

OVERCOMING RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE THROUGH THE “MERCY-CENTRIC” THEOLOGY OF IBN AL-ARABI¹

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Abstract

“Religious violence”, which is a popular issue in our day discussed particularly in relation to Islam, is kept on the agenda. It is commonly discussed by sociologists and political scientists but not by religious studies scholars as much, while they would have many things to say about the issue. Behind every human behavior, there lie intellectual reasons that are either conscious or unconscious. What lies behind religious violence is a theological perspective which justifies violent crimes in the name of religion. When it comes to Islam the “power-centric” theology that prioritizes God’s justice, seems to be the reason for religious violence. Ibn Al-Arabi’s “mercy-centric” theological perspective is an alternative to that theological approach. In this paper, I will argue that the “mercy-centric” approach of Ibn Al-Arabi could be a solution to the problem of religious violence.

Keywords: Ibn Al-Arabi, Religion, Violence, Mercy, Theology.

Introduction

Violence has always been a big problem for the oppressed people while tyrants can easily find some means of justification for their violent acts. Religion, as the strongest of those means, has been prone to be misused because of its “divine” origin and some religious people

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derive an unquestionable power from this divinity which ends up with the most violent crimes. Behind every social and political fact, there is an intellectual impulse; therefore, behind this misuse of religion, there lie some theological arguments which promote religious violence. The solution to the problem of this violence can only be an “anti-violence” theological perspective. Ibn Al-Arabi, who has been an extremely controversial figure in the Muslim world, is a milestone in Islamic theology in this sense. He criticized theologians, who put the power of God at the center of their theologies and brought a “mercy-centric” approach. He emphasized the all-comprehensive aspect of God’s mercy and prioritized this mercy over God’s omnipotence. So much so that, he argued that even the people of hell have a kind of pleasure because of God’s mercy, which is completely unacceptable for classical theologians. Moreover, Ibn Al-Arabi argues that all humans –even the polytheists- worship “Allah” independently of their religious beliefs. This paradigm includes everyone in the circle of “believers”, so brings no space to “the other” in terms of belief. Keeping in mind that every kind of violence is committed against the so-called “other”; Ibn Al-Arabi’s “mercy-centric” approach to theology serves as good intellectual means to cope with violence in the name of religion.

1. Ibn Al-Arabi’s Theological Position

Ibn Al-Arabi (1165-1240) is a 13th-century Andalusian Sufi who influenced Sufi metaphysics deeply and caused many theological discussions not only in his age but also after his death. He became a field of a dispute so much that, he is both called “*al-shaykh al-akbar*” (the greatest master) and “*al-shaykh al-akfar*” (the most infidel master) by his defenders and opponents. His first known opponent is Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), from whom Wahhabism, Salafism, and Jihadism are influenced. It is important to note that contemporary Islamic violence groups depend on these ideologies.

Ibn Taymiyya was a jurist and theologian who lived in Damascus during the Mongol invasions of Mamluk Empire, and he is famous with

his fatwa for jihad against the Mongols. This fatwa is the first in history issuing a general authorization for the use of lethal force against Muslims (Chittick, 2018). There was nothing wrong about legitimate self-defense which was the case in that situation. The problem was that Ibn Taymiyya based his fatwa on the idea that Mongols could not be true Muslims since they used man-made-laws rather than Islamic Law (Chittick, 2018). Modern Salafi movements take this fatwa as an example to declare some Muslims “unbelievers” and fight against them.

According to Islamic law, people having different beliefs can live together since there is freedom of belief and “there is no compulsion in the religion” (al-Baqarah 2:256). There are some “others” according to the common law of Islam like “people of the Book” (Christians and Jews) and “unbelievers”, who are non-Muslims therefore, “other than Muslims”. However, “otherization” does not stand outside the scope of Islam. Within any religion, there always have been “others” who do not believe as the commons do. Human being defines himself through other than himself since we live in a world of dichotomies. Everything is understood through the things other than itself and this fact is the very origin of the idea of “the other”. However, if emphasizing the otherness goes too far, it feeds fear and hatred which may result in violence. Behind any kind of violence, there is fear and impulse to preserve one’s own existence. Creatures fear from the unknown, “the alien”.

But what if there is no alien? What if there is no “other” than God? What if there is no unbeliever since everyone believes in God in his own specific way? According to Ibn Al-Arabi, the only existent is God and all creatures are the reflections of God in the mirror of His knowledge. They are not other than God, therefore ontologically there is no “other”. Moreover, according to Ibn Al-Arabi, every single believer believes in “the God of belief” (*al-ilah al-mu’taqad*) which means God in one’s belief (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1980: 226). This God in the believer’s belief is not God *per se*, but the servant’s relative conception of God. In fact, no one worships God as He is since God is beyond conceptions of creatures. “Created beings are bound to worship only what they believe

regarding the Truth [i.e. God], so they only worship that which is created” (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 4/386). Therefore, for Ibn Al-Arabi, everyone is an “idol-worshiper” (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 4/386), which means there is no way to really worship God as He is. Since there is not a true believer, no one can accuse others of not having a true conception of God and declare them unbelievers.

According to Ibn Al-Arabi, each creature worships God in any case because “the Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him” (al-Isrâ’ 17:23). Ibn Al-Arabi reads this verse as a proof to the impossibility of not worshipping God or worshipping someone other than God. Worshipping or servanthood is an ontological necessity because of God’s decree therefore, God is the only worshipped one in every act of worshipping; because no object of worship is other than Him since God is immanent in all creatures.

2. Immanent and Transcendent God

In Ibn Al-Arabi’s metaphysics, God is both immanent and transcendent. The Essence of God is incomparable to anything since It is the Absolute which means that, It is above every kind of relationship with the creatures. The Essence (*dhat*) is the possessor of the Divine names, which are the attributes of God. Names of the Essence, Divinity, is the face of the Essence turned towards creatures through which It communicates them. Ibn Al-Arabi thinks that all creatures are the names of God, therefore every single thing is a divine name indicating the Absolute in a relative manner. Names of God are his attributes and since attributes of a substance cannot be separated from the substance and cannot exist independent of it; names of God cannot be separated from God. Therefore, every single thing is not other than God since it is a Divine name. This fact indicates God’s immanence in creatures. However, God is not only immanent but also transcendent.

Ibn Al-Arabi explains the fact that God is transcendent and immanent at the same time, with this expression; “He/not He” (*Huwa/lâ Huwa*). Creatures are God in a sense and not God in another sense. On

the one hand, creatures are not God since God's Essence is transcendent of everything; on the other hand, they are not other than God because God's names or Divinity is immanent in everything. The transcendence can easily be seen with the help of the intellect (*aql*) since it perceives difference and distinction, therefore incomparability (*tanzih*) of God. However, in order to understand God in his immanence or his similarity (*tashbih*) to the creatures, we need imagination (*khayal*). In religious texts, God calls Himself with attributes of creatures such as seeing, hearing, laughing and getting angry. According to Ibn Al-Arabi, these expressions indicate God's similarity (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 1/272). God is similar to creatures and this fact can only be understood by the help of imagination (Chittick, 2018). Ibn Al-Arabi's main critic of both philosophers and theologians is that they only use their rational faculties to understand God's relation to the creatures. Since reason can only point to the transcendent aspect of God, they lack the true knowledge of God because of not seeing immanence or similarity of God. The heart has two eyes to see, intellection and imagination; without one, the vision would be incomplete (Chittick, 1989:367).

God calls himself in the Qur'an with opposite attributes like the First (*al-Awwal*) and the Last (*al-Akhir*), the Outward or the Manifest (*al-Zahir*) and the Inward and the Nonmanifest (*al-Batin*). In respect of his Essence, God is Nonmanifest and this can be understood by the intellect. In respect of his names, God is Manifest and this aspect is understood by imagination. Therefore, in order to know God in the manner, He explains himself to us in the scriptures, we need two eyes; both intellection and imagination.

According to Ibn Al-Arabi, the Real (*al-haqq*) is "the One/the Many" (*al-wahid al-kathir*) (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 3/276, 3/420). This expression is paradoxical like the expressions above (Manifest-Nonmanifest). However, since God is comprehensive of the opposites (*jami' al-addad*), He can be One and Many at the same time. God is one in Essence and many in names. With imagination, the heart sees God immanent in all

things and with intellection it sees the transcendence or incomparability of God which means seeing the diversity and therefore otherness.

Ibn Al-Arabi's emphasis on the similarity of God is a significant contribution to Islamic theology. God's transcendence was a known fact in both Islamic philosophy and theology and this aspect of God was the main concern of the rational thinkers. However, laying stress on God's transcendence creates a sense of distance and misrepresents God because "God is closer to human than his jugular vein" (al-Nahl 16:50). Ibn Al-Arabi's theological perspective emphasizes God's closeness and immanence to the creatures. According to this perspective, nothing can be "undivine" because of its relation to the Divine, since it is "not other than the Divine". The similarity of God means "not otherness of creatures than God" and this idea creates a sense of unity in whole existence.

The theory of "Unity of Existence" or "Oneness of Being" (*wahdat al-wujûd*) is attributed to Ibn Al-Arabi even if he did not use this expression. Ibn Taymiyya seems to have been the first author to say that Ibn Al-Arabi believed in *wahdat al-wujûd* and he calls this belief as "worse than unbelief" (Chittick, 2018). He thinks this doctrine means that there is no distinction between God and creatures. However, Ibn Al-Arabi not only talks about the similarity of God but also incomparability of God since he sees God as comprehending the opposites. God's transcendence had been signified by theologians before Ibn Al-Arabi; his specialty was to contribute God's aspect of immanence and he did it without neglecting God's transcendence. However, this contribution was interpreted as pure pantheism and Ibn Al-Arabi was turned into a target by many theologians. His doctrine cannot be called pantheism since he never denied the existence of an Absolute Essence which is transcendent of anything else. Nevertheless, denying God's immanence and the divinity present in every creature, likewise emphasizing God's transcendence and therefore "otherness", serves as an efficient means to create an exclusivist theological discourse which can easily form a basis for religious violence.

3. Putting Mercy in The Center

Seeing God other than creatures and distant from them feeds fear from God. The transcendent and distant God is totally unknown to the human being therefore, He is fearful since there is no way to foresee what He will do. The main tendency in Islamic theology has usually been to see God's actions as unpredictable as "He does whatever He wants" (Âl 'Imrân 3:40; Ibrâhîm 14:27; al-Haj 22:14). So much so that, some theologians went too far to deny causality in order to protect God's unlimited power. For them, God is absolutely omnipotent and can do anything without being restricted even with His own nature/being. I call this theology "power-centric". On the contrary, Sufism has emphasized God's closeness and mercy. For this school of thought, God is immanent in us and He is the all-Merciful before anything else. Because of its emphasis on God's mercy, Sufism is called "the smiling face of Islam" (Meyerovitch, 2018).

Ibn Al-Arabi as "the greatest master" in Sufism is the name who emphasized mercy more than any other scholar. He thinks that God has made him an "unlimited mercifier" (*rahiman mutlaqan*) (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 3/341). That is why Hirtenstein calls him "The Unlimited Mercifier" -which is the name of his book on Ibn Al-Arabi's life and thoughts- and indicates that he is the embodiment of unlimited mercy (Hirtenstein, 1999: 248). He puts God's mercy in the center of his thought and sees everything in the circle as a reflection of this center. According to him, God created creatures with "the breath of the All-Merciful" (*nafas al-Rahman*) because of His love to be known. "The Breath of the All-merciful made the cosmos manifest in order to release the property of love and relieve (*tanfis*) what the Lover found in Himself. So, He knew Himself through witnessing in the Manifest." (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 2/399). In Ibn Al-Arabi's ontology, God looks at his knowledge of the creatures which is a mirror for God to see Himself and the reflections that He sees in this mirror are creatures. Things in His knowledge are nonexistent but intelligible entities which are called "immutable entities" (*al-a'yan al-thabita*). God knows them before they externally exist because

they are immutably present in God's knowledge. With the word "Be!" God makes these immutable entities, existent entities; in other words, he creates them as calling them "Be!". As human speech takes place for the sake of breath, God's creative word takes place with the breath of the All-Merciful. Human breath is unseen, and letters make it manifest; like this, the breath of the All-Merciful is unseen and the word "Be!" makes it visible which means God manifests Himself through the breath (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 3/95).

Ibn Al-Arabi emphasizes the fact that, the breath belongs to the All-merciful and concludes that the whole creation is a result of God's all-comprising mercy: "God attributed a Breath to Himself, ascribing it to the name "All-merciful," only to tell us that mercy comprises and includes all things and that all people and creatures end up with mercy."(Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 3/420). Every creature in the cosmos comes into existence because of mercy, since the source of existence -namely the Breath- belongs to the All-merciful. Therefore, mercy is the ontological origin of the existent things since everything is created from mercy.

Essentiality of mercy is apparent in "basmala" (*bismillahi al-Rahman al-Rahim*) which is in the very beginning of every chapter of the Qur'an, and means "In the name of God, the eternally Merciful, especially Merciful". The two words here (*Rahman* and *Rahim*) come directly from the same root: "mercy" (*rahma*) and though the difference between *al-Rahmān* and *al-Rahīm* is not very clear (Yousef, 2010) for these two names grammatically mean the same thing (Chittick, 2010). According to Ibn Al-Arabi God's beginning each chapter with them indicates that everything will return to the Mercy (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 2/171). Everything is coming from mercy and returning to it and "existence itself is a mercy for every existent thing" (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 2/281). That is why he sees the cosmos identical with mercy (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 2/437). The reason for that is, since Being comprises everything, "Mercy of God encompasses everything" (al-A'râf 7:156), including the wrath of God (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 3/382). Besides that, the wrath of God is not essential, it is accidental, and it will be cut off, unlike mercy (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911:

4/405). Therefore, it does not exist in a real sense because only the Essence really exists. According to Ibn Al-Arabi God is sheer Good so since there is nothing except God, evil does not exist. For that reason, wrath, which is the lack of mercy, has no ontological reality.

Since God's mercy encompasses everything, there is nothing outside the scope of mercy; even the chastisement in the Fire. Ibn Al-Arabi argues that the people of the Fire have a share from mercy since the word "*adhab*" (chastisement) comes from the root "*dhaba*" which means sweetness and pleasantness. Fire is called a chastisement due to the sweetness of its food according to him. After mercy embraces the people of Fire, they "will find their joy from being in the Fire and they will praise God for their not being in the Garden" because of their constitution (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 4/14). They were created from the fire so "if they were to enter the Garden with the constitutions that they have, they would suffer chastisement, because of the Garden's equilibrium." (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 2/207). Therefore, their state of being in Fire is goodness for them, with His mercy "God make them pleased with what they have been given" (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 2/244).

Despite the verses in the Qur'an on the eternity of the Fire (al-Nahl 16/29; al-Nūr 23/103; al-Zumar 39/72; al-Mu'min 40/76), Ibn Al-Arabi thinks that even if the Fire will be eternal, chastisement cannot be eternal, since God "forgives all sins" (al-Zumar 39:53). It should disappear in the end because mercy will show its priority (Chittick, 1994: 113). Since "the most beautiful place of return" is with God (Âl 'Imrân 3:14) and God is the sheer Good which does not have any evil, His mercy "will embrace everything" (Ibn Al-Arabi, 1911: 1/423).

Conclusion

Ibn Al-Arabi's hopeful attitude depends on his unshakable belief in the Nondelimited Merciful. Taking mercy's ontological priority into consideration together with God's excessive emphasis on His aspect of mercy in the Qur'an, Ibn Al-Arabi concludes that there is really nothing outside the scope of mercy. His understanding does not exclude anyone,

therefore never creates “others” and does not result in fear and violence. Nonetheless, this optimism itself could be seen as a reflection of God’s mercy. Despite Ibn Al-Arabi’s mercy-centric approach, there are people -in his words- “who desire to take God’s mercy away from some of His servants” like theologians who criticize his understanding of “all-encompassing Mercy”. However, according to Ibn Al-Arabi, even these people are encompassed by God’s mercy. Foreseeing the possible oppositions to his approach, Ibn Al-Arabi could incorporate his opponents into the all-comprehensive mercy of God. Because in the end, mercy will overcome fear and violence deriving from it.

İbn Arabî’nin “Rahmet-Merkezli” Teolojisiyle Dini Şiddeti Aşmak

Özet

Günümüzde özellikle İslam dini özelinde tartışılan popüler bir konu olan “dinî şiddet”, din ile şiddet ilişkisini gündemde tutmaktadır. Daha çok sosyolog ve siyaset bilimcilerin tartıştığı bu konuyla ilgili, din sahasında çalışanların da söyleyecekleri bir şeyler olmalıdır. Tüm insan eylemlerinin arka planında bilinçli ya da bilinçdışı entelektüel sebepler vardır. Dinî şiddetin ardında ise teolojik bir bakış açısı bulunmaktadır ve söz konusu bakış açısı dinî söylemleri kullanarak şiddet eylemlerini meşrulaştırmaktadır. İslam dini söz konusu olduğunda Tanrı’nın adaletini esas alan “kudret-merkezli” teoloji anlayışı, din adına gerçekleştirilen şiddetin arkasındaki neden olarak görünmektedir. Bu yazıda, teolojik bir perspektif olarak “kudret-merkezli” anlayışa alternatif bir bakış sunan İbn Arabî’nin, “rahmet-merkezli” teolojik yorumunun dinî şiddet problemine bir çözümü getirebileceği iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İbn Arabi, Din, Şiddet, Rahmet, Teoloji

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