Book Reviews

The Vicegerency of Man

Abd al Majid al Najjar, tr. Dr. Aref T. Atari
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This short book deals with the seemingly perennial problem confounding the Muslim community: the nature of the relationship between reason and revelation. That the ultimate purpose of human existence is to serve the divine will, as expounded by the latter, problematizes this relationship in terms of how can humanity fulfill this purpose based on a dialectical nexus between the foundations of human belief and human rationality. The failure to address this question led to painful consequences and the historical emergence of communal intellectual polarities between text-oriented schools of thought and reason-oriented counterparts.

According to Najjar, this apparently perpetual deep schism between both proponents called for painstaking attempts to articulate their relationship. Najjar seeks to actualize such an articulation. He stresses the complementary link between revelation and reason, arguing that both are tools for revealing the truth and according to which humanity adopts particular modes of thought and attitudes toward the universe in ways intended to accomplish the role of vicegerency *(khilafah)*. In this framework, text and reason must be placed in an ideological context within which humanity's multidimensional existence is investigated. This includes humanity's position in the universe, significance, duties, and ultimate goals.

Toward this goal, the book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter elaborates the *khilaafah*'s doctrinal framework based on the duality of Divine existence on the one hand, and that of the universe on the other, in a relationship of Creator and created respectively. This same duality segregates existence into the "world of the unseen" *('alam al-ghayb)* and the "world of the seen" *('alam al-shahadah)*, the former pertaining to the spir-

itual realm and the latter to the material domain. This chapter basically presents the Islamic doctrinal beliefs with regard to God's oneness, creation, universal and human existence, and the subduing *(taskhir)* of the former for the latter. People are equipped to interact with the universe in ways that testify to their lofty position and serve to actualize their *khilafah* duties. In such actualization lies the harmony and unity of both.

Chapter 2 proceeds to elaborate on what Najjar calls the *khilafah* methodology. *Khilafah* means humanity's obligation to implement Allah's intent on Earth and practice His rules. Its essence is the growth of the human self through interaction with the universe. The human being, composed of both spiritual and material components, is the highest creation in the universe and, therefore, uniquely qualified to serve the Divine purpose. Within this framework, the relationship of both revelation and reason to truth is of a different order. Whereas revelation and truth are identical, not every conclusion reached through reason is necessarily true, for the former is absolute while the latter is relative. As such, reason cannot decree anything that is commendable or unacceptable, subject to reward or punishment, but can proclaim only that which is inconclusive and which, therefore, may be a basis for human deeds in the absence of revelation. In short, reason can function only where revelation is silent.

Chapter 3 deals with the role of reason in understanding the revealed text. The main theme is that it is erroneous to try to isolate the divine intent from the methods laid out in the revealed text, for intents are embodied in the methods and can be actualized only by those stated methods. Hence, to argue that certain Islamic retributory *(hudud)* punishments may not be consistent with the "spirit of the times" *(zeitgeist)* would challenge the Shari'ah's universality by confining revelation's relevance to a specific time, space, or people. For example, this applies to the case of amputating a thief's hand, where divine "intent" should not be separated from Divine "method," as some proponents of reason would tend to argue. Changing circumstances do not change the understanding of conclusive revelation (i.e., *la ijtihad ma'a nass*).

From understanding the revealed text, chapter 4 takes us to the role of reason in applying the text. Whereas the former seeks to identify Divine intent, the latter seeks to make it the norm according to which human affairs are conducted. An incorrect understanding of the text, as well as its wrongful application, undermine divine intent. Principles of application therefore incorporate two basic points: understanding the judgment's intents and understanding life's actualities. This is where reason and *ijti-*

had are applied, not only to implement the Shari'ah, but also – and as important – to prevent its mechanical application without knowledge of life settings. This is necessary, for only by such a thorough knowledge can those responsible determine whether conditions for applying a penalty exist. A historical case in point is when caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab suspended the penalty for theft during the Year of the Famine. Such suspension did not challenge the validity of the ruling, and perhaps effectively confirmed its spirit. When conditions conducive to its suspension ended, the ruling was reinstated.

Najjar's concise book is both instructive and illustrative to those interested in Islam's general stance regarding the relationship between revelation and reason. To the extent that this is the purpose, the book is commendable. However, in other respects it seems to avoid addressing the real problem of methodology. Historically, the problem may have not been simply one where the textual school denied the role of reason while the school of reason undermined the text. Perhaps the problem was more complex. One can assume that neither school sought to deny the other, but given that no clear methodology could be developed that would restrain one tendency from eventually totally dominating the other, one school opted for the safety of the text and the other for the dynamism of reason (notwithstanding historical political considerations).

It is not clear whether Najjar actually succeeds in developing such a methodology with the precision needed to maintain the dialectical balance between the two. What he calls the *khilafah* methodology seems to be nothing more than the reiteration of traditional Islamic arguments and positions with perhaps some additional emphasis on the works of the Andalusian scholar al-Shatibi and his *maqasid al-Shari'ah* (the Shari'ah's intents) approach. In the absence of a clear and well-developed methodology, simply stating that both revelation and reason should go hand in hand, or that one should remain silent (e.g., reason) when the other speaks (e.g., revelation), borders on the tautological and polemical. The question is not whether they should, but rather how? This is so, particularly when neither may be expected to remain silent, at least not in the kind of world in which we are living.

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