

Conference Reports

From the Divine to the Human: New Perspectives on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic

When we survey the scene of Muslim responses to the pandemic, one noticeable lacuna is in the area of philosophy of religion. This conference, *From the Divine to the Human: New Perspectives on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic*, held June 28–30, 2022, at the University of Cincinnati (via ZOOM platform) was organized by Muhammad U. Faruque (University of Cincinnati) and Mohammed Rustom (Carleton University) in hopes of addressing the following question: What do Muslim thinkers have to say about the pandemic, and, more broadly, about the evil and suffering it has caused? This event, which was funded by the prestigious Templeton Foundation under the Global Philosophy of Religion Project, brought together thirteen Muslim scholars from wide-ranging disciplinary perspectives. The explicit aim of the conference was to feature the work of Muslim thinkers who draw from the Islamic tradition but do so not as historians of philosophy, but as philosophers and theologians. Such an effort is both admirable and necessary, given the robust ways in which the Islamic traditions of philosophy, rational theology, and philosophical Sufism can be drawn upon today to address a wide range of philosophical and theological questions.

Muhammad Faruque introduced the conference and emphasized its objective to speak to non-academic communities, while elaborating that just as the pandemic has posed social and medical problems, its philosophical and

theoretical ramifications in the minds of the general public must be treated with similar urgency. Rustom offered two observations which highlighted how (1) most discussions in philosophy of religion are shaped by and follow Christian frameworks in analytic theology, thereby never allowing the unique philosophical perspectives in other traditions to stand on their own; and explained how (2) the Islamic intellectual tradition offers a wide variety of approaches to such problems as theodicy, and if any headway is to be made in addressing them for our own times, we must first rise out of the historical mindset and seek to deal with these kinds of problems as contemporary thinkers on our own terms.

DAY ONE: June 28, 2022

Panel 1, Session 1

This session which was chaired by Sayeh Meisami (University of Dayton) brought together Cyrus Zargar (University of Central Florida) and Hina Khalid (University of Cambridge) who focused on the role of narratives and somatics respectively in relation to suffering. Zargar's paper "Suffering as Metaphysical Narrative: Another Author's Story" drew on the role afforded to imagination by Ibn 'Arabī as well as Bakhtin's theorizations on the novel in order to illustrate our inability to understand the narrative that we all take part in, due to our limited understanding vis-à-vis God's knowledge. Zargar then touched on the Qur'anic narratives of Abraham, Moses, and Joseph to elaborate on their hope in and consignment towards God, borne out of a conviction in the beauty of the superseding narrative. The structure of Q2:156 which further demonstrates this as humanity's narrative, as a single entity, is bookended by the origin from and return to God.

Khalid's presentation "Cultivating Prayerful Presence at the Bedside: From Mastery Towards Mystery" began with a theological display of the sacredness afforded to the human body, and that any turn from the divine to the human ultimately returns back to the divine, without whom no grounded understanding of the human can ensue. In presenting this, Khalid structured her presentation upon three sections: (1) the theological backdrop which treats the material body as a site of the sacred; (2) the enactment of this backdrop in light of illness by way of cultivating *'ubūdiyya*, *ṣabr*, and *shukr*; and (3) the portrayal of this backdrop through care for the other, which is understood as a reflection of God's compassion and presence.

Keynote Address

The keynote address which was delivered by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (George Washington University) touched on the relatedness of theodicy to the modern world and explained that although the premodern world had faced devastating

tragedies such as poverty, loss of life, and hunger, however, the question pertaining to the role of God was never so pervasive. Nasr continued to offer a cosmological perspective for the difficulties we find around us. The further from God things are, ontologically speaking, the greater the distance between them and the Light of lights (*nūr al-anwār*). The absence of light hence only allows darkness to take its place, thereby positing a material realm (which is ontologically the furthest) to be pervaded by the amount of suffering and evil that it has. This reality, however, serves as a call for us to realize how limited mankind is in terms of knowledge, especially in the larger context of pre/post-eternity. Nasr touched on the fact that although Prophet Muhammad faced adverse difficulty throughout his life, he did not identify his very being with that hardship. Suffering for Muslims thus has always been understood to be a natural feature of being in this world, and it does not overshadow, or even affect in the slightest, the larger message of *lā ilāha illā Allāh*. Suffering thus should bring within us a sense of inwardness which sustains happiness and felicity, as well as increasing our *tawakkul* upon God, as all moments in life can and should serve as reasons for us to turn to the One.

Panel 1, Session 2

The second session began with Muhammad Faruque's presentation "Hume on Trial: Can Evil and Suffering be Justified?" By drawing on David Hume and his infamous questioning of how a benevolent God can be reconciled with human suffering (to which he later ascribes amorality to God), Faruque began his presentation by addressing atheistic objections to the problem of theodicy. He later went on to show how these objections are based on certain assumptions (of which he lists four), such as desiring a sense of paradisaical perfection in this world, which hence misconstrues the meaning that suffering brings. Faruque brought his presentation to a close by emphasizing that the purpose of this world is an attainment of spiritual perfection by the human being, for which suffering can serve as an efficacious conduit.

Mohammad Mansouri (University of Toronto) began his presentation by first highlighting a common accusation heralded against the mystical tradition, namely its willful ignorance of the material world. His paper "Human Suffering in Light of the Oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*)" used 'Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafī's articulation of this central Akbarian point to address the matter. Mansouri began with an introduction to Nasafī's life and context, and then offered a valuable study of Nasafī's assertion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as standing true despite the suffering found among all the multiplicity subsumed under the one Being. By weaving Mohammed Rustom's aphorisms on evil¹ into his presentation, Mansouri concluded by asserting the paradox of opposites, namely that the existence of the One does not negate the darkness of the

many but demands it. This was represented precisely in Mansouri's closing employment of Rustom's aphorism that "the potentiality of evil is a natural feature of divine freedom, but the actuality of evil is a natural feature of human freedom."

DAY TWO: June 29, 2022

Panel 2, Session 1

The second day began with Justin Cancelliere's (Independent Scholar) treatment of "Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Metaphysical Theodicy" which invigorated metaphysics and gnosis as a means of solving the problem of suffering, as opposed to conventional pathways addressed by philosophical theology and philosophy of religion. Cancelliere affirmed thus that metaphysics is necessary for any account of evil to be satisfactory, and that such a pursuit breeds certainty which is distinct to any sound undertaking which aims to purify and liberate the self. Cancelliere's presentation concluded by affirming that man's participation in being is a process of becoming who he really is, as archetypally rooted in the Divine knowledge. In light of Q 2:30, all good and evil is predetermined; however, man's estrangement from that Divine wisdom renders him neglectful towards abandoning evil altogether, which, as related to God, never really was.

The second presentation in this session was by Taraneh Wilkinson (University of Cincinnati) on "Transformative Love Amid Suffering: A Perspective from Hilmi Ziya Ülken (1901–1974)." Wilkinson treated Ülken's thoughts by first introducing him and then addressing his theory of monopluralism, which affirms the unity amid human multiplicity. Ülken confirms that based on notions of duality, spiritual and material realities are part of one's reality. The topic then turned to Ülken's treatment of human suffering, emphasizing its psychological relation to alienation, and thus rendered its solution as one which emphasizes service through love-based ethics. This led into the third part of the presentation, where transformative love is addressed, with self-sacrifice being its exemplar.

This session ended with Sara Aziz's (Harvard University) presentation on the topic of "Suffering Before God: The Hermeneutics of Tawhid in the Act of Supplication." By drawing upon Zayn al-Ābidīn's *al-Ṣaḥīfah al-Sajjādiyyah* and Khwāja 'Abdullāh al-Anṣārī's *Munājāt*, Aziz offered a hermeneutical study centered around the themes of *tawḥīd* and prayers of the afflicted. Through analyzing the prayers of those who are facing great affliction, Aziz drew out the understanding that the supplicants had of God and suffering at large, thus informing the participants on how supplicatory compositions relate to attitudinal shifts.

Panel 2, Session 2

Amer Latif's (Emerson College) lecture "Living with Pain, Confronting Addiction" began the second session by touching on the feeling of pain felt by many across the world. Pain, which is often seen as a malady requiring a cure was portrayed by Latif as being the cure itself. With Latif's approach in his portrayal of pain, it becomes clear that not all pain has a cause, but rather a gift which propels one from the world of cause and effect into that of the causeless.

Nicholas Boylston (Seattle University) presented "Aesthetic Theodicy: Light from the Horizon of Karbala" which began by pointing to the necessity of transcending rational inquiries into answering the problem of suffering by resorting to supra-rational understandings rooted in direct experiences. Boylston drew upon 'Āshūrā', which refer to the *ta'ziya* poems which help explain how poetry informs and transforms tribulation. One such example is that of Karbala itself, reflecting upon which the contemporary Iranian poet and reciter Hossein Fakhri writes, "My Heart-Taker makes love-play with my head on the head of a spear," which immediately calls to mind the tragedy of Imam Ḥusayn. In this poem, Fakhri reverses the martyr into the supreme lover, through which the unspeakable imagery is transformed into Divine love-play. Boylston termed this an "aesthetic theodicy," and concluded by calling upon viewers to consider singing and aesthetics, rather than ratiocinative activity, as alternative responses to suffering.

The last presentation in this session by Mukhtar H. Ali (University of Illinois) on "Self-knowledge, Divine Trial and Discipleship" highlighted *ma'rifat al-nafs* as the means by which one is able to actualize higher levels of both intellectual and spiritual awareness. Ali points to the fact that personal rectification is received by both humans, through the means of spiritual instruction, and the divine, by the bestowal of divine graces and tribulations (which relate to the divine names of beauty and majesty respectively). Hence, tribulation is seen as a mirror reflecting the reality of the believer and is thus a vehicle for imbibing the greatest of lessons. The polishing of this mirror is ultimately done through the intellect, represented by the Muhammadan Light, which impresses upon the soul, which is the disciple.

DAY THREE: June 30, 2022*Panel 3, Session 1*

The final day of the conference began with Khalil Andani's (Augustana College) presentation on "Unnecessary Evil: An Islamic Neoplatonic Theodicy from the Ismaili Tradition." Andani began his presentation by highlighting the essential goodness present in the first creation, namely the First Intellect, from which the Universal Soul is effectuated, thereby rooting the following types of "evil."

For example, the Universal Soul, as it gazes upon the First Intellect, is actually craving perfection for itself, and therefore creates the Cosmos (and human souls therein) in order to actualize that perfection. The human soul's experience of evil in turn nurtures its spiritual growth towards that perfection, granting affinity to the First Intellect from which it ultimately emanated.

Özgür Koca's (Bayan Islamic Graduate School) "Necessity and Freedom in God, Evil, and the Human Response" followed suit by touching on Ibn 'Arabi's insights regarding the nature of this possible world as a *barzakh* between God and (abstracted) nothingness. The distinction thus between the three modalities of existence is that God is understood to be pure goodness, but the shadow, that is this world, is akin to its source, hence containing beauty, but also entailing distance. This simultaneousness present in our being brings together necessity and freedom, allowing for a submission which upholds both human agency as well as Divine perfection.

Rosabel Ansari (Stony Brook University) brought this session to a close with her paper "Climate Change and Specific Evil: An Avicennan Reading." Ansari drew on Avicenna's theory of evil as enshrined in the Metaphysics section of his *Shifā'* in order to illustrate how evil, insofar as it is evil, is related to particulars alone, and serves a key role in upholding the universal order of the good (*nizām al-khayr*). Ansari used this philosophical point to address the current environmental crisis around the globe, by concluding that although climate change may lead to an existential threat, it is still affecting individuals within the larger species. Although this may cumulatively add up to all humans, it remains philosophically distinct from the species in its entirety. This would hence accommodate both Avicenna's theory as well as the existential threat that the current environmental situation poses.

Panel 3, Session 2

Mohammed Rustom's paper (Carleton University) "Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn" began by arguing that Islamic philosophy must stand on its own terms and should not be seen only as a historical concomitant to Western philosophy, or even viewed simply as an offshoot of global intellectual history. He then addressed an anecdote which illustrated the necessity to treat Islamic philosophy through its own paradigms, since Western and Christian-inspired approaches to problems in philosophy of religion tend to obscure the concepts that Muslim philosophers prefer to express and examine. This insight then led Rustom to explain how the so-called "silence of God theology" is really no theology at all from an Islamic philosophical perspective. Rustom explained how Muslims perceive suffering as a means to cultivate a more attentive ear to what God wants them to learn. Listening to God in this way can help heal the deepest of wounds.

Rustom's talk was followed by Atif Khalil (University of Lethbridge) who spoke "On Suffering and the Human Condition: Reflections from the Sufi Tradition." Khalil began by first problematizing the relevance that the question of theodicy has to the Islamic tradition. He then continues to offer a reflection on the problem of evil by focusing on its necessity for spiritual progression and our attempts at trying to rationalize it. Khalil's treatment of the discussion ends with the virtues of the heart by drawing in perspectives from the Buddhist and Christian philosophies.

The final presentation of the conference which was delivered by Ailya Vajid (Independent Scholar) on "Trials as Transformation: Islamic Chaplaincy and the Problem of Human Suffering" began by addressing the transformation that is undertaken due to trials and tribulations, hence portraying suffering as a means of self-growth, both outwardly and inwardly, in order to ultimately return towards the *fiṭra*. The presentation then offers a case study by looking at college students and their approaches to tackling questions of suffering in their contexts, thereby portraying that the pursuit of life is not necessarily one of happiness, but rather one of growth through life's challenges of different forms of pain and suffering.

Roundtable Discussion

The roundtable discussion provided panelists sufficient time to engage with one another, and conference participants in order to delve into a variety of topics related to the theme of suffering. The Q & A session addressed questions pertaining to such topics as horrendous evils and the role of sacrifice, as well as broader questions related to the nature and purpose of Muslims studying sciences like philosophy and theology in the contemporary academy. In response to Khalil's question regarding the intellect and its modern perversion, Ali noted that the *'aql* referred to in modernity's hyper intellectualization is the shadow of the intellect, which is connected to the Divine light. Ali noted that the *'aql* is an aspect of understanding, but that the *qalb* or heart is also a source of knowledge. Therefore, true understanding is that which incorporates the intellect's heart and the heart's intellect; but without the heart, the intellect can delve deeper into, and develop, rational problems, but unaided by the heart, the intellect will fall short of the goal of being human.

Boylston then pointed to the following two approaches regarding solving such problems: (1) cultivating modes of understanding, including the philosophical, literary, and imaginative, which were illustrated throughout the conference, and (2) examining modes of being, wherein our being needs to be transformed as a result of that understanding.

Mansouri, in light of earlier reflections shared by Boylston and Andani, noted his appreciation for the conference serving a platform wherein intellectuals could

address the problem of theodicy from decolonialized perspectives, and noted how the isolating factor of the pandemic has made such opportunities all the more necessary. Zargar touched on the question of sacrifice and how suffering exists almost as if it has to happen, and Khalil pointed to Ghazālī's *'Ajā'ib al-qalb* for the need to cultivate the heart vis-à-vis the refinement of the human soul.

This conference offered a platform for Muslim academics to investigate the question of theodicy on their own terms, and in conversation with the wider Islamic intellectual tradition. The conference's timeliness was highlighted by the appreciation of the many participants who greatly benefitted from the lectures and expressed great enthusiasm over Muslim academics addressing contemporary issues as Muslim thinkers.

For those unable to attend, the lectures have now been posted online at www.sufferingpandemicconference.org. The conference proceedings are scheduled to be published in 2024 as an edited volume in Routledge's *Studies in Islamic Philosophy* series.

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Endnotes

1. Mohammed Rustom, "Some Aphorisms on God, Evil, and Liberation," in *Sacred Web* 48 (2021): 147–149.