

Contemplation as an Unrestricted Form of Worship

Contemplation of the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is included in them is a practice which cannot be impeded by changes in time, place or the nature of things. It is a free, unrestrained form of worship. It is also a cognitive and emotional process that enlivens the heart and enlightens perception as the mind ascends from contemplating the signs of God in the universe to their Creator and Lord. This is the real meaning of contemplation.

Concerning the liberation of contemplation from the limits of time and place, the Qur'an encourages the practice of contemplation of the beginning of creation: "Say: 'Travel through the earth and see how God originated creation. Thus will God produce a later creation, for God has power over all things'" (29:20). In addition to encouraging believers to contemplate the present, the Qur'an invites them to contemplate the destinies of extinct nations: "Do they not travel on the earth, and see what was the end of those before them? They were superior to them in strength..." (30:9). While ordering the believers to contemplate this world, the Qur'an also calls for meditation on the hereafter: "...Thus God makes clear to you His signs, in order that you may consider [their bearing] on this life and the hereafter" (2:219-220). This is because contemplation limited to the transient world is nothing but an incomplete image of the universe and a distorted concept of the reality of human existence. Therefore, the believer is ordered to contemplate God's creation from the beginning until the Day of Judgment.

Concerning the freedom of contemplation, the Qur'an calls for meditation on the natural creations of God in which the human hand plays no part, such as the heavens, the mountains and the seas. The Qur'an also draws the believers' attention to the bounties with which

people have been favored, such as the inventions which God has enabled some to achieve in order to serve humanity:

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships across the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, and the life which he gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds that are trailed between the sky and the earth – there are indeed signs for the wise. (2:164)

Although some of these achievements and inventions – like the sailing ships – are the work of human beings, it is the Almighty Who favored them with the knowledge that made such achievements possible:

...Nor shall they attain any of His knowledge except that which He wills... (2:255)

It was We Who taught him [Prophet David] the making of coats of mail [defensive armor] for your benefit, to guard you from each other's violence. So will you then be grateful? (21:80)¹

Moreover, no human discovery or invention can ever occur outside the natural laws established by God. In fact, human feats are nothing but a clarification of the significance of these laws. The Almighty has ascribed to His Exalted Being the ownership of the huge ships that sail across the oceans like moving mountains: “And to Him belong the ships, sailing smoothly across the seas, lofty as mountains” (55:24). Not only do the ships belong to Him, but also the aircrafts, rockets, satellites, and all the other things that men and women have made and discovered by God's will and grace: “Your Lord is He that makes the ship go smoothly for you across the sea, so that you may seek of His bounty. He is to you Most Merciful” (17:66).

It is unfortunate nowadays that some believers do not contemplate modern inventions simply because they are the products of countries that do not believe in Islam or in the Oneness of God. At the same time,

they see how the Muslim world has become a weak consumer of modern inventions and services, and how it has been violated and overrun by the modern military technology of aggressive non-Muslim countries. In the midst of such emotional confusion, some believers entertain divided feelings, as on one hand they can see the power, mercy, and great bounties of God in His natural creations like rivers and mountains and, on the other hand, they see the great inventions of modern technology – some of which stimulate in them quite negative responses. Various propagators of Western and Eastern trends of thought have encouraged this tendency to an extent that the distinction between the natural creations of God and the modern inventions of humankind has almost become a split between science and religion.

However, when their hearts move closer to God and they have a clearer vision of the universe, people realize that the globe and all it contains represent but an insignificant atom in the infinite domain of God. Moreover, God says in the Qur'an that it is He Who created human beings and whatever the human mind and hands have made: "God has created you and your handiwork" (37:96). In fact, one of the reasons for the degrading situation of the Muslim world today is its disregard of the laws of God on earth.

It should be remembered, in this connection, that when God drew the attention of the people of Makkah, Madinah and the neighboring areas to the ships sailing smoothly across the oceans like moving mountains, it was at a time when most of these ships were in the hands of people who had not yet embraced Islam. Nevertheless, it did not prevent the believers from contemplating a sign of God, the benefit and use of which He had chosen to put into the hands of unbelievers.

This short chapter has shown how contemplation of the universe is an unrestricted spiritual activity. However, this world also contains unseen beings and phenomena that provoke the curiosity of Muslims and form essential aspects of their faith. The question as to whether the contemplation of these unseen phenomena is also free from any restriction will be examined in the following chapter.