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RSOC 81
May 12, 2005

Two Islamic Visions of Humanity and the Physical World

Introduction

What should one's relationship be with the physical world? This incredibly deep question has been being asked and contemplated throughout human history, and different religions – and different factions within those religions – have long been offering answers. In Islam, the Sufi mystics have leaned towards departure from and rejection of the world to focus more completely on God himself. Other Muslims have rejected this emphasis and have said that the theological accent should be on the importance of living in the here and now and actively fulfilling God's will in concrete, worldly situations. To examine these two perspectives, we will look at two Muslim thinkers who fall on different points on this spectrum: the 13th Century Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar and the 20th Century scholar Dr. Isma'il al Faruqi.

Before we look at this issue, though, we should begin by examining what the Qur'an itself has to say about the physical world. It is perhaps most important to remember that the Qur'an establishes a highly dualistic relationship between creator and created. That is to say, God draws a sharp distinction between himself as infinite, omniscient, and omnipotent and everything else, all of which owes its existence to God and none of which is equal to or even comparable to him and his power. This, of course, has several implications. First, it completely rejects any notion of polytheism: there is only one supreme power, and no other entity or group of entities can rival it. No other gods exist, and any idol that is built is a completely impotent physical object. At one point God says, "Those / On whom, besides Allah, / Ye call, cannot create / (Even) a fly, if they all / Met together for the purpose! / And if the fly should

snatch / Away anything from them, / They would have no power / To release it from the fly. / Feeble are those who petition / And those whom they petition!” (22:73). In other words, God affirms that nothing but himself has had power to create or initiate anything. There is and cannot be any rival divine power to God. This also means that God himself cannot be a part of the physical world because that would mean splitting the divine power into one or more subordinate entities. Thus, the orthodox Christian belief in Jesus’ divinity is wrong because God cannot be split between himself and some physical person:

No son did Allah beget,
Nor is there any god
Along with Him: (if there were
Many gods), behold, each god
Would have taken away
What he had created,
And some would have
Lorded it over others!
Glory to Allah! (He is free)
From the (sort of) things
They attribute to Him! (23:91)

Likewise, God’s presence is distinct from and cannot be housed without nature’s great inanimate objects: “Adore not the sun / And the moon, but adore / Allah, Who created them, / If it is Him ye wish / To serve” (41:37). Thus, God is completely distinct from everything else, and everything else is a creation of his. Humans cannot consider themselves or anything other than God to be divine.

This is central to our discussion, for in this crisp, dualistic system (in which creator and created are completely distinct), and since humans are completely non-divine, they must be fully created entities whom their Creator has given a specific calling. That calling is to relate to God, worship him your Creator, and seek his guidance, as is clearly affirmed in the Qur’an’s opening surah: “Praise be to Allah, / The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; / Most Gracious, Most

Merciful; / Master of the Day of Judgement. / Thee do we worship, / And Thine aid we seek” (1:2-5). Similarly, it is also important to note that God, as “Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds,” has also made our physical planet and has put humans – and not just one human, importantly, but many – on it, indicating that he expects his various animate and inanimate creations to interact among themselves as they relate to him, with all these dynamics working together to create some sort of harmony. It is this harmony that the Sufi and non-Sufi Muslims are trying to comprehend and for which they have generated different explanatory models.

Attar and the Sufis: Renounce the World, Focus on God

Attar’s lengthy poem *Conference of the Birds* is the story of a bird called a hoopoe who calls together many other birds and through a lengthy dialogue that includes many stories and parables encourages them to set out to find a mysterious and divine bird called the Simorgh. Throughout the discussion of this journey, which is symbolic of humanity’s quest to find God, there is a recurring theme of how we should also relate to the physical world. The clear answer is that entering into a relationship with God is of supreme importance and that everything else, if need be, should be given up to attain that relationship

Towards the poem’s beginning, several birds give reasons for why they cannot go on the journey due to various material attachments that they did not want to give up, and each time the hoopoe responded that the material attachment in question is unimportant. The nightingale, for instance, loves being around roses: “My love is for the rose; I bow to her; / From her dear presence I could never stir” (36). However, the hoopoe responds that such a devotion is unwarranted: “This superficial love which makes you quail / Is only for the outward show of things” (36). Meanwhile, the parrot wants to preserve her good looks, to which the hoopoe

responds, “Your coat is beautiful, but where’s your brain?” (38). The duck wants to live a conservative life near the water and does not wish to risk a journey: “I live in water and I cannot go / To places where no streams or rivers flow; / They wash away a world of discontent – / Why should I leave this perfect element?” (41). The hoopoe responds that such a lifestyle is focused on irrelevancies and totally misses what is most important: “Your life is passed / In vague, aquatic dreams which cannot last – / A sudden wave and they are swept away” (41). In these exchanges (and in the several others with other birds), Attar argues for the dangers of attachment to the physical, whether it be objects, one’s own appearance, or one’s environment and traditions. What is instead important is the closeness to God that comes from going on the journey to find him. By letting go of all that is temporal and impermanent, one advances on the journey that moves one ever closer to God. As the hoopoe says, “This strange, magnetic force / That holds God’s ancient lovers to their course / Still shows the Truth: if you will but aspire / You will attain to all that you desire” (132). That is to say, what is important is the journey of renunciation itself, and if one is devoted fully enough to it, one will eventually find God. To use John Esposito’s summary of overall Sufi belief, “At the heart of Sufism is the belief that one’s self must die, that is, one must undergo annihilation (*fana*) of the lower, ego-centered self in order to abide or rest (*baqa*) in God” (107).

However, from Attar’s point of view, exactly what it means to find “rest... in God” is ambiguous. A danger with such thinking is that if a relationship with God is emphasized too strongly over a relationship with the rest of the world, one may begin to pull humanity out from its status as created beings interacting with the rest of creation and then begin to collapse the dualism between creator and created revealed in the Qur’an. To put it another way, if humanity is part of creation and across the dualistic gulf from God, then focusing on humans renouncing the

rest of the created world and focusing on God could result in humanity being considered closer to God and farther away from the rest of creation than is justified in the Qur'an. Attar sometimes uses language that is very suggestive of this, such as when he writes, "When you perceive His hidden secrets, give / Your life to God's affairs and truly live – / At last, made perfect in Reality, / *You* will be gone, and only God will be" (32). Attar states this passage so strongly that it would appear that when humanity finds union with God, the bond becomes so close that humanity actually becomes part of God – a clear departure from the Qur'an's dualism. However, at other times, Attar makes clear that he understands the need for dualism, such as when he discusses Hallaj, a more ancient Sufi poet who had claimed "I am the Truth," essentially declaring that he had reached such a union with God that he had himself become part of God. Other Muslims executed Hallaj for heresy for believing this, and Attar's discussion of Hallaj's death in the text (114-115) implicitly acknowledges that he himself must not cross the same line that Hallaj did. Attar also elsewhere explicitly claims that his beliefs do not actually constitute a belief in becoming one with God: "You are not God, though in God you are drowned; Those lost in Him are not the Deity" (52). This statement, though, hardly clarifies exactly how separate creator and created are. In fact, in the very next line, Attar seems to state that perfect clarity on the issue is impossible: "This problem can be argued endlessly" (52). Regardless of the ambiguity, though, Attar is clearly emphasizing the closeness rather than the distance between God and humanity.

Since this emphasis on renunciation of the world and closeness with God is characteristic of the Sufi movement as a whole, we can observe how it has manifested itself concretely in the lives of Sufis. John Esposito reports that at some points in history "These men and women pursued an ascetic lifestyle that emphasized detachment from the material world, which, they believed, distracted Muslims from God, repentance for sins, fear of God, and the Last Judgment"

(101). Sufis formed fairly sectarian communities, headquartered in various Sufi centers, in which they could be buffered from worldly temptations and focused on unity with God. According to Esposito, members usually “lived nearby in the center, devoting themselves to study, spiritual exercises, and the upkeep and activities of the center” (106). The Sufis did have contact with the outside world, including caring for the impoverished, ill, and any visitors who came through their doors. However, they sometimes also engaged in deep and lengthy meditations. Sometimes they even “repeated or recalled God’s name hundreds and thousands of times for hours during the day or throughout the night” (108). They would even perform very wild rituals, including “use of music and song, spiritual concerts of devotional poems, as well as dance or bodily movements to induce or trigger ecstatic states in which the devotee could experience the presence of God or union with God” (108). Such behavior showed how strongly they tried to reach communion with God. It also, needless to say, opened them up to criticism from their fellow Muslims.

Faruqi: Emphasize Life in This World

In his short book *Islam*, a general introduction to his faith, Faruqi laid out his perspective on some of the most important aspects of Islam and at a couple of points explicitly rebuts Sufism. His emphasis is not so much on full pursuit of God and certainly not nearly so much on renunciation. It is rather on two quite different aspects of life: one’s conscious beliefs and one’s responsibilities within this world. Although he certainly affirms that to be Muslim one must love God and fully seek his will, Faruqi starts by emphasizing Islam’s creedal elements (the explicit theological beliefs that compose Islam) and the fact that under Islamic law, to be considered a Muslim, all one must do is affirm those basic creedal statements: “Once a person is put to the test

and witnesses responsibly to the twin declarations of God being the only God and Muhammad being His Prophet, no more can be legally required as proof of faith and, consequently, that person enjoys all the rights and is obligated by all the duties under Islamic law” (4). This is not to say that creedal recitation alone represents the full meaning of life, and he readily also says that “only... works and deeds constitute justification in God’s eyes” (5). However, it does turn the focus was from love and towards conscious belief. Under his thinking, since God has chosen to reveal explicit instructions to humanity through the prophets, such explicit instructions are to be taken very seriously. Thus, he devotes a chapter to explaining the five pillars of Islam (19-34). In that chapter, he discusses fairly specifically different details of each pillar, and in doing so draws attention to the importance of intellectually understanding an in one’s practice adhering to these behaviors and rituals.

Also, far from the hoopoe’s chastisements of the other birds for their connections to the physical world, Faruqi actively celebrates it as one of God’s creations: “Muslims consider nature and wealth as gifts from God, entrusted to them for their enjoyment and use within the limits set by moral law” (53). Thus, having physical possessions is not necessarily a hindrance from pursuing God and is actually a part of God’s will for our lives. God wants us to be materially wealthy, provided only that we use our possessions wisely and in accordance with our calling. Thus, Faruqi can say that “Every Muslim desires and plans to become a “millionaire” if he or she takes Islam seriously” (57). Likewise, he also rejects overly sectarian lifestyles since they do not take into account the goodness of this world: “God did not want people to mortify themselves or to lead lonely lives in monasteries. Rather He wanted them to live an abundant life, full of joy and happiness but always observing the moral laws of purity and faithfulness to God and showing fairness, love, and brotherhood” (17). In short, Faruqi believes that one’s life should be

intricately connected to this world both because God has made this world for us and because we have responsibilities as his created beings in it.

In light of all this, Faruqi faults the Sufis with having lost touch with this world and, as a result, forgetting what their responsibilities in it are. As Faruqi describes it, “Engagement in the affairs of society and state, so expressive of the Muslim’s consciousness of vicegerency, was slowly abandoned for contemplative bliss and mystical experience.... They withdrew from “history,” from the “now,” and became preoccupied with eternity and mysticism” (77). In other words, the Sufis forgot what their actual role was: they no longer considered themselves as created beings whom God had placed squarely within a created world. To pursue God alone and not his world (with which they were far more immediately connected) was folly. Loving God is important, but it must be done in the ways that we were built to do it.

Attar’s Response

How would Attar react to these criticisms by Faruqi? Judging by his poem, two responses emerge. First, Attar would say that Faruqi is too quick to celebrate physical good fortune. While in some sense it may be good, one must also remember just how strong a temptation it is. If all Muslims really did pursue becoming millionaires as blatantly as Faruqi states it, would not many of those Muslims be overcome by those physical possessions and then become like the birds who were so preoccupied that they did not want to pursue God himself?

Likewise, on the matter of conscious, creedal belief, Attar would insist that we cannot let our beliefs about God get in the way of our love for God. Throughout the poem, Attar discusses how belief is irrelevant to and will eventually become swallowed up by love. Getting a correct intellectual understanding of doctrine and practice does not really help in the full, unadulterated

pursuit of God. For instance, Attar tells the story of some moths (representing humans) circling a flame (representing God). The story makes clear that their goal is to fulfill their innermost urging (their deep love for God) and rush into the flame. Such an action is not intellectual: it is the heart conquering the narrow thinking of the mind and acting in full harmony with its love of God. It is therefore, in Attar's thinking, good that "The pilgrim driven on by his desire / Will like a moth rush gladly on the fire" (167). Attar then goes on to say very vividly that once we arrive in heaven, our different theological constructs (whether wrong or right) of God will become irrelevant and we will unite with him in our perfected love of him: "His zeal to know faith's mysteries will make / Him fight with dragons for salvation's sake – / Though blasphemy and curses crowd the gate, / Until it opens he will calmly wait, / And then where is this faith? this blasphemy? / Both vanish into strengthless vacancy" (167). In essence, Attar would respond to Faruqi that when we do get to heaven, what will matter will be our love for God and not what we believed about him.

Conclusion

Attar and Faruqi's divergent approaches represent two very different ways of understanding how God has called humanity to relate to the physical world. Attar emphasizes that the world is distracting and that one must detach from it to focus fully on God. Faruqi, on the other hand, celebrates the physical world as a wonderful creation of God's in which we were designed and called to participate fully. Both represent a larger debate that has always been going on in interrelations, intra-religious, and secular dialogues: is the world helpful or harmful, and should we immerse ourselves in it or detach and focus our attentions elsewhere? Obviously,

no easy answer presents itself, and we would be wise to remind ourselves of Attar's warning that "This problem can be argued endlessly" (52).