

4 | Moral Evil, Freedom, and Predestination

On February 10, 2015, Deah Barakat, his wife, Yusor Abu-Salha, and his sister-in-law, Razan Abu-Salha, were brutally murdered by a neighbor in their Chapel Hill, North Carolina home. All three were students and involved in charity work. Deah was a second-year student at the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Dentistry. Yusor had just finished her degree at North Carolina State University (NCSU) and had been accepted to the same school as Deah. Razan was an undergraduate majoring in architecture at NCSU. Their families believed their children had been the victims of a hate crime and that the perpetrator was motivated by his animosity toward Muslims. In June 2019, the perpetrator pleaded guilty to three counts of first-degree murder and was sentenced to three consecutive life terms without the possibility of parole. While the families of the victims did everything in their power to bring the murderer to justice, they also found comfort in their faith. Deah's brother recited two verses from the Qur'an in his court statement:

Do not say that those who are killed in the way of God are dead; they are alive, but you are unaware of it. Happy with what God has given them of His grace; and they feel pleased with the good news, about those left behind them who could not join them, that there shall be no fear for them nor shall they grieve.¹

¹ Qur'an 2:154; 3:170. See "Farris Barakat (Deah's Brother) Court Sentencing Statement 6/12/2019," Our Three Winners Foundation, YouTube video, posted June 24, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YU-gU1BwX6w.

Deah's mother remarked that what had happened to her son was an ugly crime, but she also said:

I believe that God is wise and He let this happen. I accept God's wisdom and I don't question it. I am sure there is some good for me coming out of [this tragedy]. I believe Deah did not die; only his state of being changed. He was among us, but now he is in heaven. Knowing that gives me a sense of relief.²

Echoing her brother and mother, Deah's sister pointed out that while nothing could make up for her family's loss, much good had come out of their tragedy. NCSU established a scholarship in their honor. The UNC School of Dentistry created an annual "Deah Day" dedicated to their memory. Every year on that day, the students of the school do community service to honor Deah's and Yusor's charity work. In addition, students raised \$500,000 that created an endowment for a refugee project Deah and Yusor were working on.³ This case exemplifies the Muslim understanding of predestination, good, moral evil, and suffering.

Perhaps no theological issue in the world's religions has been more contentious than the question of predestination and its relation to the role of God in human actions and to the problem of evil and suffering. God is known as all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-benevolent, especially in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If God predestines people to have certain fates, then how can they be accountable for their actions in this world and in the hereafter? If God is all-powerful, do humans have free will? If God is omniscient and already knows what people will do, how can they be tested by God? If God is all-benevolent, why does he not intervene, especially when innocent people face injustice

² For Deah Barakat's mother's remarks, see "Family of Deah Shaddy Barakat, One of Three Muslims Killed in Chapel Hill," Anadolu Agency, YouTube video, posted March 5, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e9riCU9vpg&frags=pl%2Cwn.

³ For Deah's sister's talk, see "Dr. Suzanne Barakat Addresses the Parliament in a Moving Keynote," Parliament of the World's Religions, YouTube video, posted December 6, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9NISUhO7OU&frags=pl%2Cwn.

and suffering? Like members of other religious traditions, Muslims have also been dealing with these questions.

In this chapter, we explore predestination, freedom, and moral evil in Islamic theology. We first engage with some verses in the Qur'an and then look at different theological views concerning the notion of predestination. Finally, we explore the issue from the perspective of the divine names of God. The last section offers various ways of finding meaning in good and bad events. Before we turn to the notion of predestination in Islam, however, it is important to note that some Muslim scholars prefer the expression *measuring out*, as they believe this better captures the Islamic approach to human action in relation to God than the word *predestination*.⁴

Belief in predestination is the sixth and final article of faith in Islam. The tradition first establishes the other articles of faith and then builds the belief in predestination on them, as it is one of the most difficult areas in Islamic theology. In one of the hadiths, the Prophet emphasized not only the belief in “measuring out” but also “the good and the bad side of it.” Human beings, as such, will experience good and evil in this world. However, they should always maintain faith that both good and evil come from God. Whether what reaches them is benefit or loss, they are to accept it with thankfulness and have hope in God's mercy.⁵

The two most common concepts that appear in Islamic theology in the context of predestination are *qadar* and *qada*. The word *qadar* (literally, “power”) comes from the Arabic root *q-d-r*, which means “to decide,” “measure out,” or “judge.” But as a term, it generally means that God knows everything in the past and future through his eternal knowledge. He is all-knowing, and nothing exists outside of his knowledge. The word *qada* means “to execute,” “create,” or “fulfill.” Put simply, *qada* is the execution of *qadar*. According to *qadar*, God knows and has written down everything that will occur.

⁴ Sachiko and Chittick, *Vision of Islam*, 104.

⁵ Sachiko and Chittick, 113.

Through *qada*, God creates and ordains what is in the *qadar*. Sometimes, these two concepts are used interchangeably. In emphasizing God's power over creation, phrases such as "Ma sha Allah" (what God wills), "In sha Allah" (God willing), and "La hawla wa la kuwata illa billah" (there is no might nor power except in God) have become part of the daily language of Muslims around the world.

Measuring Out in the Qur'an

The Qur'an emphasizes that God creates with measure: "We have created all things in proportion and measure. We have treasures of everything. We send it down only in well-known measure."⁶ The Qur'an also stresses that there is nothing outside of God's knowledge: "With Him are the keys of unseen: None but He knows them. He knows all that is in the land and sea. No leaf falls without His knowledge, nor is there a single grain in the darkness of the earth, or anything, fresh or dry, that is not written in a clear Record."⁷ The prophet Abraham's supplication in the Qur'an depicts God's involvement in people's lives: "[God is] who created me. It is He who guides me; He who gives me food and drink; He who cures me when I am ill; He who will cause me to die and then bring me to life again."⁸

Theological Schools on Measuring Out

If God knows everything and is in control of everything, what role do humans play in their actions, whether good or bad? Islamic theological schools have taken three main positions on freedom and predestination.

⁶ Qur'an 54:49; 15:21.

⁷ Qur'an 6:59.

⁸ Qur'an 26:78–81.

First, based on various Qur'anic verses and hadiths, some Muslim theologians have argued that every human action is predetermined, and thus humans have no power over what they do. Human beings do not have free will either. Like leaves in a strong wind, they cannot control their actions. This approach was represented by a theological school known as Jabriya, whose first representative was Jahm bin Safwan (d. 745). In addition to believing that all human activities are predestined, adherents of this school argued that if humans were the creators of their movements, then they would be able to create in the same way as God. However, only God can create, and humans are only the products of creation. Among God's attributes is that he is all-knowing, and his knowledge is eternal. Everything then depends on his knowledge, and nothing can change.

The Jabriya approach had political implications, and it is therefore not surprising that others disagreed with this theological interpretation. Having the right answer for human actions in relation to God was important. In the civil wars during the Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE), for example, many companions of the Prophet died at the hands of fellow Muslims. If human actions are foreordained, then believers must accept that Muslims who kill and are killed act as part of a plan foreordained by God. Other questions have revolved around what to make of the condition of someone who commits a major sin, especially a ruler. If humans are predestined to behave in a certain way and have no power over their actions, then believers should not revolt against the injustices of a ruler. Those who have argued in favor of this theological idea point to verses in the Qur'an to justify their positions:

God is the Creator of all things and He is the Guardian over everything. God knows what every female carries and how much their wombs diminish or increase – everything with Him is measured. Whomever God guides is on the right path, and whomever God leads to stray is a loser. Yet you do not wish unless God wishes. God is full of knowledge and wisdom.⁹

⁹ Qur'an 39:62; 13:8; 7:178; 76:30.

When it was founded, the second school, Qadariya, disagreed with almost everything the Jabriya campaigned for. The Mutazilites later expanded on the Qadariya view, which emphasized human free will and power in relation to God. Unlike representatives of the Jabriya school, they argued that humans control their own actions, and their movements cannot be attributed to God. At the heart of this theological position is the question of justice in relation to God. Advocates of this school stress that humans are accountable because they enjoy freedom in their actions; they are the creators of what they do, whether good or bad, and they will eventually face punishment or reward for their choices. Attributing human acts to God is inconsistent with God's justice and incompatible with the idea of the world as a testing place for humans.

The Mutazilites argued that if human actions are predestined, as the Jabriya maintained, then human accountability would seem pointless, and belief in a day of judgment would be unnecessary. Predestination implies that God forces certain actions on his creation. This would contradict the idea that God is just. The Mutazila school's view of predestination has had political implications as well. According to their interpretation, rulers can be held accountable for their injustices, and their crimes and sins cannot be interpreted as divinely predestined. The Mutazila school was especially favored by the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258). Like the Jabriyas, they also justified their position through verses in the Qur'an: "Whoever does evil will be requited for it and will find no protector or helper apart from God. They said, 'Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves: if You do not forgive us and have mercy, we shall certainly be lost.' We showed him the way, whether he be grateful or ungrateful."¹⁰

A third position that offers a middle way was originally put forward by the Ashari and Maturidi, which later became the official theological schools of the Sunni, who today make up more than 80 percent of Muslims. The founders of both schools were initially

¹⁰ Qur'an 4:123; 7:23; 76:3.

members of the Mutazila school but later parted ways. They disagreed with the Mutazilites concerning their view of human actions. The Ashari and Maturidi explained their position through the doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*). While God was the creator of every action, humans were the ones who acquire them by choosing them of their free will. Therefore, humans are accountable for their actions. God wants humans to opt for good, but they have the freedom to choose evil. In this sense, humans are not the creators of their actions, but because they desire or wish for a particular action, God creates it.

The Asharite and Maturidi schools also distinguished between what is determined and what is known. In this regard, one should understand divine determining as a form of knowledge. According to Muslim scholar Colin Turner: “The knowledge of the knower depends on the thing which is known; the thing which is known is not, and cannot be, dependent on the knowledge of the knower.” For advocates of these schools, therefore, people’s actions are not determined according to God’s knowledge. Rather, because God is all-knowing, he foresees people’s will and choice. To elaborate this view, Turner provides the following example: “My knowledge that X is a thief is dependent on my having seen him steal, or on my having heard about his stealing from someone else; his being a thief is not, and cannot, be dependent on the fact that I know he has stolen something.” Turner then points out that this person is “a thief regardless of whether I know he is a thief, and the fact that I know he is a thief has no effect whatsoever on his having become a thief, his being a thief now or the continuation of his thieving in the future.” Likewise, Turner continues, what is known by God “does not depend for its existence on Divine knowledge: it is not God’s knowledge of a thing which brings it into existence, or effects changes in its existential status, it is God’s will in conjunction with His power.” He concludes that:

[C]ompulsion, therefore, is not something that can be predicated on knowledge, which is simply the awareness on the part of the

knower of the thing which is known. Therefore, it is meaningless for anyone to assert that a man enters hell because God has always known that he would, in the same way that it is meaningless for me to assert that it is my knowledge that X is a thief that has made him steal from other people and end up in prison.¹¹

In this sense, the Asharite and Maturidi schools differed from the Mutazilites by emphasizing that humans are not the creators of their actions – God is. They also differed from the Jabriyas by noting that humans have free will when they choose to opt for what is good or what is evil.

Muslim theologians often turn to the following story to understand the positions of each theological school concerning predestination, human action, and God. Let's imagine X fires a rifle, and because of this action, Y is wounded and dies. Here the question is raised: "Since Y's death was determined by God to be at such-and-such a time, what was the fault of the man who fired the rifle through his own choice? For if he had not fired it, Y would still have died."¹² In addition:

If God had known from pre-eternity that X, whom He created, would enter hell, and if all things had been governed by divine determining, then the inescapable fact would have been that X had been 'destined' for hell from the outset. How, then, could X be said to have had free will, given that God knew before X was born that he would end up in hell?¹³

According to the Jabriya, even if X had not fired the gun, Y would still have died. They believed people are not the creators of their own actions. The Mutazilites maintained that if X had not fired the gun, Y would not have died because people are the creators of their

¹¹ Colin Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2013), 375.

¹² Turner, 377.

¹³ Turner, 375.

own actions. The Asharites and Maturidis argued that if X had not fired the rifle, we do not know whether Y would have died or not.¹⁴

The Status of a Grave Sinner and Moral Evil

In the early years of Islam, Muslim theologians not only disagreed on the role of humans in their actions, they also argued about the fate of a believer who commits a mortal sin that is considered evil. Two major questions were at stake. What is grave sin (*kabira*)? What is the religious status of a grave sinner (*murtakib al-kabira*)?¹⁵ While a consensus has not been reached on what is a mortal sin, some of the theologians maintained that an action that is clearly forbidden in Islam and requires punishment in this world as well as in the hereafter is viewed as a major sin. Among them are associating partners with God, theft, killing an innocent person, giving false testimony, and devouring the wealth of orphans.

The debate about the state of a grave sinner became an issue particularly during the civil wars following the death of Muhammad. A major event that sparked the controversy was the killing of Uthman bin Affan (r. 644–56), the third caliph and the Prophet's son-in-law.¹⁶ Those who killed him justified their act based on the argument that he was a sinner. The killing of Uthman would eventually lead to civil wars in the early Muslim community. Many of the companions of Muhammad and the members of his immediate family died in these conflicts, including Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656–61), the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, who succeeded Uthman as the third caliph, as well as his grandson, Husayn (d. 680). In the

¹⁴ Turner, 375.

¹⁵ For an introduction to the concept of sin in Islamic theology and the question of a grave sinner, see Vecihi Sönmez, "İslam İnancında Günah Kavramı," *İslami Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 28:1 (2017): 42–66 and Adil Bebek, "Kebire," in *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: TDV, 2022), 25:163–64.

¹⁶ A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 37.

fight, both sides were Muslims. They killed and were killed. As such, what would be their religious status? Muslim theologians offered different answers to this question.

The first group, known as the Kharijites (literally, the ones who leave), maintained that if mortal sinners would not repent, they would be considered as unbelievers (*kafir*) in this world as well as in the hereafter. They supported their argument with the verses from the Qur'an. One of them reads as follows: "But those who disobey God and His Messenger and transgress His limits will be admitted by God to a Fire, where they will remain forever and suffer a humiliating punishment."¹⁷ According to their understanding of the Qur'an, the Kharijites believed that a grave sinner should not be accepted as part of the Muslim community anymore.¹⁸ Ali ibn Abi Talib was assassinated by a Kharijite with the accusation that he committed a grave sin by making an arbitration with his enemy during the second civil war. For them, Ali relied on his own opinion instead of relying on God's judgment alone.

The second group, known as the Murjiites (literally, those who postpone), differed from the Kharijites in their interpretation. They maintained that sin does not make a Muslim an unbeliever. The Qur'an mentions that God forgives all the sins except associating partners with him.¹⁹ For them, the matter of whether a mortal sinner remains a believer must be deferred to God in the hereafter. God will reveal the final word about their fate on the Day of Judgment.²⁰

The third group, the Mutazilites, offered an in-between position. They argued that the grave sinners are neither believers nor unbelievers. They will remain in an intermediate state (*al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn*). If the grave sinners repent, they will become believers, otherwise they will die as unbelievers.

¹⁷ Qur'an 4:14.

¹⁸ Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 47.

¹⁹ Qur'an 4:48.

²⁰ Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 28.

The Maturidi and Asharite scholars took a more positive approach toward a grave sinner. They distinguished between faith (*iman*) and actions (*a'mal*). A person is in the state of faith when they believe that there is no god but God and the Prophet Muhammad is his messenger. Their actions, including murder, do not disqualify them from this state. In a number of verses, while the Qur'an offers retribution for Muslims involved in killing, it still refers to them as the believers. Their grave sin does not change their status as a believer.²¹ Committing a grave sin is not because of a lack of faith; it is often about following one's selfish desires.²² Also, the Qur'an mentions that every action is counted: "Whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it."²³ It also teaches that the believers should never lose hope in God's mercy even if they committed sin: "Say, [God says], My servants who have transgressed against themselves, do not despair of God's mercy. Surely, God forgives all sins. He is truly the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful."²⁴ The responsibility of a believer is to avoid sin and seek refuge in God, otherwise, as pointed by Nursi, a continuous sinful condition may eventually dismantle the light of faith: "Sin, penetrating to the heart, will blacken and darken it until it extinguishes the light of belief. Within each sin is a path leading to unbelief. Unless that sin is swiftly obliterated by seeking God's pardon, it will grow from a worm into a snake that gnaws on the heart."²⁵

Predestination in Relation to Good and Evil

In Islam, predestination is often discussed in relation to the problem of evil and suffering. The Qur'an frequently refers to the evil, suffering, and calamities that people experience, all of which are

²¹ Qur'an 2:178 and 49:9.

²² Nursi, *The Flashes*, 112.

²³ Qur'an 99:7–8.

²⁴ Qur'an 39:53.

²⁵ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 22.

part of their trial and examination in this world. Qur'an 90:4 explicitly states that humans were created in suffering. The word in Arabic that points to the suffering of people in this verse is *kabad*. According to some Qur'an commentaries, *kabad* pertains to hardship, suffering, pain, trial, and distress.²⁶ In other verses, the Qur'an specifies the forms of suffering and notes that God is testing people with "fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, lives, and crops."²⁷ The Qur'an also stresses human weakness and ignorance and indicates that because they possess inadequate knowledge, people cannot comprehend the wisdom behind their suffering and trials.²⁸ According to the Qur'an, people may dislike something while it is good for them or like something while it is bad for them.²⁹

The Islamic theological position on moral evil and suffering in relation to humans is well captured in a number of narratives in the Qur'an. The story of the prophet Moses and an unidentified man known as Khidr in Islamic literature is one of them.³⁰ According to the Qur'an, God asked Moses who was the most knowledgeable among people. When Moses answered "Me," God revealed that there was a person more knowledgeable than Moses at the place where two seas met. He told Moses to go there and find the servant of God, Khidr. After Moses found Khidr, he asked if he could accompany Khidr in order to acquire his knowledge. Khidr replied, "You would not be able to be patient with me while traveling." When Moses assured him that he would be patient, Khidr responded, "How could you be patient in matters beyond your knowledge?"

²⁶ Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami' al-Ahkam al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Muassas al-Resalah, 2006), 22:292. See also Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (London: The Book Foundation, 2003), 1215.

²⁷ Qur'an 2:155.

²⁸ Qur'an 22:73; 33:72; 2:216.

²⁹ Qur'an 2:216.

³⁰ This story is narrated in chapter 18 of the Qur'an, "Sura al-Kahf."

Humbled, Moses answered, "God willing, you will find me patient. I will not disobey you in any matter."³¹

They agreed to travel together, but Khidr again advised Moses, "If you follow me then, do not question anything I do before I mention it to you myself."

They set off for their venture. First, they took a boat. While on the boat, Khidr made a hole in it. Moses got frustrated and asked, "How could you make a hole in this boat? Do you want to drown its passengers? What a strange thing to do!" Khidr reminded him of their agreement that Moses needed to be patient. Moses apologized for his forgetfulness. Farther along in their journey, Khidr killed a young boy they encountered. Angrily, Moses said, "How could you kill an innocent person? He has not killed anyone! What a terrible thing you do."

Khidr replied, "Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?"

Moses responded, "From now on, if I question anything you do, banish me from your company."

Their journey continued. Moses and Khidr arrived at a town and asked for food and hospitality from its inhabitants. They were refused. When Moses and Khidr were about to leave the town, they saw a ruined wall, and Khidr rebuilt it. Moses was disquieted and once again questioned Khidr's motives. At this point, they parted ways. But before they took their departures, Khidr revealed to Moses the wisdom behind his actions.

In the first case, the boat was owned by some needy people who, with their earnings, were feeding their families. In the direction the boat was moving, there was a king who was seizing all solid boats. He would not, however, seize a boat that had a hole. In the second case, the young boy Khidr had killed would in later life have become a criminal and committed many atrocities. In the third case, the wall was owned by two orphans in the town, and a treasure

³¹ Qur'an 18:69.

for them was buried underneath it. He built the wall so that when the orphans reached maturity, they would own it.

Obviously, the acts committed by Khidr seemed horrifying and immoral – full of suffering, fear, and concern. But the story reflects the Qur'an's approach to evil and suffering. In Moses, we see that humans are ignorant compared to God. Because their knowledge is limited, they are unable to understand the larger picture of the evil and suffering around them, reflecting the Qur'anic instruction: "What you see as evil might be good for you."³²

Another account is the story of Joseph. Although the Qur'an describes the narrative as one of the best stories, it is full of pain and sorrow. Joseph faced moral evil at the hands of his fellow humans, including his own brothers. His siblings believed that their father loved Joseph more than them, and they became jealous of him. The brothers initially planned to kill Joseph so that their father, Jacob, would pay more attention to them. However, the brothers eventually modified their plan and threw Joseph into a pit. A caravan that was passing by found Joseph and took him with them to Egypt. He was then sold into slavery, and a ranking official bought him. Not long after, his master's wife fell in love with Joseph and attempted to seduce him. Joseph did not succumb to the temptation with God's help. However, he was still accused as the aggressor and imprisoned. In the prison, Joseph interpreted the dream of one of his fellow prisoners who worked for the king. Joseph's interpretation came to be true. The fellow prisoner was released and continued to work for the king. One day the king himself dreamed about "seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones; seven green ears of corn and [seven] others dry."³³ No one was able to offer a profound interpretation. The fellow prisoner remembered Joseph's ability to interpret dreams and told the king about him. The king then summoned Joseph and asked him to

³² Qur'an 2:216.

³³ Qur'an 12:43.

interpret his dream. Joseph informed the king that there would be seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. So the king should store up and prepare for the years of hardship. Not long after, Joseph was exonerated and became the chief minister for the king. Because of the measures that were taken prior to the famine, Joseph's brothers made their way to Egypt. The family was reunited. Joseph forgave his brothers for what they did to him. He said to them: "There is no reproach against you this day. God will forgive you. He is the Most Merciful of the merciful."³⁴

In the story, while the Qur'an makes clear that it was the moral evils of fellow humans that made Joseph suffer, it also points out that God was aware of what Joseph was going through. Everything depends on God, and nothing is beyond his knowledge. Throughout the story, both Joseph and his father, Jacob, turn to God with patience, hope, and trust. Eventually, Joseph becomes a means of a greater good and remains grateful to God. Joseph responds to his brothers' evil with forgiveness and compassion.

The Qur'anic story of the creation of humans also provides an example of Islamic theology's perspective on moral evil. According to this account, God told the angels that he would create humans as successors on earth. The angels asked, "How can You put someone there who will do evil and shed blood, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?" But God responded, "I know what you do not know."³⁵ God then created Adam and Eve in heaven, and they were expelled from there because of their disobedience. In their new dwelling, the earth, God equipped humans with free will, and they had the opportunity to reach their full potential. While God's desire for people is to use their capabilities for what is good, they also have the freedom to choose evil. God created humans despite their ability to commit moral evil. However, his wisdom justified their creation, including their evil acts, because of the greater good.

³⁴ Qur'an 12:92.

³⁵ Qur'an 2:30.

Moral Evil as the Manifestation of God's Names

As indicated in Chapter 3, evil and suffering are also related to the manifestation of God's names (*asma al-husna*). This world and the humans who live in it are limited in many ways, but they are unique configurations and manifestations of the divine names. To explain why God allows suffering, an analogy using fashion designers and models might be helpful. Once models are hired, they have no say in the clothes they will wear. It is a designer's right to try various styles on the model; a model cannot say, "I do not want to wear this dress." Let's imagine there is a beautiful designer dress that a fashion model likes. If the designer decides to try another dress on the model, she cannot decline it if she dislikes it. The designer can only produce and decide on the best dress after many tries on the hired model. These tests will eventually reveal the best of the designer as well as the model. Likewise, each creature can be considered God's fashion model. Without changes in our situation, including suffering because of moral evil, there is no way for people to know God.³⁶ It is through these alterations that one becomes acquainted with God's attributes, which are embodied in creation. For example, God is the Giver of Mercy (al-Rahim), the Most Generous (al-Karim), the Provider (al-Razzaq), and the Just (al-Adl). These names of God "require" the existence of the needy.³⁷ That God is generous and all providing has no meaning unless there are creatures who call on God to meet their needs, including when they are facing moral evil. People who suffer become the mirror of God's compassion, generosity, and justice not only in this world but also in the hereafter.

Fighting against Moral Evil

While Islamic theology emphasizes that there is nothing beyond God's knowledge and that moral evil is part of God's creation, it also

³⁶ Said Nursi, *Mektubat* (Istanbul: Söz, 2009), 271–72.

³⁷ Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 216.

admonishes people to use their freedom to fight against moral evil and stand for justice: “O you who believe! Stand firmly for justice, as witnesses for God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, God can best take care of both. So do not follow your own desire, so that you can act justly. If you distort or turn away from justice, then surely God is aware of what you do.”³⁸ In another verse, the Qur’an reads, “God enjoins justice, kindness, and generosity towards relatives and He forbids indecency, injustice, and aggression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed.”³⁹ The Qur’an also points to some specific acts that people should avoid. Among them are theft, injustice, oppression, lying, slandering, and backbiting. The Qur’an repeatedly asks believers to support the rights of the most vulnerable in society, especially those who are unable to defend themselves. It also points out that it is an obligation upon the rich to share a certain percentage of their income with those who are in need. It encourages them to be charitable. Violating the rights of fellow humans will result in a severe punishment not only in this world but also in the hereafter.

In a number of hadiths, the Prophet Muhammad also taught his followers to stand for justice and be mindful of the rights of not only people but also animals and plants. Concerning an evil act, he said: “Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart – and that is the weakest level of faith.”⁴⁰ In another hadith, Muhammad said: “The best jihad is to speak the truth to a tyrannical ruler.”⁴¹ He did not want his people to be bystanders in the face of injustice and oppression.

Wrongdoers are asked to repent and seek the forgiveness of those they hurt because of their evil acts. The Qur’an also encourages those who are wronged to forgive: “But if you overlook their

³⁸ Qur’an 4:135.

³⁹ Qur’an 16:90.

⁴⁰ *Sahih Muslim: kitab al-Iman, bab al-bayan al-Islam.*

⁴¹ *Sunan Abi Davud; kitab al-malahim, bab al-’amr wa al-nahy.*

offenses, forgive them, pardon them, then truly God is Forgiving, Merciful.”⁴² The Qur’an also points out that “the recompense of an evil is an evil like it. But whoever forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is with God. Indeed, He does not love evildoers.”⁴³

Seeking Meaning in Evil and Suffering

Through suffering because of moral evil, humans progress and can move toward perfection. Without upsets, turbulence, and struggles, life is static and monotonous, and people cannot evolve morally, spiritually, and intellectually. Islamic theology teaches that pain may bring one closer to God and draws considerable attention to the suffering of the prophets as a result of moral evil, including Muhammad himself. Without poverty and hunger, we may not be able to appreciate wealth and surfeit. Without death, we cannot understand the importance of life. Without trials and tribulations, it would be difficult to imagine not only personal progress and gratitude but also material gains outside of one’s self, such as in human rights and medicine. It is then appropriate to end this chapter with the observations of the great Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi (d. 1934):

Reflect! The order of life
Is a subtle, marvelous, unique order,
For nothing but death endears life,
And only the fear of tombs adorns it;
Were it not for the misery of painful life,
People would not grasp the meaning of happiness.
Whomever the scowling of the dark does not terrify,
Does not feel the bliss of the new morning.⁴⁴

⁴² Qur’an 64:14.

⁴³ Qur’an 42:40.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 265.

