

## THE FALL AND THE OVERCOMING OF EVIL AND SUFFERING IN ISLAM

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We need more understanding of human nature, because the only real danger that exists is man himself. He is the great danger, and we are pitifully unaware of it. We know nothing of man, far too little. His psyche should be studied, because we are the origin of all coming evil.

C. G. Jung<sup>1</sup>

As human beings we are obliged to face much difficulty, hardship, pain, and suffering, since we are not angels and we do not live in Heaven, and we also arrive in an environment that has already been religiously and socially structured. There are natural calamities such as fires, floods, tidal waves, volcanoes, earthquakes, droughts, and famines that cause immense suffering. Diseases such as leprosy, cancer, and AIDS; physical deformities and impairments such as misshapen limbs, blindness, deafness, dumbness, mental deficiency, and insanity are additional misfortunes that kill or cause people to suffer. However, the greatest harm has come from the immoral behaviour of humankind itself. Selfishness, envy, greed, deceit, cruelty, cowardice, oppression, injustice, and despotism cause untold agony, as do certain human creations such as the “gift” of advanced technology, nuclear weapons, which *are* the most monstrous and horrifying ‘inventions,’ given their ability to wipe the human race off the face of the earth.

These causes of suffering do not discriminate between theists, atheists, and agnostics, either. They may strike all of us. In such circumstances, what should be done? What matters is *not* producing a consistent theodicy in order to defend a particular theistic belief, nor dethroning God, having found irreconcilable the ‘arbitrary’ existence of natural and moral evils with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent Deity. *I believe that what matters is how each person can become psychologically as well as spiritually prepared or equipped to overcome particular instances of suffering.* This is the task the Quran undertakes.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. G. Jung, *Jung on Evil*, selected and introduced by Murray Stein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Although rational theodicy may not seem central in the Quran, some writers have approached it from this perspective. For instance, a contemporary Muhammad al-Ghazali seeks the

As I see it, the Quran does not develop a sophisticated theodicy. It seeks to mould its believers in such a manner that they become able to combat instances of suffering, hardship, agony, and pain and able eventually to conquer evil-doing.

In this paper I shall argue that the Quranic approach to suffering and hardship brings more practical benefits than the way of contemporary philosophers. I also claim that these philosopher's judgements, based on conceptual analysis and logical arguments regarding the problem of evil, do not seem to represent the actual experiences of people facing instances of suffering. Also, because their arguments focus on whether a God who is both omnipotent and perfectly good can exist when there are evils in the world, the issue becomes the problem for them. From the perspective that I take, it is the existence of instances of suffering, hardship, pain, and agony that is the problem, and denying the existence of God or particular attributes of God because of them will not lessen our pain.

Focusing on natural and moral evils as the problem leads us to wondering how the occurrences of such evils can be reduced and to wondering about what characteristics people need to be endowed with in order to better deal with or even defeat or overcome such evils. Thus, I would like to draw attention to the role the Quran plays in bringing about the reduction of moral evil and overcoming physical suffering. Both the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet are important contributors in the "formatting" of the minds of Muslims, so that they pay attention to certain things and ignore others, leading to holding certain ideas and living certain lifestyles. The Quran points out the need for humans to improve their behavior and prevent evil through attending to their spiritual lives.

Although I do not attempt to solve the "problem of evil" in the way the philosophers do, let me briefly consider the way they present the problem. Some of them have seen the existence of evil and suffering as irreconcilable or incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent God. According to David Hume, Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil."<sup>3</sup> Having brought up these questions, Hume answers them with more questions:

Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive except we assert that these sub-

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possibility of developing a form of the Quranic theodicy. See Muhammad al-Ghazali, "The Problem of Evil from Islamic Perspective," *Dialogue & Alliance*, 8 (1994), pp. 65-74.

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), p. 63.

jects exceed all human capacity, and that our common measures of truth and falsehood are not applicable to them.<sup>4</sup>

For J. L. Mackie, the problem of evil is a problem only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good. He claims that the problem of evil is *a logical* one and not a scientific problem that might be solved by observations, or a practical one that might be solved by a decision or an action.<sup>5</sup> He maintains:

I think, however, that a more telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.<sup>6</sup>

Alvin Plantinga, in contrast to Mackie, attempts to demonstrate that there is no logical inconsistency in believing in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God along with the existence of evil.<sup>7</sup> Here, I do not intend to take sides either with the line of thought presented by Plantinga, John Hick,<sup>8</sup> and Terence Penelhum,<sup>9</sup> or with the arguments presented by Hume and Mackie. In fact, in reading Hick, Plantinga, Penelhum, Mackie, and Nelson Pike<sup>10</sup> with regard to the problem of evil, I have realised that the world they construct with the concepts and rational arguments they use seems different from the world of real people who face instances of suffering. This is my main objection to the arguments made by the philosophers. In the remainder of this people, I shall present my argument in six points.

<sup>4</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence" (first published in *Mind*, 64 (1955)), in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 25 (hereafter cited as *Problem of Evil*).

<sup>6</sup> Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 25.

<sup>7</sup> He developed further what is called the "freewill defence" in his book, *God, Freedom and Evil* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974). Some of his articles on the issue are: "God, Evil and the Metaphysics of Freedom," in *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 83-109; "The Free Will Defence," in *Readings in The Philosophy of Religion: An Analytical Approach*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp. 186-200.

<sup>8</sup> His book, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Collins, 1968) has become almost a classic in the contemporary philosophy of religion. He also published many articles on this issue. The most important of them are: "An Irenaen Theodicy," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in the Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), pp. 38-52; "Soul-Making and Suffering," in *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 168-88.

<sup>9</sup> In his article "Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil" (in *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 69-82), he makes a particularly Christian defence of the existence of evil.

<sup>10</sup> His article "Hume on Evil" (first published in *The Philosophical Review*, 72 (1963) and reprinted in *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 38-52) offers a remarkable analysis of Hume's daring assertion on the existence of God and Evil.

# 1. The Problem of Evil Is Not Entirely Logical and Propositional, but Is Fundamentally Phenomenal or Existential

Let us consider a particular argument offered by Plantinga. My own reaction is that the instances of suffering, hardship, pain, or torture that many people face in their lifetime have little relevance (if any) to the kind of argument he makes:

If God existed at T1 and if God believed at T1 that Jones would do X at T2, then if it was within Jones' power at T2 to refrain from doing X, then (1) it was within Jones' power at T2 to do something that would have brought it about that God held a false belief at T1, or (2) it was within Jones' power at T2 to do something which would have brought it about that God did not hold the belief He held at T1, or (3) it was within Jones' power at T2 to do something that would have brought it about that any person who believed at T1 that Jones would do X at T2 (one of whom was, by hypothesis, God) held a false belief and thus was not God – that is, that God (who by hypothesis existed at T1) did not exist at T1.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the sort of evil that can be found in everyday life is described in horrible detail in a passage written by Dostoevsky:

One day a serf boy, a little child of eight, threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the general's favourite hound. "Why is my favourite dog lame?" He is told that the boy threw a stone that hurt the dog's paw. "So you did it." The general looked the child up down. "Take him." He was taken – taken from his mother and kept shut up all night. Early that morning the general comes out on horseback with the hounds, his dependants, dog-boys, and huntsmen, all mounted around him in full hunting parade. The servants are summoned for their edification, and in front of them all stands the mother of the child. The child is brought from the lock up. It's a gloomy, cold, foggy autumn day, a capital day for hunting. The general orders the child to be undressed; the child is stripped naked. He shivers, numb with terror, not daring to cry .... "Make him run" commands the general. "Run! run!" shout the dog-boys. The boy runs .... "At him" yells the general, and he set the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes! ... I believe the general was afterwards declared incapable of administering his estates. Well – what did he deserve? To be shot? To be shot for the satisfaction of our moral feelings?<sup>12</sup>

One wonders why evil and suffering is so real in life, while Western philosophers have dealt with them in ways so divorced from what is experienced? In fact, after Kant and Hegel, even more emphasis was placed on rationality and developing realms of abstract concepts. As I see it, the realms that have been created are like Plato's cave. These Philosophers have produced shadows from

<sup>11</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brother Karamazov*, trans. G. Garnett (New York: 1950), p. 288.

the existing phenomenon. Then they claim that the relations they see between the shadows must exist in the world of phenomenon as well.<sup>13</sup>

What is actually happening is that the philosophers have employed just two concepts, God and evil, and instead of describing evil as it is experienced by different cultural groups, they discuss their two concepts in the abstract, using logical propositions that ascribe certain predicates to them. Finally, one group of the philosophers sees a contradiction between the predicates of the concept of God and the concept of evil, while the other group does not.<sup>14</sup>

What I claim in this paper is that the rational arguments of philosophers benefit ordinary people in a limited way, while religion can play an important role in helping people in their struggle to defeat evil. I hope the rest of this paper will substantiate my claim.

## 2. The Perception of Evil Is Culture-Specific

Here, I will argue that perceiving something as evil is, *to a certain extent*, culture-specific. At the same time, some degree of agreement between various cultures on which events are seen as evil exists, and the cross-cultural similarities need to be borne in mind. However, the way a culture equips its people to deal with and overcome evils is not partially but *totally* culture-specific. A joke mentioned by C. G. Jung on the subject of good and evil illustrates the point clearly. He says:

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<sup>13</sup> A brief demonstration may show my intention. Evil is a concept and death is one of the species of the content. To indicate whether the concept corresponds to the content, I will first quote a passage on evil, then replace the word "evil" with "death" and see how the passage sounds: "The existence of evil in the world must at all times be the greatest of all problems which the mind encounters when it reflects on God and His relation to the world. If He is, indeed, all-good and all-powerful, how has evil any place in the world which He has made? Whence came it. Why is it here? If He is all-good why did He allow it to raise? If all-powerful why does He not deliver us from the burden?" H. J. McCloskey, "God and Evil," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytical Approach*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 169.

Now let us read the same passage having changed the word "evil" with "death": "The existence of death in the world must at all times be the greatest of all problems which the mind encounters when it reflects on God and his relation to the world. If He is, indeed, all-good and all-powerful, how has death any place in the world which He has made? Whence came it. Why is death here? If He is all-good why did He allow death to raise? If all-powerful why does He not deliver us from this burden."

<sup>14</sup> Having briefly considered the way philosophers present the issue, as one Muslim, I can speak for others and state that the God Muslims worship five times a day has nothing to do with the philosophers' concept of God. Muslims would also not see much of a connection between philosophers' concept of evil and the suffering they face.

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