells us that man is so and so and does so and so. Science never tells us what sort of creature man ought to try to be and how he ought to behave.

Classical ethics, i.e. moral philosophy has always occupied itself with the valuation of things, persons, characters and the voluntary actions of man. Religion does the same sort of valuation, although it has some other fundamental questions. Having the above-mentioned function of ethics in mind, we may divide ethical theories into two main classes : Theories of values, and theories of moral obligation. The first ones tell us what is worthwhile in life, whereas the others tell us what we, as moral beings, ought to do so as to attain what is worthwhile. There are still more comprehensive theories which deal with such questions as the value and the uniqueness of man, and the ultimate meaning of life. Now, in the analysis and the valuation of any given culture, the question of man as moral being has the absolute priority and importance.

What is man? Well, the answer to this question, as we all know, has always varied from age to age, culture to culture and even person to person. «He is a viceregent of God» for the Kur'an. «A useless passion» for an existentialist. «An animal that produces and consumes» for some other ideologies. «A combination of physico - chemical substances» for a simple minded scientist. Unfortunately, the wrong emphasis of valuations of man and life vis-a-vis wealth, material welfare and so forth is quite widespread nowadays, Therefore, it is not surprising to see that man is described as «industrial or technological man, stuffed

man one-dimensional man, alienated man lonely man etc.¹» Such an attitude and description is no doubt very unethical indeed.

In the following lines I will try to say something about the main characteristics of «The Moral Man of the Kur'ân», and the dignity of man vis-a-vis Islâm. As we all know, the Kur'ân is a Book about man. To use the terminology of the holy scripture, «it is a guidance for mankind»². According to the Kur'ân, man is a unique creature. Now to call something 'unique' is to emphasise differences rather than similarities. The things that differentiate man from the rest of creation have amply been described in so many verses of the Kur'ân. For instance, in the story of the creation of Adam³, man is described as a being who has rationality, understanding and will. From one point of view, man is just like any other created being. He is a natural creature moulded out of clay. But from another point of view, he is unique, since God says: «I breathed My spirit into him»⁴. This means that man is composed of mud and divine spirit. He is also a God - taught creature. After the biological completion of man's existence, God «taught him all the names»⁵, i.e. all that is required to make him a knowing being. In another verse it is said that God «taught man, that he knew not»⁶. Now, the nobility and superiority of man over other creatures, including angels, derive from knowledge which enables him to understand himself, his universe and his Creator. In fact, he is the one who tells himself who he is. No creature - except man - ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life. This is one of the reasons for our considering man as unique, certainly on earth, and probably in the whole universe.

Again, man is unique because he is the bearer in the world of the heavy responsibility of not only understanding but also free - will. The Kur'ân says that he is the bearer of «amâna»

(1) For the evaluation of such description see, Dr. C. Iqbal, «The Ethics of the Prophet and the Modern Man», a paper read in the First International Congress on Seerat, Pakistan, 1976.

(2) Bakara, 185.

(3) Bakara, 30.

(4) Hicr, 29.

(5) Bakara, 30.

(6) 'Alaq, 4.

(Trust) which is sometimes translated as «reason», «responsibility» or «free - will»⁷. We read in the story of creation of Man that Adam was told by God not to approach the forbidden Tree. Such an act of commandig would be meaningless if Adam were incapable of not obeying the command. In an indirect way, the prohibition in question indicates that Adam was face to face with the reality of disobedience and thus sin. Now, wrongdoing and the state of sin are the effect as well as the condition, of freedom. This means that moral evil begins with moral freedom Adam was not free, if by it we mean pure spontaneity. Freedom is the creation of character by character, self by self. No doubt, we do not start from the absolute zero. Adam was created and we are all born - with some potentialities the realization of which is considered is the sole aim of moral struggle. The in-built potentialities however, only qualify or limit man's freedom, and do not determine it all - in - all. The world existed long before us and before the Father of human race. Therefore, our liberty is qualified by some factors arising out of our selves, the limitation of our individuallities, the necessities of our lives and so on. Thus absolute freedom is but a myth.

The first Man was not free to possess or not to possess the capacity of knowledge. As we have just pointed out, Adam was a God - taught being. This process of teaching and instructing should be understood and interpreted as a directive factor, and not as a totally determining force. Otherwise God's prohibiting adam not to commit wrongdoing would be absurd if Adam was not free to choose or not to choose between the act of obedience and disobedience. Despite some difficult theological questions, one can say that by giving man liberty and conscience, God willingly abdicated a part of His omnipotence in favour of His creatures; and this represents the spark of the Spirit of God in man.

The existence of knowledge and free will in man makes the human condition very problematic indeed. In fact, man lives in an existential tension. His being stretches out over the distance between the baked clay and the divine spirit In him there are the forces of integration as well as disintegration. The combination of the opposing tendencies in man's nature creates motion - or a dialectic if you like - which results in a constant

(7) Ahzâb, 72

struggle. It is due to the existence of free will, that man has, the inner power to transform his human condition from the stage of the irrational self which, as the Kur'ân says, «incites man to evil»⁸ to the stage of «self - reproaching self»⁹, and ultimately to the stage where the self attains a complete «satisfaction»¹⁰. Now, such a transformation is possible, since man can act against his own instinctual nature, something no other creature seems to be able to do. This also shows that man is not a one-dimensional being attached to a single stage of existence,

There are many verses in the Kur'ân that show how the human condition can be smooth and bright, and can also be gloomy and miserable. Sometimes the opposing states of man's existence is summed up in one and the same verse. Let us read some of them :

«We indeed created man in the fairest stature then we restored him the lowest of the low...»¹¹

«We have honoured the children of Adam and carried them on land and sea, and provided them with good things, and preferred them greatly over many of those we created.»¹²

«If you count God's blessing, you will never number it; surely man is sinful, unthankful.»¹³

It is clear that the full responsibility of man's becoming this or that sort of person lies ultimately in his hands although he usually blames others for his own failure, as beautifully stated in the following verse:

«And when we let man taste mercy from us, he rejoices in it; but if some evil befalls him for that his own hands have forwarded, then surely man is unthankful.»¹⁴

Now it is time to say a few words about man's social responsibility which is directly connected with the question of the

(8) Yûsuf, 53.

(9) Kiyâma, 2.

(10) Facr, 27.

(11) Tin, 4.

(12) Isrâ. 73.

(13) İbrâhim, 38.

(14) Şûrâ. 48.

dignity of man. The application of the Islamic idea of viceroy (khalifa) and Trust (amâna) to the social realm must lead to the emergence of a social philosophy that stresses human equality, distributive justice and so on. Islamic social philosophy - with its motto 'One God and One Humanity' - is but a direct consequence of Kur'ânic conception of man. Man can realize his God - given potentialities only in a communal life. He, in order to see the full meaning of human existence, ought to have an active relation with social and natural environment. Goodness, or what the Kur'an calls birr and taqwâ is a social rather than individual achievement. The following Kur'ânic statement is very clear about this:

It is not goodness (or 'righteousness') that ye turn your faces to the East and to the West, but true goodness is this : To believe in God and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets; to give of one's substance, however cherished, to kinsmen and orphans, the needy, the traveller, beggars; and to ransom the slave; to perform the prayer, to pay the alms...¹⁵

Practically all major ethical terms have social connotations. Talking of generosity, courage, truth, faithfulness and so on would be meaningless, if there were no one to whom to assist or tell the truth etc.

Man's ethical progress starts with some sense of self - respect and goes to further stages of development by treating others not as a means but as an end. Man, in order to be a truly moral being, ought to «be saved from the pittiness of his own self», as the Kur'an says. He is an open creature capable of seeing others in the same way as he sees himself. He feels that he belongs to a community the destiny of which is very much tied up with the destiny of his own. Thus to be good is not enough; man ought to work hard to make others good as well. He is the being who is able not only to understand his natural and social surroundings, but to change them. To use the Kur'ânic expression, man ought to remove the «corruption» (fesâd) and implant goodness, and thus «to reform the earth.» It is because of such capacity of man that the Kur'an says:

«He (God) has subjected to you what is in the heavens and

(15) Bakara, 177.

what is in the earth, all together from God. Surely in that are signs for a people who reflect¹⁶».

Muslims, individually as well as collectively, are in charge of establishing a viable, egalitarian, ethically based social order. To ignore this collective responsibility might invite, as the Kur'an says, a total destruction. Those who neglected their responsibilities and let corruption of whatever kind take place had to face the «judgement of history». They were destroyed, says the Kur'an, and «neither the heavens nor the earth wept for them¹⁷». Now corruption can flourish in any field of life, although the term has an overwhelming moral sense. Moral laxity, economic exploitation, racialism and so many other evils have their shares in the coming into existence of corrupted social theories and practices. In a corrupted social frame work it becomes almost impossible for individuals to preserve their moral integrity and intellectual honesty. Even the use of scientific technology and economic growth, although in themselves have nothing to do with the spread of corruption, contribute to the degradation of man's dignity. No doubt, the moral man of the Kur'an ought to work for the growth of science and technology on which the present economic order depends. But he ought never allow himself to be a mere product of amoral and nonreligious factors of human culture. The moral man should be in a position to redefine the authentic development in moral terms. He has to make it very clear that to be a «man of time» is not only to become more powerful and prosperous but to become more ethical i. e. faithful, honest, just, tolerant kind and so on. His task is very difficult indeed, but there is no reason for him to be pessimistic. The Word of God clearly promises the victory of the right.

For the Kur'an it is «The Morally Best» who shall «inherit the earth» and not the physically strongest. In a moving passage it is said that evil is like a foam, and the «foam on the top of a torrent disappears, and that which is beneficial to mankind (the alluvium) settles down upon the earth¹⁸». The universe is a creation of a good, just and merciful Creator; thus it cannot be ethically neutral towards the establishment of rightness and truth.

(16) Cásiya, 12—15.

(17) Dukhán, 29.

(18) Ra'd, 17.