

Abdal Hakim Murad on free will

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One of the spiritual aspects of Islam I've always been thinking about is its concept of free will for within Islam it is often said that all our actions are eventually God's will. As a Christian I spontaneously react to such concepts with the idea that God, out of love, has granted us all a free will. I was very pleased therefore to read a different translation of verse 14:4 of the Qur'an in the translation of professor A.S. Haleem – a translation that I hold in high esteem. Often part of that verse is translated as "God leads whoever He wills to stray." Yet in Haleem's translation, we read "God leaves whoever he wills to stray." That more passive phrasing offers a very different nuance.

Translators tend to squirm at things like this. Islam gives you naked monotheism without the cute metaphors. In Islam we talk of *the* One God and the implications of His divine majesty is that everything that happens is an expression of the divine power, including the people going wrong. In the Latin tradition particularly, people like Augustine and Aquinas tried to dissociate the divine from the dark things in creation, setting up a semi-autonomous demonic sphere where things have gone wrong and God can't deal with it and we have to cooperate with God in order to redeem it. But that's not the Islamic view.

So you're saying that "He leads whoever He wills to stray" is more correct?

Yes. That's what the text says. "He guides whomever He wills, He misguides whomever He wills". You see, all of these things are oppositions in the Divine Names. The raiser, the Abaser, the Judge... In the Ghazalian tradition of Islam you would say that when you've looked beyond the 'superficial interface' and tasted the reality of the divine *jelal*¹, you then realize that the ground of being is the divine compassion and love, but that there's also another side to it. Blake would call that the left hand of God. That left hand is the plagues, the dying babies, the exploding stars and the scary stuff.

If you over-antropomorphize God, you end up complaining and it becomes a crisis in the theodicy.² Because Islam doesn't have the incarnation, it doesn't antropomorphize God to that extent. It is not like the Buddhists who say anthropomorphism is for babies but it's still more abstract and hence it can deal better with the problem of pain.

Within Islam you can of course find the Mu'tazalites who said that you can't attribute bad stuff to God because there is free will and moral agency but classical Sunni Islam bites the bullet and says that the reality is that God is doing whatever happens.

An approach we can often find among mystics of different traditions...

The Christian mystics indeed looked at it a bit more clearly however, as they happened to contemplate on the problems of darkness and suffering. They look upon them in a certain non-

1 Splendour, glory and brilliance

2 The theodicy is the crucial question of monotheistic religion about the existence of evil: if there is a God which is all good, all powerful and all merciful why then does evil exist in the world?

sentimental way and can also embrace the divine rigor and the terrifying aspects of reality as an expression of divine love.

That means you can love the beloved even when she's slapping you in your face. That's eventually what real love is about.

Which brings us to the tradition and teachings of the Sufis, is it not?

One of the early Sufi saints was persecuted and was thrown to the lions by a tyrant but when the lion took the saint's head in his mouth he all of the sudden let him go. So the disciples of the saint asked afterwards: "What was going through your mind when your head was in the mouth of the lion?" and he answered: "I was trying to remember the sharia ruling on the purity of lion saliva."

He excepted the lion as a part of the divine majesty and just tried to make sure he was right with God at that moment.

So it's about trying to expand you mind to God-like proportions to see darkness and light and understand these things. To try to give an account of the moral implications of the divine agency is very unwise.

Rumi has this story about the ant in the carpet. The ant is complaining because he tries to get to the other side of the carpet but he has to go up and down and because there are so many different colors that seem to be designed to make his life miserable. But of course the point is that the weaver of the carpet sees its purpose, its perfection and its beauty – which is something the ant can't grasp.

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