

## **Reason and Revelation**

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There are four sources on which, from a Shi'a point of view, any investigation about Islam has to be based: the Glorious Qur'an, the Sunnah, reason, and consensus. After a careful consideration of these four sources, it becomes clear that the Qur'an and the Sunnah are both originated from revelation and that consensus is reducible to the Sunnah. Therefore, there are two types of sources: (1) the Qur'an and the Sunnah that constitute the revealed or transmitted sources, and (2) reason or intellect that constitutes the rational source.

This does not mean that every single enquiry must be based on *all* the aforementioned sources; rather, there is no way to establish the truths other than referring to one or more of those sources. Some fields of study are completely intellectual, such as natural theology or philosophy; others are purely based on revealed information, such as revealed theology; and yet others rely on both, such as law and morality.<sup>1</sup>

When Muslim scholars mention the Qur'an and the Sunnah as revealed sources, this does not mean they do not believe in previous revelations. Indeed, it is part of Islamic faith to confirm all the previous prophets and revelations. The only problem is how to identify them. Whenever something is known to represent a religious fact or a general rule revealed previously by God, that too is certainly accepted. Thus, we can conclude that there are two major *common* ways to understand and discover religious truths: revelation and reason.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Status of Reason**

Islam regards reason as one of the greatest blessings bestowed by God on human beings. It is by means of reason that we understand ourselves and the world around us, and that we realize the necessity of investigating our origin and the One who has created us. If we had no reason, we would not be responsible for our acts or beliefs. In Shi'i Islam in particular, great emphasis is placed on reason and the rational sciences. This emphasis derives from the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet and the Imams of his household. The Qur'an says in several verses: "Surely there are signs in this for those who ponder" (13:4; 16:12; 30:24).

The Qur'an also condemns more than once those who do not think or use their reason. The following two traditions, selected from the large number of hadiths available on the subject, show the place of reason in Shi'a belief. One Imam says: "Whoever has intellect has faith and whoever has faith will enter Paradise." With reason one comes to understand the truth, to believe in Islam and follow the teachings of the Prophet, and consequently to be able to enter Paradise. In an insightful hadith addressing one of his companions, an Imam said:

With reason God completes His proof. God has equipped His prophets with the ability of expressing their ideas in a way that all people can understand. God has shown people His lordship through reason.

Then the Imam recited the following verse of the Glorious Qur'an, "Your God is the One God, there is no god but God who is the Compassionate the Merciful. . . . Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the alternation of days and night, and in the ships that move in the sea, and in the rain that descends from the sky to bring life on the earth, and all kinds of animals that God has spread over the earth, and also in the movement of the wind and the clouds which God has kept between the earth and the sky—in all these there are signs for those who are thoughtful." Then the Imam said: "Allah has made these signs a proof to show people that they have a Creator Who arranges everything for them and Who directs everything, because God then says, 'Surely there are signs in these facts for those who use their reason.'" Many other references to the Qur'an are made in this tradition to show that God in His final message considers reason as the only means by which human beings become responsible and come to understand the truth. All questions on the Day of Judgement are proportionate to the rational capacity of people. Those who have been given greater intelligence will be questioned more deeply than ordinary people.

### **Different Roles of Reason**

In general, reason contributes to religious sciences in three major areas. The first is to understand the realities of the world, such as the existence of God, the truth of religion, and scientifically established truths. The second is to

present moral and legal principles, such as the wrongness of oppression and the rightness of justice. The third is to set up standards and logical processes for reasoning and inference. All three roles of reason are recognized and, indeed, encouraged in Islam.

The first step towards religion, inquiring into it and searching for its truth, is taken by reason. It is reason that drives us to take the issue seriously and tells us our interests would be harmed if the claims of religion are true and we fail to discover and believe in them. Once we have started our researches and investigations, it is reason that instructs us on how to think and how to argue. It is also reason that tells us to be fair, pious, truth-seeking, and committed to the truth during and after the entire process of rational discovery.

We cannot say that one must believe in God or Islam simply because God says so or because the Qur'an requires it. We cannot even say that one has to investigate the truth of religion simply because the religion itself tells us to do so. It is reason that urges us to enquire about religion and thereby discover the veracity of the Qur'an and the Prophet. Reason thus has a crucial role with respect to religious belief. Everyone must make his or her own enquiry regarding religion and discover the truth independently, and no one can rely on others. Of course, once the truth of a given prophet or book is established, many further truths can be learnt from that prophet or that book.

In respect to practical laws and moral values, the relevant principles are understood by reason. Details are, of course, provided by religious sources, although the process of understanding the scriptures and the implications of religious judgments again are governed by reason. For example, if God says that we must perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, it rationally implies that we must make all necessary preparations, such as buying tickets or obtaining a visa. If there is a conflict between two obligations, such as saving an innocent life and performing our prayers, what should we do? In this case, even if there is no explicit or particular religious instruction, we still rationally understand that we must act according to the certain and clear judgment of our reason, which is to save the person's life.

In contrast, the role of revelation or scripture in religious sciences can be summed up as follows: (1) confirming truths already known by reason; (2)

presenting new subjects not known by reason, such as the details of the resurrection and detailed injunctions of moral and legal systems;<sup>3</sup> and (3) establishing due recompense sanctions through the religiously determined system of reward and punishment.

Here I should make two points. First, one has to distinguish between decisive and certain rational judgments and actions such as guessing, personal opinions, or weak arguments. There have always been some people who introduce their ideas as enjoying rational grounds (even they themselves think this), while after consideration it becomes clear there is no basis for such claims. Consider here those who represent their ideas as Islamic ideas, while religious sources do not support them in any known way.

Second, although the reason is recognized as an independent source of knowledge, it has its limits. On many things reason has no judgment and is silent, because they are beyond its scope. Therefore, there might be many things that we can grasp by other means, such as perception, intuition, or revelation, that do not fall within the scope of reason. You cannot really understand through rational arguments what a rose smells like or how a mother feels when her child is dead. In respect to religious issues, many facts are not knowable by reason, such as many details of the resurrection. What is important is that there is nothing in Islam that contradicts the reason.

Thus, we should not make our acceptance of religious facts depend on finding a rational proof or justification for them, though they must be rationally possible. The Qur'an sometimes uses the expression "vision" and attributes it to the heart for a type of knowledge much higher than perception and rational knowledge.

### **Role of Reason in Understanding Moral Values**

Now let us consider the role of reason in understanding what is morally good and bad, what is right and wrong. This has been an important issue for all religious traditions, especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to "divine command theory," good or morally right means "commanded by God," and bad or morally wrong means forbidden by God."<sup>4</sup> In contrast, some theologians have argued for a rational approach to ethics. They believe there are independent criteria of good and bad that can be understood by our reason. In other words, the religious believer has no special access to moral truth;

God has made all people rational. For both believer and non-believer, making a reasonable moral judgment is a matter of listening to reason and following it. God's commands are not arbitrary, and we can exercise rational methods to discover moral norms. Among Muslim theologians, the Ash'arites held the former view and the Mu'tazilites and the Shi'a held the latter.

According to the Ash'arites, all values are determined by the will of God, and moral concepts such as "good" and "right" have no meaning other than "that which God wills" or "what is commanded by God." These words have no objective meaning. According to the Shi'a and the Mu'tazilites, values such as justice and goodness have a real existence, independent of anyone's will, even God's. Values are objective. Are good and evil rational or revealed? The Shi'a and the Mu'tazilites believed that good and evil are objective and therefore can be known rationally. Allamah Hilli, a great Shi'a scholar, writes: The principle on which the problems concerning justice depend is that God is the Wise, He never does an evil action and He never fails to perform any obligatory action. When this principle is proved questions concerning justice, such as goodness of obligation, necessity of Grace and the like are constructed upon that. And since this principle depends on knowing good and evil and their rationality, the author started his discussion with these.

Elsewhere he says:

Imamites and their followers, the Mu'tazilites, believe that goodness and badness of some actions are known by the reason evidently such as our knowledge of goodness of beneficial telling truth and badness of harmful lies, on which no reasonable person have doubt, and his certainty about this is not weaker than his certainty about the need of a contingent being [in its existence] to a cause or about the equality of two things which are each equal to a third thing. They believe that there are some actions, understanding of whose goodness or badness needs reflection such as goodness of harmful telling truth and badness of beneficial lies, and finally that there are some actions, on which the reason is unable to make judgement and their goodness and badness is to be expressed by the religious law, *Sha'ia*, such as [how to perform] worship.

On the other hand, there are the Ash'arites who deny the rationality of goodness and badness. Shahrestani describes their idea as follows:

All obligations are to be learnt from the scriptures. The reason does not make anything obligatory and does not make anything deserve to be considered as good or bad. Thus, knowing God becomes possible by reason and becomes obligatory by the scripture. God, the most High, says: “We have never chastised unless we have despatched some messenger” (Q 17:15). Similarly, gratitude to the blessing-giver, rewarding the obedient and punishing the disobedient all become obligatory by the revealed, and not the reason.

In contrast, the Shi’a and the Mu’tazilites have argued that if goodness and badness were just religious and not understandable by the reason, unbelievers would not recognize them today or before they knew of revelation, e.g., the Qur’an. But we know that there are many common values and moral principles among both theists and atheists. ‘Abd al-Jabbar, a great Mu’tazilite theologian, says: “any sane person knows his obligations even though he does not know that there is a commander and forbider.”

The Qur’an in fact implies in many statements that knowledge of what is obligatory, good, and evil is accessible to everyone, as in “Surely God bids to justice and good-doing and giving to kinsmen, and He forbids indecency, dishonor and insolence” (Q 16:92). These virtues and vices must have been seen as such prior to revelation. The objectivity of ethical value is asserted or implied all through the Qur’an. For instance, the repeated commands of God to do what is right would be empty of force and spirit if they meant only “commands to do what He commands.” It is even harder to make sense of statements that God is always just to His servants on the supposition that “just” means “commanded by God.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Al-Ghazali divides theological issues into those known only through religious sources, those known only with the intellect, and those known in both ways. He mentions the visibility of God as an example of the first category, and exclusiveness of creating movements to God as an example of the second. In respect to cases where both intellect and transmitted knowledge have judgment, he adds that whenever we receive something from religious sources, we must see what the rational judgment is. If intellect allows us to do so, we have to follow those sources. But if that is rationally impossible, we must interpret the text in another way, since

there is no disharmony or contradiction between religion and intellect. Then, al-Ghazali adds that in cases where intellect is silent, again we must accept and follow the demands of religious sources. He insists that rational permission for the possibility of something is not required. What is really required is to be free from rational impossibility. "There is a [subtle] difference between these two, which unintelligent people sometimes fail to recognise."

<sup>2</sup> Things understood through personal intuitions or mystical experiences are valid for the person who has had these intuitions or experiences and is certain about the truth and validity of them or beliefs based on them. However, these are not included in our discussion here, since this sort of knowledge cannot be communicated through discussion or argumentation to others. The only way to learn and accept these issues is to undergo the same experiences.

<sup>3</sup> Having verified the truth of the Prophet or the Qur'an, we come to know many things that we were unable to know by ourselves because of our lack of access to certain realms of reality or certain evidence.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, George Hourani says: "It [the Ash'arite view, or what he calls 'theistic subjectivism,' or what others call 'ethical voluntarism'] is not peculiar to Islam, since it occurs in medieval Judaism and occasionally in western thought; but it was probably more prominent and widespread in Islam than in any other civilization." (G. F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* [Cambridge UP, 1985], 57.)

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