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Islamic Ethics: Is Islam a Religion of Peace?

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Introduction

I first visited the United States of America in 2004. I have visited four different states, and I was asked the same question in every state—“where are you from?” To my surprise, none of the people who asked me that question knew of Syria or Damascus, even though it is mentioned in the Bible. Today, after nearly twelve years, everyone knows where Syria is. Syria did not become famous for the right reasons; actually, it became famous because of violence, Islam, and ISIS.

At the same time, many terms, such as Islamophobia, Radical Islamic Jihad, and Islamic terrorist, appear in the media and create confusion in the minds of the listeners. People hear that Islam is a peaceful religion and ISIS has nothing to do with Islam. Others point to ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Harakat Al-Shabab, Boko Haram, Abou Sayaf, and the recent attacks in Europe and the US and conclude that those are Muslims. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to offer clarity to this confusion by appealing to a philosophical objective standard to examine the nature of Allah, and his commands.¹ Logically speaking, if the authoritative Islamic literature predominantly describes Allah as good, loving, and peaceful, then the religion of Islam should be plausibly regarded as a religion of peace. However, if goodness is generally shown to be arbitrary, ambiguous, and defined in conflicting terms, then several objections may arise against the theology of the god who commands it.

The Euthyphro Dilemma: An Objective Moral Standard

This study shall answer an epistemological question: can the reader know that Islam is a

¹ Allah means in Arabic God. Arab Christians and Muslims use this word to refer to God even though they are referring to two different divine beings; however, for the purpose of this study, I will be referring to Allah as the god of Islam. Whether Islam is a religion of peace is closely connected to the nature of Allah.

religion of peace? In the Arabic world, people's first reaction to any information is the question, "Who told you so? Or who said so?" as if they are waiting for a reference to a trustworthy person to authenticate the news. In the western world, however, the epistemological question takes another form. People ask, "How do you know?" and the expected response is some *thing* (not a person), such as a book, an experience, or a certain measurement.

The Euthyphro Dilemma provides a similar example in the struggle between the *who* question (the person) and the *what* (the measurement). In fact, it combines them both. The first horn of the dilemma deals with a person and the second with an order coming from that person.

Since the Euthyphro Dilemma is an acultural measurement—it is Mediterranean, but many Western scholars adopted it—it can be applied as a neutral objective ethical standard. In fact, it is a great tool that will help the reader to make several distinctions between the good and the right, the nature of God and his commands, and ultimately can help answer the question of whether Islam is a religion of peace.

The Euthyphro Dilemma of the 21st Century

The context of the Euthyphro Dilemma introduces a religious element into the discussion of ethics. Disputes of the 21st century as Louise Antony puts it, "Translated into contemporary terms, the question Socrates is asking is this: Are morally good actions morally good simply in virtue of God's favoring them? Or does God favor them because they are—independently of his favoring them—morally good?"² The modified version of the classic dilemma can be read in this way: Is something moral because God commands it, or does God command what is moral?

² Louise Antony, "Atheist as Perfect Piety," in *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 71.

However, this dilemma does not concern goodness only because morality is a wide term. It could refer to goodness, or it could refer to rightness. Goodness and rightness are distinct, especially if rightness is associated with moral obligation. Not everything that is good to do is obligatory to do. The first horn of the dilemma is called the pure will theory or voluntarism, and the second horn is called the guided will theory or non-voluntarism. Both, the pure and guided theories can be analyzed according to the good or the right. The pure will theory of the good says: something is good because God commands it, and of the right says: something is right/obligatory because God commands it. In the same sense, the guided will theory of the good says: God commands something because it is good, and of the right says: God commands something because it is right/obligatory.

Voluntarism Concerning the Good

Voluntarists in general believe that God rules the world in accordance to his commands, and judges all human beings, whether they have acknowledged God's authority or not, by their obedience to that law.³ However, voluntarism with respect to the good endorses the view that an act is good in virtue of God commanding it. In other words, if God chooses an action and defines it as good, then that action should be regarded as a good action. This theory is also called the Divine Command Theory (DCT) according to the good. According to Antony "'Good' for the divine command theorist is synonymous with 'commanded by God.'"⁴ This leads to the understanding that there is no goodness or badness apart from God's definitions. If that is the case, then there is nothing inherently good or bad, and thus nothing can explain God's choice of

³ John Hare, *God's Command* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 52.

⁴ Antony, "Atheist as Perfect Piety," 72.

which act to endorse and which act to prohibit. This type of theory requires blind (fideistic) faith in the nature and character of God.

Voluntarism According to the Right

Voluntarism concerning the right (or moral obligation) is synonymous to a divine command theory of moral obligation. On this view, an act is obligatory because it is commanded by God. If the nature of God is good, then God would not order an evil command. So, if the command of God is constrained by the good nature of God, then no act rendered obligatory by divine command is likely to be irremediably evil.

Non-Voluntarism or the Guided Will Theory

This horn of the dilemma affirms that God commands something because it is good (or because it is right, depending on which variant of the theory is on offer). However, what makes the guided will theory unattractive to many theists in general and to Muslims in particular is that it formulates goodness or rightness on grounds independent of God.

Distinction between Voluntarism and Extreme Voluntarism

An important distinction must be made at this point between voluntarism and extreme voluntarism, for DCT according to the right is different from DCT according to both the good and the right. As stated earlier, DCT according to the right is a DCT of moral obligations, whereas the DCT according to the good and right is an extreme version of voluntarism.

Extreme voluntarism is endorsed by certain philosophers. The most famous one is William of Ockham. His ethical theory has two parts. The first is positive moral knowledge, which “contains human and divine laws that obligate one to pursue or to avoid things that are good or evil only because they are prohibited or commanded by a superior whose role it is to

establish the laws.”⁵ This knowledge contains laws that are similar to the governmental laws, which are regulated by reason and enforced by the authorities such as police officers and juries. The second is the non-positive moral knowledge, which directs human actions without any precept from a superior, as principles that are either known per se or by experience.⁶ Therefore, in Ockham’s opinion, ethical theory includes divine command (positive morality) as well as principles (non-positive morality).

There are several interpretations of Ockham’s ethical theory. For the purpose of this study, I will follow the predominant view of Ockham, which expresses the extreme voluntarism view, and apply it on Islam.

In the emphasis of radical voluntarism, that nothing can restrict God’s absolute divine power.⁷ God establishes all truths, including necessary truths.⁸ Consequently, there really is no such things as necessary truth because God could make them untrue at any time. Alvin Plantinga calls this concept “Universal Possibilism: the view that everything is possible.”⁹ On such a view, God can create, order, and define according to his own approvals. If morality, as Ockham seems to affirm, depends entirely on the will of God in Ockhamistic fashion, then it seems that even an act like hating God could have its evil characteristics separated from it and become a good act if God wills it.

⁵ Peter King, “Ockham’s Ethical Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, Paul Vincent Spade, ed., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 227-228.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Simin Rahimi, “A Resolution to the Euthyphro Dilemma,” *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 50, Issue 5, August 12, 2009, 754.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Does God have a nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 90.

Allah: His Nature

To apply the previous analysis on Islam, a person will discover that Allah is the source of everything, including morality. For instance, in Surah 4:78 Muhammed says, “if some good reaches them, they say, ‘This is from Allah,’ but if some evil befalls them, they say, ‘This is from you (O Muhammad) (ﷺ).’ Say: ‘All things are from Allah.’”¹⁰ Muhammad explains that everything, including good and bad, is coming from Allah because the people accused him of being the source and reason of their afflictions.

There is another famous Surah in the Quran called Surah Al-Falaq,¹¹ which shows that evil is created by God directly (Surah 113:1-2). Muslims repeat the verses of this Surah every time they face bad or evil circumstances because Muhammad asks his followers to seek refuge with Allah from “the evil that He has created.”¹² This Surah states clearly that evil is created directly by Allah and not indirectly through the freedom of the will.

The Names of Allah

The names of Allah have a very significant place in the whole system of Islam because they designate divine perfection, they tell people about the character of Allah, and they allow people, if they follow them, to go heaven. Muhammad says, “Allah has ninety-nine names, i.e.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all qur’anic passages referenced are in Translation of the Meaning of the *Noble Qur’an in English Language* (Madinah, KSA: King Fahed Complex, 1984).

¹¹ Translation: the daybreak.

¹² It is very important to mention the usage of the word “create” in the Arabic language. The general use of this word is ascribed only to God (Surah 35:3). Arabs do not ascribe the word to people who create something new; they use the word “make” instead. For instance, when a person creates a new software or a theme, Arabs say he/she made a software or a theme. The word “create” in Arabic connotes creating something out of nothing; something was not existent before and came into being because of the creator, and only Allah who can do that.

one-hundred minus one, and whoever knows them will go to Paradise.”¹³ If God has the best names, then, logically speaking, he should possess the best divine nature and characteristics as well. This is to emphasize that the names of Allah are not merely arbitrary names; they are reflective of their bearer’s essential traits.

Ad-Dar

The first name to discuss is *Ad-Dar*. It means “the harmful,” and it is not mentioned in the Quran in the form of name, but as an act that Allah is performing. The dictionary of the Quran explains the gerund form of the word *Ad-Dar*, which is *Ad-Darar* (harming) as the opposite of profiting.¹⁴ In Surah 6:17 Muhammad says, “And if Allah touches you with harm, none can remove it but He, and if He touches you with good, then He is able to do all things.” An earlier section in this paper discussed that Allah is responsible for good and evil, for he tempts people with good and bad trials (Surah 21:35). Therefore, verse 6:17 should not come as a surprise, for it does not emphasize this fact only, but it affirms that Allah is baleful and beneficial at the same time.

Al-Mudil

The literal meaning of this word is “the person who leads other people astray from the truth.”¹⁵ The dictionary of the Quran explains that the gerund of the word “Al-Mudil” comes

¹³ Abi Abdullah Muhammad Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Hadeeth no. 2736, (Damascus, Syria: Dar Ibn Kathir, 2002) 675. “الله تسعة وتسعين اسما، مئة إلا واحدة، من أحصاها دخل الجنة.” it is also mentioned in Hadeeth no. 6410, 1597.

¹⁴ “Ad-Darar,” *Al-Mujam’ Al-Ishtiqaqi Al-Muwasel Lil Quran Al-Karim* (Cairo, Egypt: Al-Addab Library, 2010), 1277.

¹⁵ “Dhallala,” *Lissan Al-Arab Dictionary*, 390. The root of the word Mudil is Dhallala.

from *Dalala*, which is the opposite of going in the right direction or being guided by the truth.¹⁶

It is important to note that the word *Al-Mudil* is similar to the name *Ad-Dar*, which has been discussed earlier. They both do not appear in the name form of the word in the Quran, but in the gerund form. However, the verb *Darra* (ضَرَّ), which is the root of the name *Ad-Dar*, is mentioned in several places in the Quran (Surah 6:39, 74, 140; 4:88).

Al-Nabulsi notes that these two names should not stand by themselves; they should be mentioned with their opposite names. *Ad-Dar* with *Al-Nafe'* (the harmful and the Beneficial), and *Al-Mudil* with *Al-Muhdi* (the misleader and who leads to truth).¹⁷ In other words, Al-Nabulsi stresses the composite names because the names *Al-Mudil* and *Ad-Dar* by themselves have aberrant connotations that cannot be ascribed to God.¹⁸

The composite names imply contradiction in the nature of Allah for how is it a good thing for the people to believe in a harmful and misleading divine being? The name, attribute, and act reflect the essence and the traits of its bearer, in the same manner, Allah's attributes as the harmful and the misleader. These two names reflect a direct contradiction to his goodness. To sum up, extreme voluntarism, which defines goodness according to the will and commands of Allah, combined with a bad nature, cannot produce a religion of peace.

Allah: His Commands

If Allah is a good god, consequently, his commands are supposed to be good. It is

¹⁶ "Dalala," *Al-Mujam' Al-Ishtiqaqi Al-Muwassel Lil Quran Al-Karim* (Cairo, Egypt: Al-Addab Library, 2010), 1297.

¹⁷ Al-Muhdi is the opposite of the Al-Mudil. It means the one who lead others to the truth.

¹⁸ Rateb Al-Nabulsi, "Al-Aqida Al-Islamiya: Asma' Allah Al-Husna," *Al-Nabulsi Encyclopedia*, 1995, accessed November 7, 2016, URL: <http://www.nabulsi.com/blue/ar/art.php?art=3596&id=55&sid=600&ssid=601&ssid=603>.

illogical to believe that a good God might issue an evil command; therefore, the next section will discuss some of the putative commands of Allah that are mentioned primarily in the Quran and Hadeeths.¹⁹

Allah commands Muhammad (in the Quran and Hadeeths) to fight and kill the unbelievers for the purpose of spreading Islam. This Hadeeth is repeated in several books to show its exigency. Muhammad asserts, “I have been commanded that I should fight against people till they declare that there is no god but Allah, and when they profess it that there is no god but Allah, their blood and riches are guaranteed protection on my behalf.”²⁰ This Hadeeth is very comprehensive, for it is a divine command issued to Muhammad to fight all people who do not believe in Allah. It does not specify a certain group of people; instead, it includes all who do not believe in the god of Islam.

There is another detestable command that Muhammad asked his followers to do during wartime. The Hadeeth says, “We used to participate in the holy battles led by Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ) and we had nothing (no wives) with us. So we said, ‘Shall we get ourselves castrated?’ He forbade us that and then allowed us to marry women with a temporary contract.”²¹ This Hadeeth is interesting because it shows that the people around Muhammad were worried about their sexual desires and they did not want to commit adultery; they were even willing to castrate themselves so they did not commit a sin. However, Muhammad lowers the standards of his

¹⁹ Sahih Muslim and Sahih Bukhari are the second major official books in Islamic literature after the Quran, according to the Sunni sect of Islam. Any Hadeeth (collective talks based on Prophet Muhammad’s words and acts) is treated as authentic and authoritative as the Quran.

²⁰ Abi Hussai Muslim Al-Nisabouri, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadeeth no. 35, (Al-Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar Tiba, 2006) 32. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadeeth no. 392, 108. Abi Issa Al-Tirmidhi, *Al-Jami’ Al-Kabeer*, Vol. 3, Bashir Ma’loof, ed., Hadeeth 3341, (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, 1996), 365.

²¹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadeeth no. 5073, 1294. Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadeeth no. 1404, 632.

fighters and commands them to marry—according to the law of Allah and himself—to avoid adultery.

To some people, a temporary marriage license might seem an act of adultery because the goal of such marriage is not to make a family, but to fulfil the sexual desire of the man. In such a marriage, the man is not responsible for his wife's needs nor his future child if she gets pregnant; he marries for short period of time in exchange for money.²² This type of marriage looks like Halal (legal) prostitution, for marriage does not become legal just because it happened in the Islamic way (according to the law of Allah and his prophet), nor because of a paper or contract between the both parties. On the contrary, virtue is observed when a person represses his wrong desires for the sake of pleasing God and takes good care of his family.

The last immoral command is very interesting because it breaks all moral standards. During Muhammad's days, it was known that the mother who cannot breast-feed her child could ask a special strong woman in her tribe to feed him/her. The child will be known as son/daughter in suckling to the feeding mother, and she should treat him/her as her own child. He/she also will be a brother/sister to her children; therefore, these children were not allowed to marry from their suckling mother's children. Muhammad took advantage of this custom when a lady came to him complaining that a man called Salim is entering her house and her husband is not happy about it. The solution that the messenger of Allah gave was: "Suckle him. She said: How can I suckle him as he is a grown-up man? Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) smiled and said: I already know that he is a young man Muslim."²³ This command is very inappropriate by all standards. I remember an

²² Shams Ad-Deen Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jame' Liahkam Al-Quran* (Beirut, Lebanon: Al-Resalah, 2006), vol. 6, 219.

²³ Abi Hussain Muslim Al-Nisabouri, *Sahih Muslim*, (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar Tibah, 2006), book 17, Hadeeth no. 1453, 664.

Egyptian TV anchor, whose name was Hala Sarhan, who invited an Islamic scholar Dr. Abed Al-Muhdi from Al-Azhar University to ask him about the meaning and authenticity of this Hadeeth. Her words were, "I am confused, tell me what to do with the cameramen and directors that I meet every day." Dr. Abed Al-Muhdi asked, "What to do? Do what it is written in the Hadeeth." His answer was an honest Islamic prescription to Hala's problem because he was imitating Muhammad and applying his commands without any twist or change to the original meaning. Muslims should face the fact that a prophet, who claims to be sent by a good God, is asking women to breastfeed other grown up men, this cannot be a good prophet coming from a good god. The god who forbids adultery and allows adult breast-feeding is not a good god.

Conclusion

The extreme voluntarism in Islam requires a fideistic type of faith in the nature and character of God because a good God would not and could not intend, determine, or issue a bad command. However, the Quran places much emphasis upon the dependence of all human beings on divine guidance. The theme of confused and lost people being guided by the book runs throughout the Quran. When divine guidance appears, Muslims are obligated to surrender their personal preferences to this guidance. However, a fideistic type of faith in a bad god is very dangerous because the person is required to follow and obey evil instructions. The person would feel entitled to harm others because of God's commands. The harm itself is not considered bad anymore because the person is following the divine purpose.

What is more dangerous, voluntarism according to the right endorses the view that an act is obligatory because it is commanded by God. The danger about such a theory lies in the fact that extreme voluntarism makes even the worst commands of God obligatory because they are commanded by God. When this theory is applied to Islam, it makes the doctrine of militant

Jihad, temporary marriage during war, and the adult breastfeeding commands obligatory. These acts become the duties of Muhammad (and the Muslims after him) because Allah commanded them. For whatever Allah or Muhammad command, it is the duty and the obligation of the people to obey; otherwise, they will be treated as disobeyers and will not gain access to heaven in the afterlife.

This analysis concludes that it is extremely difficult to argue that Islam is a religion of peace because it requires a blind faith and trust in the nature and character of an arguably bad god.

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