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From the Divine to the Human: Contemporary Islamic Thinkers on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic, edited by Muhammad U. Faruque and Mohammed Rustom, is a fresh and insightful engagement with one of the most challenging questions of human thought, namely evil and human suffering, from an Islamic perspective. The volume takes a new approach by focusing on the human subject and its potential and spiritual development in the face of evil and suffering. Although the overarching problem of evil is considered one of the most investigated questions in the field of philosophy of religion, the issue is mostly addressed in the context of God's divine attributes with the objective to justify the existence of a powerful and benevolent God and the fact that evil exists, hence the formation of various theodicies. The present volume, however, shifts the attention from the divine attributes to human capabilities, and while it does not overlook the metaphysical nature of evil and suffering, it draws attention to the anthropocentric conceptions of them, thereby addressing both the theoretical and the practical dimensions of the problem.

The volume begins by a concise introduction where the editors introduce the topic and provide a short history of various versions of the problem of evil and suffering, as well as ways by which the philosophers of religions have largely addressed the issue. Following this background information, the reader is made aware of the unique approach of the present study and the redirection that will take place throughout the volume, *i.e.* drawing attention away from the traditional approach in philosophy of religion, where the focus is on God and His attributes, and directing the emphasis on human capacities and spiritual development. Subsequently, the contributors of the fourteen chapters of the volume attempt to achieve the aforementioned goal by investigating both pre-modern and contemporary Islamic literature to propose new avenues in studying the nature of evil and human suffering.

In Chapter 1, "Remarks on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic", Seyyed Hossein Nasr begins by informing the reader that while the problem of evil is considered the primary reason for many in the West to denounce religion, by and large this is not the case in Muslim societies. The existence of good and evil from an ontological level is discussed next, pronouncing that from the metaphysical point of view these two related notions do not possess the same ontological foundation; as such, there is only the Divine, (the Absolute/ All-Good) at the ontological level, and evil does not exist *per se*. This, of course,

does not negate the fact that evil is real at the level of relative existence which is this world. In an attempt to explicate the origin of evil, Nasr continues by underscoring the inner-teaching of the Qur'an – the root of the mystical dimension of Islam – where God is referred to as the "Light of the heavens and the earth" and points out that the act of creation entails separation from the Source, the Light, resulting in darkness, that which we call evil. Viewed from this perspective, human suffering is ultimately due to this separation – separation from our divine essence, our *fiṭra*. His concluding remarks are on the Covid pandemic, where he emphasizes the importance of the spiritual lessons to be learned from it. According to Nasr, suffering caused by the pandemic should bring us closer to our Source, help us realize we are not the ruler of nature, and acknowledge that "with respect to the preservation of the natural environment, the pandemic has not been negative" (11).

The notion of environment is picked up in Chapter 2, "The Existential Threat of Climate Change: A Practical Application of Avicenna's Theory of Evil". Rosabel Ansari's research is structured on three main pillars. Firstly, she draws attention to the wider problem of climate danger along with many other threats such as pandemic where human life is threatened; secondly, she describes the major shift that has happened in the climate change discourse, wherein this problem is identified as an existential threat to human existence; and thirdly she attempts to apply her findings within the framework of Avicenna's philosophy. According to Avicenna's theory of providence, she informs us, the world is governed by the Order of the Good, and while evil is necessary for the functioning of the world, its affliction is limited to individuals because providence ensures the eternity of the species. "Given this theory, we might ask whether there is any space in Avicenna's philosophy for the possibility of an existential threat to human species or whether his philosophical system simply cannot address this issue" (21). Ansari concludes, while the existential threat imposed by climate change, as well as the historical elimination of species, impose a major challenge to the traditional articulation of Avicennian philosophy, there nevertheless appears to be opportunities to think of innovative ways to apply his teachings.

In Chapter 3, "On Self-Knowledge, Divine Trial, and Discipleship", Mukhtar H. Ali invites the reader to ponder on human suffering from a different perspective, namely, training of the soul. The author begins by explaining the foundation of Islamic spirituality which is grounded in self-knowledge (*ma'rifat al-nafs*); it is through the self that one gets to know God and begin to actualize its potentials. To this end, the author points out that according to the Qur'an, the ability to recognize truth and attain various levels of perfection is ingrained in human nature by God. However, due to the fact that

the soul is constantly being pulled in opposite directions: the material and the spiritual, the training and discipling of the soul becomes necessary for human spiritual development. After familiarizing the reader with the stages of soul's transformation towards perfection, Ali draws attention to the instrumental role that divine trial plays in training of the soul. It is through the manifestation of the Divine names – the names that signify His majesty, and those that relate to His beauty – that the soul is trained. Trials and tribulations are therefore means by which the soul is trained through the names of majesty. Moreover, the author asserts, “just as God trains the soul through the names of majesty, He trains it through the names of beauty ... that is, just as God trains the soul through trial and hardship, so too must He train it through bounties and blessings” (40).

Understanding life's tribulations as a necessary component in human development appears again in Chapter 4, “Necessitated Evil: An Islamic Neoplatonic Theodicy from the Ismaili Tradition”. Khalil Andani begins by sharing his observation concerning the underrepresentation of Muslim theodicy in the current literature. He notes, although the problem of evil is a major challenge to all monotheistic religions, contemporary scholarly works relating to God and the problem of evil are mainly concerned with Christian analytic theology and even when Muslim theodicies are presented, they tend to focus on Sunni theological views. This chapter, therefore, attempts to construct a Muslim philosophical theodicy with its foundation in the Islamic Neoplatonism of the Ismaili tradition. Andani first explains the metaphysical aspect of this theodicy to demonstrate that God only creates what is good and perfect, that which is called the First Intellect and may be recognized as goodness itself. “[In] Ismaili Neoplatonic thought ... evil has no positive ontological status, is privative and accidental. God does not create evil. Evil *qua* imperfection is the necessary consequence of the fact that perfect creation of God is itself *not* identical to God” (64). The author further explains that the Universal Soul created by the First Intellect is not perfect but utilizes its imperfection to seek the good; thus, evil serves a greater good at this level of existence. The second good that evil serves is to facilitate the purification of the human soul to reach its fullest potential; human beings encountering hardships and tribulations will realize the goodness that is hidden within their struggles as they go through their spiritual journey.

In Chapter 5, “Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Metaphysical Theodicy”, Justin Cancelliere investigates Nasr's teachings to present his theodicy. The author starts by informing the reader that while Nasr takes the problem of evil very seriously, he nevertheless views the post Enlightenment's emergence of arguments from evil – the attempt to question the existence of God – as indicative

of an intellectual decline. Cancelliere continues by describing Nasr's teachings on metaphysics, where metaphysics is not only associated with the ability to solve difficult problems and engage in discursive reasoning, but more importantly, is involved with the direct knowledge of the Divine resulting in a strong conviction in Him, that which is called *gnosis*, *i.e.* a mode of knowing that transcends thought. "In contrast to those contemporary thinkers who disregard *gnosis* in engaging with the problem of evil, Nasr places it at the heart of his theodicy, since for him no fully satisfactory theodicy is possible without it" (69). Another significant feature of Nasr's theodicy is to consider the human experience of evil to offer much insight to how one should understand the reality of suffering; in other words, Nasr's emphasis is on suffering rather than evil, for in his view, the purification of the heart happens when one encounters tribulations and goes through the experience of suffering with the right intention. After highlighting the main pillars of Nasr's metaphysical theodicy, the author dedicates the rest of the chapter to investigating ways by which this theodicy may be expanded to address some of the challenges that are briefly addressed in Nasr's writings.

Chapter 6, "Hume on Trial: Can Evil and Suffering be Justified?", is tasked with scrutinizing the teachings of Hume, a famous secular philosopher of the Enlightenment period, who has significantly influenced the contemporary secular humanist movement. Muhammad U. Faruque begins by highlighting Hume's main arguments pertaining to the problem of evil and suffering, more specifically, what is called "pointless suffering" all across life. The objective of the chapter is to contest the so called "evidential problem of evil" wherein the atheist philosophers base their claims for the nonexistence of God. According to the author, the meaning of suffering is not correctly understood in the Humean tradition. This misunderstanding has caused an unrealistic assumption that the goal of creation must be for humans to pursue a pleasure-seeking life, is the foundation stone of the. In contesting this idea, Faruque argues, that "the telos of creation is the human being's spiritual development and ultimate perfection for which suffering in life can be a means to actualize one's latent spiritual and ethical flourishing" (90). What follows next is a detailed discussion of Hume's arguments along with the author's refutations. The notion of evil and suffering is then explained from the Islamic tradition to include the theological viewpoints of the Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite schools, the Qur'anic teachings, as well as philosophical teachings of Avicenna and Ibn'Arabī, and ways by which one can overcome these challenges. The author encourages the reader to reframe the question, instead of asking why there is suffering in the world, we should be asking whether God has given us adequate means to overcome suffering. Given the fact that according to the Qur'an, humans have

been created in the image of God, the answer is positive. Human beings have already been granted the resources that are needed to overcome life's challenges; however, these inner resources are hidden behind the egocentric self. Thus, seen from an Islamic perspective, the author affirms, trials and tribulations are means by which the purification of the soul happens, and a great spiritual reckoning is made possible.

The theme of human transformation in light of suffering discussed previously is reiterated in Chapter 7, "Cultivating Prayerful Presence at the Bedside from Mastery to Mystery". Hina Khalid starts by drawing attention to the spiritual significance of the body, as it is discussed in the Sufi/mystical tradition of Islam. In this context, the sacredness of human being's physical modalities, as well as bodily afflictions, are emphasized as means by which spiritual moralities are developed, and divine traits become manifested. Establishing on the Sufi literature and reflecting on the blessedness of the body, the author argues that the practice of visiting and spending time with the sick, establishes the framework for an ethic of 'mystery' over 'mastery'. "[I]n this vision, the other is not the object to be finally controlled or domesticated but a fellow creature who is enfolded in, and forever journeying towards, the inexhaustible infinite." (112). Viewed from the Sufi perspective, ill health signifies a spiritual transformative experience for the individual going through the suffering as well as the caregiver where virtues of servitude, patience, and gratitude are actualized – occasions for the individuals to get oriented more fully with the divine.

The instrumentality of suffering in human spiritual development is picked up, once again, in Chapter 8, "The Gifts of Suffering and the Virtues of the Heart". Atif Khalil opens the discussion by noting that the problem of evil did not make itself known as a major issue in Islamic theological discourse, primarily because the focus was directed on other areas of inquiry, for example the highly debated notion of free will and predestination or the ontological status of the Qur'an. However, the actuality of suffering in human lives was recognized and explored within the Islamic tradition of Sufism. The aim was to create a framework for the practical guidelines on how one may comprehend the wisdom behind the adversities of life, and furthermore, to know how to properly respond with the goal of recognizing the positive impact that this experience might have on human development. Khalil continues by discussing the doctrine of the Fall to point out that we suffer simply because we are in the physical world (*dunyā*) which is at the lowest position of the cosmic hierarchy and identified as the realm of trials and tribulations. "To seek freedom from suffering in this rung of cosmic hierarchy is therefore to seek the impossible, since suffering is woven, in a sense, into its very fabric" (145). The chapter concludes by highlighting how some of the most significant virtues of the heart,

such as patience, forbearance, steadfastness, and trust in God, are cultivated as human individuals are faced with adversities, and recognize the opportunities that the experience of suffering offers in their spiritual journey.

In Chapter 9, “Cain, Systemic Evil, and our Inhumanity”, the Qur’anic narrative of the two sons of Adam, Abel and Cain, is scrutinized to bring to the forefront the reality of, and the roots of evil forces, within human individual and society. Martin Nguyen begins by noting that the stories of the Qur’an, although addresses a particular moment in human history, the message of the story is nevertheless immutable as it provides insight to humanity’s continual exposure to evil and its tendency towards it. Through this story, he argues, we learn that human nature is embedded with two distinct forces: that which brings us closer to our divine essence, and the other which distances us from it. “In Abel is the enabling of our *fiṭra*, that natural sense of belonging to the Divine. Here is our inclination to good and righteous action personified. Through Cain our *fiṭra* is stunned and stymied. This is our inclination to wickedness and acts of transgression” (160). The concluding remarks of the chapter extends the above framework from the individual to the group and sheds light on how systemic evil flows to various peoples when the children of Cain become rulers and leaders of society.

The objective of Chapter 10, “Practical Muslim Theodicy, A Ghazalian Perspective on Emotional Pain”, is to examine the teachings of al-Ghazālī pertaining to life’s tribulations and how to reflect and respond when faced with hardship and adversity. Prior to diving into al-Ghazālī’s theodicean thought, Joel Richmond criticizes the literature produced by the modern writers in the philosophy of religion on the problem of evil, with the exception of Hick, because contributions of non-Western religious intellectuals are hardly ever considered. To this end, some aspects of Hick’s famous “soul-Making Theodicy” is discussed and cross-referenced in al-Ghazālī’s teachings to demonstrate their similarities and differences. Subsequent to this brief discussion, the author explores al-Ghazālī’s overall thought on what constitutes evil in a theological context and points out that, due to the fact that problem of evil is multidimensional, we could say that al-Ghazālī “approached one aspect of the problem of evil from an Ash’arite theological perspective and another according to what he determined from moral psychology” (167). The author continues by highlighting al-Ghazālī’s practical teachings on how one should respond in the face of perceived evil and suffering, that is, to exercise the virtues of patience and gratitude, as well as have contentment with the decree of God.

The volume progresses with Chapter 11, “The Student and the Sage”, where Mohammed Rustom invites the reader to observe a philosophical and spiritual dialogue, relating to the problem of evil, between a philosophy of religion student and a sage. The conversation begins with the student’s astonishment to

learn that he has been walking the same route, exactly at the same time every day for a long time, and yet, he never saw the old man. The level of his amazement is elevated even more when he realizes that, while the wise man saw him every day, due to student's lack of readiness to receive God's help, the sage had refrained from approaching him. The author engages the reader by advancing the dialogue on the problem of evil, and the sage's response that, viewed from human perspective, this is a philosophical and theological problem; but, from the Divine viewpoint there is no problem. Although the reality and existence of evil is acknowledged by the sage, the root goes back to the ontological understanding of cosmic creation. Seen from this standpoint, the existence of evil in this world, the sage informs the student, "is because of the infinity of God, or what some call His all-possibility; God's all-possibility entails Self-negation, which entails manifestation, which entails separation, which entails evil" (183). The conversation also moves in the direction of addressing various forms of evil – moral and accidental – where human freedom and the nature of things are discussed. Delighted to have had the opportunity to learn from the wise man, the student learns one final point: that which is called evil veils true life, thus, one must rise above the veil in order to experience true life (there being here a play on the word "evil," which spelt backwards is "live," and when two of its letters are transposed, can also spell "veil").

The theme of transformative power of trials, discussed previously, is picked up in Chapter 12, "Trials as Transformation in Islamic Chaplaincy". Aila Vajid shares her experience as a chaplain and provides the reader with first-hand accounts of college students who, once reached a place of healing, recognized their trial and encounter with hardship played an instrumental role in their spiritual growth and finding more meaning and purpose in life. Preceding the discussion of student's experiences, the author invites the reader to ponder on a critical question – who are we, and what is the purpose behind human creation? Viewed from a metaphysical viewpoint, as emphasized in Islamic literature, God created human beings because He loved to be known; therefore, the purpose for human beings' creation is for them to get to know God, worship him with a sincere heart, and establish a genuine loving relationship with Him. In this context, the author states, every moment, whether in wellness or illness, in adversity or joy, becomes part of human spiritual development. "Human suffering then becomes a part of the journey – the journey of awakening, knowing, witnessing, connecting, and being" (190). The remaining sections of the chapter is dedicated to student's experiences of suffering and their transformation.

The transformative dimension of human suffering, albeit from a different perspective, is recapitulated in Chapter 13, "Transformative Love Amid Suffering in Hilmi Zia Ülken". Taraneh Wilkinson explores the writings of Hilmi

Zia Ülken, an Ottoman-Turkish philosopher of religion, to shed light on some of the practical ways that suffering maybe addressed. In this approach, the aim is to consider various possibilities of the human situation and make the effort to recognize both the loneliness and potential moral poverty of the individual, as well as the person's ability to rise above such adversities. The author affirms that, in Ülken's worldview, "transformative love is both a response to the human condition of suffering and an intentional route to address the suffering and human isolation caused by human injustice and mutual alienation" (201). Wilkinson dedicates the remaining parts of the chapter in highlighting Ülken's viewpoints on transformative love and demonstrates that his philosophy is grounded in the idealism that is veiled in God's unity (Unity of Being), while recognizing the realism that is implied in multiplicity.

The volume comes to an end with Chapter 14, "Suffering as Metaphysical Narrative: Exploring an Islamic Theodicy of Authorship", in which human suffering is discussed in a larger context of the cosmic creation. Cyrus Ali Zargar, through the story of a grieving relative who lost their 23-year-old son, inspires the reader to reflect on this tragedy from a different perspective – that there is meaning and purpose in this life, and more significantly, that life has an author. Influenced by the teachings of Ibn'Arabī, the 13th-century Muslim Sufi theorist, and Mikhail Bakhtin, the 20th-century Russian literary critic, Zargar explicates on the idea of universal authorship and asserts that, while the events of one's life constructs a distinct story; in reality, each individual story is part of the story of humanity. Therefore, the author of the story is not the self, rather, it is God. "This sense of an author other than oneself for the role one plays in the story of life, I am arguing, can liberate us from having to be the authors of our own individual stories. Suffering, too, then becomes framed within a larger context of meaning that contains each of us" (216). Although in modern times people are encouraged to focus on their unique story and how it is self-authored, this creates disappointment and anguish when a person is faced with undesirable situations; this is because the individual is not able to see the entire story, for he/she can only see their role in it. That God is the ultimate author of the book of existence as a whole – and by extension – each individual life, is evident by various Qur'anic stories. To this end, Zargar draws attention to the stories of Abraham and Moses in the Qur'an to provide examples that illustrate the importance of God's authorship portrayed in Islamic revelation.

In the final analysis, *From the Divine to the Human* is the product of a groundbreaking and collaborative conference on the problem of evil and human suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other global issues. The volume is innovative in its approach as the main objective is to draw attention away from the traditional philosophical and theological discourse relating

to evil – where the focus is on God's attributes – and direct the attention to human potential and practical ways by which the overcoming of evil is made possible. Moreover, the content presented in the volume is all-embracing and extremely rich as the topic is examined from various perspectives and incorporates the view of living Muslim intellectuals who are rooted in the vibrant Islamic tradition. Indeed, the luminous nature of theological, philosophical, ethical, and mystical dimensions of Islam pertaining to the problem of evil and human suffering, shine through the rich discussions presented in this volume. The content of this study will unquestionably inspire readers and scholars interested in philosophy of religion for decades to come.

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