Reason, Grace and the Freedom of Conscience
The Period of Investigation in Muʿtazilī Theology

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Introduction

Of all sources that help one understand the Islamic weltanschauung, it is doubtless the Qurʾān that occupies the paramount position, due to its privileged status as God’s revelation. An examination of religiosity in Islam, be it in relation to orthodoxy or orthopraxy, ought thus to take the Qurʾān as a point of departure, even if intending to venture further into theology (kalām), ethics (akhlāq), mysticism (taṣawwuf) or law (fiqh).

The Qurʾān, the cardinal source of Islamic ethics, is replete with verses that stress individual responsibility. Moreover, ethical values are predicated on a particular conception of eschatology that makes individuals’ otherworldly destiny a direct consequence of their conduct in this world. As such, salvation or damnation are intimately related to what the Qurʾān judges as one’s ethical standing. Brought together, these observations suffice to establish that individual salvation is what an Aristotelian would call the ‘teleological cause’ of Qurʾānic ethics.

The above, however, leaves open the question of what defines Qurʾānic ethics in concrete terms. For it is one thing to know the prescribed outcome and undergirding presumptions of a model; it is another to know what constitutes this model: its components, their inner relations and their order of priority regarding the ultimate purpose. Thus although deeds seem to be highly relevant in judging ethical value, it is belief (īmān) that represents the dividing

* I am grateful to Maher Jarrar, Mahmoud Youness and Nader El-Bizri (American University of Beirut) for their useful remarks. Any shortcoming is solely my responsibility.

2 Ibid., p. 108, p. 203.
line between the two sides of the Qurʾān’s ethical worldview.³ On the side of belief one meets the realm of positive judgment; on the side of disbelief, the realm of negative judgment. As such, individual salvation can be said to be dependent on belief.

The status of sinning believers (fussāq, sing. fāsiq) represents one of the primal controversies in classical Islamic theology, both chronologically and conceptually. It quickly evolved into a debate concerning the nature of belief, whether it comprises doctrines only—first and foremost believing in God’s unicity (tawḥīd)—or together with deeds (aʿmāl, sing. ʿamal). Nevertheless, these disagreements do not conceal the fact that for various parties, upholding the ‘right doctrine’—i.e. the requirement of orthodoxy—is obligatory; the debate is centered on whether observing the ‘proper behavior’—i.e. the requirement of orthopraxy—must also be considered part of belief.⁴ In either case, belief involves a theoretical aspect pertinent to orthodoxy; individual salvation, therefore, depends on satisfying the theoretical requirement of belief, solely or in conjunction with a practical requirement.

Though such is the state of affairs, Muslim theologians seem to have bothered more with what belief is than with how to acquire it; this still applies even when their discussions went beyond the dry doctrinal approach to belief, thus venturing into its more ‘spiritual’ aspect as a fruit of divine help (lutf) or grace (niʿma). A detailed analysis of the causes of this phenomenon goes beyond the scope of this article, but it is worthwhile to allude to some factors that might have concurred to make it more prevalent with time. Among these is the nature of the question, extremely abstract and scholastic; for it makes no difference in reality if a scholar attains his conviction in a particular manner as long as he can get his ‘facts’ right to proceed to other disciplines of traditional Islamic scholarship. Another factor is the intimate connection of the question with a particular position on moral values that became an earmark of Muʿtazilī theology, as seen below;⁵ interest in this discussion must have then shared the unfortunate trajectory of Muʿtazilī thought. A third factor is the growing significance of law to the detriment of theology; for despite the debt of jurisprudence (usūl al-fiqh) to theology, many scholars of law regarded the latter as irrelevant or even harmful.⁶ The rise of philosophy, moreover, proved a tough

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3 Ibid., p. 105, pp. 184-185, p. 252.
5 See section 2.1.