

Human responsibility and its denial

by Zahid Aziz¹

It is well known that the Holy Quran teaches again and again that each individual will have to account before Allah, in the after-life, for his or her actions done in this life. Several passages may be quoted from the Quran to this effect, even though it seems superfluous to do so considering how commonly this teaching is known. For example:

“And We have made every man’s actions to cling to his neck, and We shall bring forth to him on the day of Resurrection a book which he will find wide open. Read your book. Your own soul is sufficient as a reckoner against you this day.” — 17 : 13– 14

“And the book is placed, and you see the guilty fearing for what is in it, and they say: O woe to us! what a book is this! It leaves out neither a small thing nor a great one, but numbers them (all), and they find what they did confronting them. And your Lord wrongs not anyone.” — 18 : 49

“This is Our record that speaks against you with truth. Surely We wrote what you did.” — 45 : 29

“And We will set up a just balance on the day of Resurrection, so no soul will be wronged in the least. And if there be the weight of a grain of mustard seed, We will bring it. And Sufficient are We to take account.” — 21 : 47

“So whoever does good deeds and is a believer, there is no rejection of his effort, and We surely write it down for him.” — 21 : 94.

“And the judging on that day will be just; so as for those whose good deeds are heavy, they are the successful. And as for those whose good deeds are light, those are they who ruined their souls because they disbelieved in Our messages.” — 7 : 8–9

“Did I not charge you, O children of Adam, that you serve not the devil? Surely he is your open enemy. And that you serve Me. This is the right way. And certainly he led astray numerous people from among you. Could you not then understand?” — 36 : 60–62

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These and numerous other passages makes it abundantly clear that it is a fundamental teaching of Islam that human beings will be held responsible by God for their actions.

We often hear people justifying some act of theirs by claiming that God had ordained for them to do it, and in fact justifying their whole lives in this way. To take one example out of many, recently a singer in Pakistan said in a television interview that the entire course of her performing career had been determined by Allah. Is she suggesting that her own desires, ambitions and choices played no part in her career, or is it that all decisions she made were dictated by Allah?

Taking another example, a political leader in Pakistan who was, a few years ago, a very eligible bachelor on the international scene, had told the people of his country that, due to his patriotism, he would marry none other than a woman from Pakistan. When he subsequently married a woman from a foreign land, he explained it by saying that it was all part of God's plan, and not his own plan. Did his own wishes not enter into it? Did he really marry the woman entirely against his own inclination and in obedience to some command by Allah? Was it just like the example of Abraham who obviously could not have wanted to perform the act of sacrificing his own son but was ready to do it purely in obedience to Allah's command!

One wonders whether such Muslims, of whom there are many, who consider all their own life decisions to be directly guided by Allah, ever do what is called *istighfar* in Islam, that is, the seeking of Allah's forgiveness for wrongs and sins committed. How could they have ever committed any sin when they were following God's bidding to the letter in each and every affair!

If their views and attitudes are right, then the passages of the Holy Quran quoted above become meaningless. Why will Allah confront individuals with their deeds written in a book and ask them to judge for themselves, if it is Allah Who is responsible for those deeds? Why will a person be afraid to face his book of deeds, as stated in 18:49, if all he needs to do is to respond that God made me do all this? If people are not responsible for their actions, how can their record speak *against* them (45:29)? The idea of judging with a just balance and taking into account even the smallest of deeds also becomes purposeless. According to 21:94, human *effort* to do good is rewarded. If deeds are all being determined and enforced by God, the concept of human effort has no meaning.

From the last passage quoted above, 36:60–62, which addresses those who would be adjudged guilty in the after-life, we learn that Allah directed all human

beings not to follow the devil, but many of them paid no heed to this advice even after seeing the fate of others who had been led astray by the devil. They are, therefore, treated by God as responsible for their actions, and any suggestion by them that it was God Who decided the actions they committed is baseless.

'Trick' arguments

According to the Quran, the idol-worshippers of the Holy Prophet's time put forward the argument that "if Allah had pleased we would not have set up partners with Him" (6 : 148). They attributed their own action of worshipping idols to the will of Allah. The reply given to them is:

"Have you any knowledge so you would bring it forth to us? You only follow a conjecture and you only tell lies. ... if He had pleased He would have guided you all." — 6 : 148–149.

Just because people are able to do something does not mean that it reflects the pleasure of God. That is mere conjecture or what might be called trick arguments.

I was asked a question about how to refute a similar trick argument put forward by a murderer. I am not sure if this was a real example or merely hypothetical. The murderer claims that as the death of the man whom he murdered had been pre-ordained by Allah to happen at the appointed place and time, therefore he bears no responsibility for the act and should not be executed. The response to him can be to just turn his own argument back on him, and say: We are also only doing what Allah has ordained, which is to put you on trial and if found guilty to pass the death sentence on you; whether you are executed or not depends on whether Allah allows us to do it or not. If he says he was only attempting to murder his victim and only succeeded because Allah allowed him, then the legal authorities are also only trying to execute him and can only succeed if Allah allows them! He could, for example, succeed in escaping from prison and be never found!

The greatest of Muslims who ever lived were always deeply conscious that they would be held to account by Allah for any wrong they committed, however trivial it might have been. They also wanted to be held to account in this life by anyone whose rights they may have infringed. I wish to refer to some incidents relating to Umar while he was the second Caliph of Islam, which provide examples of this deeply-felt sense of responsibility. These are taken from the classical book *Tarikh-ul-Khulufa* (History of the Caliphs), written five or six centuries ago by Allama Jalal-ud-Din Suyuti.

1. Ans, who was a companion of the Holy Prophet Muhammad and his servant, relates that while he was standing in a garden on one side of a wall, Hazrat Umar was by himself on the other side, and he overheard him saying to himself: "O Umar! what are you as compared to the high rank of the chief of the Muslims? Fear God or he will punish you severely."

2. Umar used to say: "The person whom I love most is the one who lets me know of my faults".

3. Among the instructions that Umar gave as he lay dying from his wounds was: "When you carry my body out of the house for burial, walk fast, for if I am a good person in the sight of God then I should be taken to Him as quickly as possible, and if I am a bad person then you would be relieved of the burden upon your shoulders as quickly as possible."

4. Once Umar was unwell and people told him that he should take honey for his complaint. There was a bowl full of honey available but it belonged to the national treasury. Umar said to people: "If you allow me to use it then I will take it; otherwise it is unlawful for me." So people allowed him to take it for his use. Thus Umar showed how responsible he was to the people whom he served.

5. Abbas, a companion of the Holy Prophet, relates as follows. After a year had elapsed over the death of Umar, I prayed to God to show him to me in a dream. So I saw him in a dream, and he was wiping his brow of heavy perspiration. I asked him: What is the matter? He said: I have only just finished accounting (before God) for my deeds, and if God had not been merciful I would almost have been disgraced by Him.

This dream is not to be taken in the literal, physical sense as meaning that one year is an actual period of time during which Umar was questioned by God. The dream is expressive of Umar's deep sense of responsibility and accountability for his actions. When Umar lay dying, and people praised and lauded his achievements, he said it was enough that any good he had done had equalled and cancelled out the wrongs he had done!

What a stark contrast to the present-day, complacent Muslims, both ordinary and great, who regard all their decisions and deeds as proceeding from the will and pleasure of Allah!

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