

ALI 453 - Readings #3

The World

Islam has a clear view of being and creation, and has a particular way of looking at man and human life. One of the fundamental principles of the Islamic world-outlook is the notion that there is no duality of any kind whatsoever in being; that is, the world of creation is not divisible into two domains of 'good' and 'evil'.

That is, it is not true that some existents are good and beautiful and should have been created, whereas some are evil and ugly and should not have been created but nevertheless exist. Such a view is regarded as kufr in the Islamic world-outlook, and is considered contrary to the principle of tawhid. In the view of Islam, the creation of all things is based on goodness, wisdom, and beauty: *You do not see in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection ... (67:3) He is the Knower of the unseen and the visible, the All-mighty, the All-compassionate, Who made good everything He created; ... (32:6-7)*

Accordingly, Islam's condemnation of 'the world' does not apply to the world of creation. The Islamic world-outlook rests on the foundation of pure tawhid and lays great emphasis on the Unity of the Acting Principle; it does not admit the existence of any partner who would share God's sovereignty. Such a world-outlook can never be pessimistic. The idea of an evil world abounding in crookedness and wickedness is not an Islamic notion. Then why does it denounce 'the world'?

Commonly it is said that attachment to the 'world' is condemned and disapproved by Islam. This is both true and false. If what is implied is an emotional attachment, it cannot be true; because, man, in relation to the total system of creation, has been created with a series of congenital emotional attachments and inclinations. All innate human tendencies, and aptitudes have a purpose which is wise and sagacious. These attachments and sentiments form a series of channels of communication between man and his world. Without them man would not be able to pursue the course of his development.

Consequently, it should be said that the Islamic world-outlook, even as it does not permit us to denounce and reject the world, it also does not allow us to regard the natural attachments and the channels of communication as superfluous, useless, and breakable, because such sentiments and tendencies are a part of the general pattern of creation.

The truth is that what is implied by 'attachment to the world' are not these natural and innate inclinations; instead, what is meant is bondage to material and worldly affairs and total surrender to them, which leads to spiritual stagnation and inertia, deprives the human spirit of its freedom of movement and buoyancy, and makes it immobile and dead.

There is a general force of attraction and gravitation that encompasses the whole universe. All the particles in it attract each other according to a set pattern. This pattern of mutual attraction and absorption is determined by a judicious design. Moreover, the force of attraction and love is not confined to man alone. No particle in the universe is devoid of this power. The difference, however, is that man, contrary to other things, is aware of his own leanings and inclinations.

From the viewpoint of Islam, the relation of man to the world is not that of a prisoner with his prison; or that of one entrapped in a well with the well; rather it is the kind of relation that exists between a peasant and his farm, or a horse and the racecourse, or a merchant and the marketplace, or a devotee and his temple. The world, from the Islamic point of view, is a school for man, his training ground, and the place where he can acquire perfection.

Without any doubt, Islam does not regard the material world and life in it-even if it involves the greatest material achievements-as a fitting goal of man's highest aspirations. This is because, firstly, in the Islamic world-outlook, this world is followed by the eternal and everlasting world of the Hereafter where conditions of life would be determined by the deeds, good or evil, of a person in this world. Secondly, the worth of a human being is too great to warrant his surrender to the slavery of and servitude to the material aspects of life.

That is why 'Ali (A) so often points out that the world is a good place, but only for him who knows that it is not a permanent abode, but only a road or a caravanserai. It is the bondage and the enslaving attachment to the world against which Islam has waged an unrelenting struggle considering it as undesirable, not the mere relation and attachment with it. It is the life of captivity that is condemnable, not the life of freedom. The world is rejected as a goal and objective and not as a way or a means.

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