

Article

Evil and Human Suffering in Islamic Thought—Towards a Mystical Theodicy

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Abstract: This paper sheds light on the treatment of the ‘problem of evil’ and human suffering from an Islamic perspective. I begin by providing an overview of the term ‘evil’ in the Qur’an to highlight its multidimensional meaning and to demonstrate the overall portrait of this notion as it is presented in the Islamic revelation through the narrative of the prophet Job. Having established a Qur’anic framework, I will then provide a brief historical overview of the formation of philosophical and theological debates surrounding “good” and “bad/evil” and the origination of Muslim theodicean thought. This will lead us to Ghazālian theodicy and the famous dictum of the “best of all possible worlds” by one of the most influential scholars of Islamic thought, Abu Ḥāmid Ghazālī. The final section of this paper will explore the Sufi/ mystical tradition of Islam through the teachings of one of the most distinguished mystics of Islam, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. The conclusion of the paper will attempt to bring about a new understanding of how the so-called “problem of evil” is not presented in Islam as a problem but rather as an instrument in the actualization of God’s plan, which is intertwined with human experiences in this world—an experience that is necessary for man’s spiritual development.

Keywords: problem of evil; theodicy; Qur’an; Job; good; evil; al Ghazālī; mysticism; Islam

1. Introduction

The ‘problem of evil’ or, as it is more often referred to, the cause of human suffering is perhaps one of the most debated questions in the history of the philosophy of religion.¹ Although the issue makes itself known to humankind in general, it gains particular attention in the context of monotheistic religions as it brings into question the main pillar of such religions, namely, the existence of a powerful and merciful God. In light of the enormous amount of evil in the world, especially in the case of undeserved suffering, the challenge becomes even more acute and begs for answers. According to Hick, pondering about the volume of afflictions and adversities that mankind is faced with, “we do indeed have to ask ourselves whether it is possible to think of this world as the work of an omnipotent creator who is motivated by limitless love . . . this is indeed the most serious challenge that there is to theistic faith.”²

This paper aims to shed light on the treatment of the ‘problem of evil’ and human suffering from an Islamic perspective. I will begin by providing an overview of the term ‘evil’ in the Qur’an to highlight its multidimensional meaning and attempt to demonstrate the overall portrait of this notion as it is presented in the Islamic revelation through the narrative of the prophet Job. Having established a Qur’anic framework, I will then provide a brief historical overview of the formation of theological

¹ The “Problem of Evil”, in the context of Western scholarship, is generally identified in two main categories: *theoretical* and *existential*, and further divides the *theoretical* dimension into *logical* and *evidential*; the distinction between moral evil and natural evil is also underscored. For more on this see Michael L. Peterson, *The Problem of Evil, Selected Readings* (Peterson 2011), Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Plantinga 1974), and John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Hick 2007).

² See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Hick 2004, p. 118).

debates surrounding “good” and “bad/evil” and the origination of Muslim theodicean thought. This will lead us to Ghazālian theodicy and the famous dictum of the “*best of all possible worlds*” by one of the most influential scholars of Islamic thought, Abu Ḥāmid Ghazālī. The final section of this paper will explore the Sufi/mystical tradition of Islam through the teachings of one of the most distinguished mystics of Islam, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. The conclusion of the paper will attempt to bring about a new understanding of how the so-called “problem of evil” is not presented in Islam as a problem but rather as an instrument in the actualization of God’s plan, which is intertwined with human experiences in this world—an experience that is necessary for man’s spiritual development.

2. Evil and Suffering in the Qur’an: An Overview

For more than fourteen hundred years the Qur’an has served as the foundation of the religion of Islam and continues to play a dynamic role in shaping and influencing the lives of its followers, regardless of their diverse cultural backgrounds. The Qur’an is also considered to be the highest source of Islamic scholarship and functions as the starting point for a major portion of scholarly works. Therefore, to understand the treatment of evil and suffering in Muslim thought, the journey must begin with studying the Qur’anic narratives where this concept makes itself known.

A cursory review of studies on theodicy reveals that the meaning of ‘evil’, for the most part, is assumed and is not negotiable—personal loss, illness, violence, natural disaster, etc. Although the term appears abundantly in both popular and scholarly works, there seems to be a conceptual ambiguity surrounding it: What exactly is evil? Furthermore, does human understanding of evil concur with the divine message?

A key term in Arabic that is translated as evil is ‘*sharr*’ and it is presented in two distinct categories of Qur’anic narratives. The first category includes verses that fall in the semantic field of *sharr* and appears amongst the moral concepts of the Qur’an. The overall notion of good (*khayr*) and bad/evil (*sharr*) is a central theme in Qur’anic teachings and is emphasized in both Meccan and Medinan phases of the Islamic revelation.³ Considering these narratives hermeneutically by applying an intra-textual contextualization method, whereby the Qur’an functions as its own interpreter,⁴ seems to suggest that the most prominent meaning for the term *sharr* in this group of narratives is the situation that man creates for himself.⁵ It is clearly stated in the Qur’an that when humankind, through his own volition, acts in certain ways and adapts to specific behaviors that are not in accordance with the divine plan, he situates himself in a condition that is referred to as *sharr* by the Qur’an. Some of the deeds that fall into this moral category include miserliness, unbelief/rejecting God, slander, and transgression.⁶ The Qur’an noticeably upholds that the creation of the universe—and by extension, humankind—is purposeful and not in vain.⁷ Man, therefore, must make a serious effort to live his life according to God’s cosmic plan. By neglecting the purpose for his creation and the accountabilities that it entails, he creates an undesirable living condition for himself, that is, *sharr*. The purposefulness of man’s creation and his responsibility as it pertains to suffering will be discussed later in the article.

The second category of Qur’anic narratives is more of an interest to us as it is directly related to human suffering and theodicy. This group of verses falls beyond the semantic field of *sharr* and is

³ For information on the chronology of the Qur’an, see Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur’an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (Robinson 2003).

⁴ Intra-textual contextualization is a methodology used in understanding Qur’anic verses according to the context in which they appear individually, as well as in relation to the overall theme of all the chapters in which they appear. For an excellent discussion on the interpretation of the Qur’anic terms, see Toshibiko Izutsu, *Ethico - Religious Concepts in the Qur’an* (Izutsu 2002).

⁵ For example, see Qur’an, 3:180; 8:22; 24:11; 17:11. For an excellent exegesis on the Qur’an, see (Tabarsi 1350).

⁶ For more information on various contexts of *sharr* in the Qur’an, see Tunbar Yesilhark Ozkan, *A Muslim Response to Evil. Said Nursi on Theodicy* (Ozkan 2015, pp. 19–35).

⁷ Qur’an, 38:27

revealed in various historical contexts reflected in the Qur'an.⁸ A careful scrutiny of these narratives demonstrates that the so-called problem of evil—and by extension, human suffering—is not treated in the Qur'an as a theoretical problem but rather as an instrument in the actualization of God's purpose. Most of these narratives illustrate that the underlying rationale for the existence of various forms of evil and suffering is that they serve as a trial (*ibtilā*) and test: "We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops; however, [Prophet], give good news to those who are steadfast."⁹

The purpose of human suffering and its role in God's overall cosmic plan may bring about two corollaries. First, there is no contradiction between the divine attributes of God and the fact that suffering exists; therefore, affirmation of the Qur'an regarding God's omnipotence is not under question: "Say 'God, holder of all sovereignty, You give control to whoever You will, and remove it from whoever You will. You elevate whoever You will and humble whoever You will. All that is good lies in Your hands: You have power over everything.'"¹⁰ Moreover, since God is undoubtedly in control of creation, suffering must also be allowed by him for God's plan to be fully executed. Second, if suffering is meant as a test and is regarded as a necessary component of life, then a Muslim must view the undesirable situations (illness, financial difficulty, loss of a loved one, etc.) as an opportunity to actualize his inner potential and move forward in his spiritual journey, becoming who he "is" as the fruit of the creational tree.

It may also be concluded that by presenting the notion of evil and suffering as part of the human experience and a necessary component of man's spiritual journey, the Qur'an refrains from articulating a systematic theodicy. Therefore, the objective is not to engage man in abstract ideas but rather to help him realize the purpose of suffering and offer guiding principles in how to overcome various forms of evil.¹¹ Here it may be noted that the notion of 'natural evil'—a distinct category under the umbrella of the 'problem of evil'—is not treated in the Qur'an. Although the Qur'an frequently makes references to nature and events in the natural world that might not be desirable by mankind, these are not referred to as 'evil'.

3. Overcoming Evil: Prophet Job (*Ayyūb*)—The Exemplar

The notion of prophethood (*nabuwwa*) and the descriptive narratives about the lives of the prophets constitute a major portion of the Islamic scripture. While the prophets serve as the conduits through which the divine message is communicated to addressee communities, they are portrayed as exemplars that inspire and guide people to the straight path of monotheism. The history of Qur'anic prophethood began with Adam, chosen to become the first prophet after the trial of eating from the forbidden tree, and includes many of the figures mentioned in Judaeo-Christian traditions. Although Islamic tradition speaks of 124,000 prophets in the history of mankind, the Qur'an mentions twenty-five by name and describes their challenges as they conveyed the prophetic message to their respected communities. Prophet Muhammad is mentioned as the final messenger and is referred to as the "Seal of the Prophets".¹²

The story of Job (*Ayyūb*), an eminent figure in Jewish and Christian tradition, is seen in the Qur'an to exemplify genuine devotion to God, gratitude through fortune and health, and patience when afflicted with illness and adversity.¹³ Job's incomparable sincerity and submission to God's will in both

⁸ Discussing the historical, political, and social climate of Islam's normative period is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it needs to be noted that a large portion of the Qur'an is directly related to the circumstances that surrounded Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community.

⁹ Qur'an, 2:155. Also see 67:2 and 89:16.

¹⁰ Qur'an, 3:26, see (Abdel Haleem 2004).

¹¹ For an extended discussion on the instrumentality of evil in the forms of *balā* see, Nasrin Rouzati, *Trial and Tribulation in the Qur'an: A Mystical Theodicy* (Rouzati 2015).

¹² Qur'an, 33:40.

¹³ The story of Job in Judeo-Christian traditions is presented in the Book of Job and appears in the form of a dialogue between Job and his friends who try to explain to him the reason for his sufferings. A comparative study of the story between Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam is beyond the scope of this paper. For an excellent comparative review, see A.H. Johns, *A Comparative Glance at Ayyub in the Qur'an* (Johns 2008, pp. 51–82).

health and prosperity, as well as during affliction and hardship, are the reasons the Qur'an portrays him as "an excellent servant."¹⁴

According to Muslim exegesis, what distinguishes Job is the fact that despite his enormous fortune, he continually attributed the source of his blessings to God and remained humble as a servant who lacked ownership of his belongings. Similarly, when God tested him with a serious disease, he exercised patience and recognized that he was going through a test—a positive experience—and ascribed any negative feelings of despair to Satan.¹⁵

The Qur'anic narrative about Job demonstrates that trials and tests—whether in prosperity and health or illness and hardship—are part of the divine plan, so much so that even prophets are not exempt; it is through various experiences in life that man is able to actualize his potential and propagate his mission on this earth. As John notes, "the story of Job in the Qur'an is understood primarily as a reward narrative with an emphasis different from that of the story of Job in the Bible."¹⁶

4. Concept of Evil: Theological and Philosophical Development

One of the earliest problems in Muslim theological thought (*kalām*) was how to reconcile the divine attribute of omnipotence with the notion of human free will. The departure point for this discourse was the Qur'an and the diverse interpretations of its teachings on the divine names and attributes (*asmā' al-husnā*).¹⁷ The reconciliation of certain divine attributes, predominantly the aspect of an all-powerful God, with the idea of human free will—the broader frame with which human suffering was enclosed—was the first attempt to initiate a theodicy within the context of Islam.

The discourse presents itself at the core of the theological dialogue amongst various groups. The theologians who advocated for the attribute of omnipotence in its absolute and uncompromising form were of the opinion that the only agent in this world is God: He creates His own acts as well as the acts of all human beings. As this view raised serious concerns about the creation of "evil" acts by God, the debate developed further to question the validity of human free will—the concept that is deeply rooted in the Quran as it relates to man's responsibility and accountability, as well as divine judgment and reward and punishment. The dialogue crystallized between the Mu'tazilite and the Ash'arite, the two main schools of thought, with a divergence of opinion; both made a serious effort to win the argument according to their understanding of the Qur'an.¹⁸

The Mu'tazilite school of thought, also known as the rationalists, categorically opposed the idea that God creates human acts that include evil and advocated for human free will by emphasizing the importance of the divine attribute of justice (*'adl*). They upheld that God, in accordance with His attribute of (*'ādil*), cannot create evil and that evil is the direct result of man's freedom of choice. This view was challenged by raising questions such as: If God does not create evil, who, then, is responsible for human suffering caused by illnesses and disasters? And if God wills for illnesses and disasters in human life, how can He be just? The Mu'tazilites responded by affirming that illnesses and disasters, while may appear as "evil", are in actuality "good" that God creates and that serve a significant purpose in the creational cosmic plan. This seems to be the first appearance of the theory of instrumentality of human suffering in the divine plan. The notion of suffering, which included undeserved suffering by children and animals, continued to be discussed by the Mu'tazilite

¹⁴ Qur'an 38:41–2 and 21:83–4.

¹⁵ See Abubakr 'Tigh Neishabur Surabadi, *Tafsir Surabadi*, ed. Sa'Idi Sirjani (Surabadi 1381). Also, see Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Qur'an, an Introduction to the Qur'an and Muslim Exegesis* (Wheeler 2002).

¹⁶ See (Johns 2003, pp. 50–51).

¹⁷ For more on this see Abdol Rahman Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldūn* (Ibn Khaldūn 1375).

¹⁸ For a comprehensive discussion on development of theology in Islam, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam* (Wolfson 1976).

theologians.¹⁹ The Mu‘tazilite’s firm stress on God’s justice, however, resulted in the group dividing, which finally gave birth to the Ash‘arite school of thought.

According to Ash‘arite theologians, God’s law of justice applies only to human beings who have been obligated to act according to His laws. Applying the idea of justice to God, however, will put a limit on an all-powerful creator; therefore, God is not bound by His own laws. He is just in whatever He does.²⁰ Applied to suffering, this then means that all harm encountered by man is fair as it has been willed by God who is just in all His creation. The Ash‘arite thinkers were in sharp conflict with the Mu‘tazilites who asserted that not only is God subjected to the same rules of justice but that, in fact, the obligation to act in just means is eternal and uncompromising for God. It is worth noting that a prominent Muslim philosopher, Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 1198), challenged these views and asserted that the element of justice may not be employed for God and man in the same manner: man, by virtue of being just, advances to a higher level of goodness; God, however, is just due to His perfection—a trait that requires Him to be just.²¹

In the final analysis, mainstream Sunnite theologians supported the Ash‘arite school of thought and emphasized that God creates all acts. In order to reconcile God’s omnipotence with human responsibility, the doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*) was adopted: God creates all acts; humans freely acquire certain acts and, therefore, are accountable for the acquisition of good and evil acts.²² Conversely, Muslim thinkers belonging to the Shi‘ite branch of Islam—through the influence of rational element in the Mu‘tazilite theology—remained in disagreement with the Ash‘arites. An example of this may be observed from the writings of an eminent Persian philosopher, Morteza Muṭahharī (d. 1979), who was of the opinion that the Ash‘arite outlook, while aimed at vindicating God from injustice, resulted in exonerating human oppressors of any wrongdoing.²³

From the Muslim philosophical perspective, the notion of good and evil is enclosed within the wider ontological understanding of existence (*wujūd*) and nonexistence (*‘adam*). Briefly put, good is defined as a positive entity that branches from existence; evil, on the other hand, stems from nonexistence and as such is viewed as a negative entity.²⁴ An example of the ontological interpretation of what constitutes good and evil may be seen from the works of two prominent Muslim philosophers who significantly influenced the shaping of Muslim philosophical thought: Ibn Sīnā, known as Avicenna (d. 1037), and Sadr al-Dīn Shirāzī, who was mostly recognized as Mullā Sadrā (d. 1636).

Ibn Sīnā formed a theodicy by distinguishing the various forms of evil such as “essential” evil (*sharr bidh-dhāt*), which is non-being or privation, and “accidental” evil (*sharr bil-‘araḍ*), which can be either being or privation. In his analysis, Ibn Sīnā concluded that it is the non-essential/accidental evil that is the leading cause of human suffering and that the total amount of good in the universe outweighs the amount of evil.²⁵ Mullā Sadrā, on the other hand, extensively developed this philosophical approach by an interest in combining theology with mystical insight. This approach, according to Rizvi, totally transformed the theory of existence as it pertains to Islamic metaphysics.²⁶ In Mullā Sadrā’s view, explained in his major work called *Mafātih Al-ghayb*, absolute existence is absolute good and since God is the only Necessary Being, He is the absolute good: perfection applies only to the

¹⁹ For a great discussion on the Mu‘tazilite’s view on pain and suffering see (Heemskerck 2000). For an extensive study on the notion of disability in Islam, see Mohammed Ghaly, *Islam and Disability: Perspectives in Theology and Jurisprudence* (Ghaly 2010).

²⁰ See Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam* (Wolfson 1976).

²¹ For more on his philosophy, see Ibn Rushd (Averroes), *The Philosophy and Theology of Averroes*, (Averroes 1921).

²² For more on theory of acquisition, see Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam* (Wolfson 1976).

²³ See (Mutahhari 1385, pp. 50–51).

²⁴ For more on ontological aspects of good and evil, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present* (Nasr 2006, pp. 65–68).

²⁵ For more on Ibn Sīnā’s theodicy, see Shams C. Inati, *The Problem of Evil: Ibn Sina’s Theodicy* (Inati 2000).

²⁶ See Sajjad Rizvi, ‘Mulla Sadra’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Rizvi 2009).

Necessary Being. Thus, the rest of creation—all contingent entities—lacks certain degrees of goodness; that is, evil and suffering are partial and negative.²⁷

It may be concluded that Muslim philosophers²⁸ have mostly referred to evil as *privatio boni* “privation of good,” which in turn provides a strong rationale for the doctrine of the optimum (*al-aṣṣlah*). According to this principle, this world, regardless of the existence of evil and human suffering, has been created in perfect fashion by its Creator who is the Perfect One. Therefore, the amount of evil and human suffering is inconsequential in relation to the volume of good that is inherent in the makeup of creation.

5. Evil and “The Best of All Possible Worlds”: Ghazālian Theodicy

As discussed previously, the instrumentality of human suffering—purposefulness and the greater good that it brings—is emphasized in the Qur’an and is also at the core of the Muslim theological and philosophical discourse. However, the practical and more tangible aspect of this theory becomes highly observable in the teachings of one of the most influential intellectuals of Islam, namely, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111). Al-Ghazālī’s significant impact on advancing Muslim scholastic thought is the reason he is often referred to as “the proof of Islam” (*Ḥujjat al-Islam*). It is, however, his personal experience with suffering and, by extension, his powerful statement regarding the creation of the world—“there is not in possibility anything more wonderful than what is” (*laysa fi’l-imbkān abda’ mimmā kān*)—that is of special interest in this article.

Through a rigorous education in theology and jurisprudence, as well as Qur’anic and *hadith* (prophetic traditions) studies, al-Ghazālī’s extraordinary abilities flourished at a relatively young age and earned him a professorship position at one of the most distinguished academic settings of his time, namely, Nizāmīyah College in Baghdad. However, at the peak of his career, notwithstanding great achievements and recognition, al-Ghazālī became doubtful of the authenticity of his theoretical religious knowledge and resigned from his position to pursue a more interior path of piety. In Bowker’s view, al-Ghazālī felt that his religious knowledge about God and the ability to describe Him with such articulacy was worthless if it did not bring him into a direct experience of God.²⁹

In his spiritual autobiography *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (Deliverance from Error), al-Ghazālī describes his intellectual and emotional challenges that ultimately resulted in a major event in his life. After examining possible ways by which a deep religious knowledge and convention that is free from doubt may be attained, he affirmed that the mystic path of life where knowledge of God is grounded in direct mystical experience was the way he had to peruse. However, in preparation to travel on this path, he needed to disengage from all worldly attachments: the prestigious professorship position, family, and wealth, which in actuality proved to be much more difficult. This inner struggle lasted more than six months until he was faced with a serious illness—inability to speak, eat, or drink—that caused him afflictions and much suffering. In fact, it was through months of hardship and suffering due to unexpected physical and spiritual crises that al-Ghazālī transformed internally, leaving all of his possessions and departing to Damascus where he spent two years in contemplation and prayer in search of certitude and a personal experience of God that was free from doubtfulness.³⁰

The positive impact of al-Ghazālī’s encounter with his severe illness, which endangered his physical and mental wellness, appears in accord with the optimistic portrayal of hardship and

²⁷ For an excellent commentary on Mullā Sadrā’s *magnum opus*, *Asfār*, see (Rahman 1975).

²⁸ As mentioned previously, Ibn Rushd (Averroës, d. 1198) is considered as one of the most influential Muslim philosophers. While he was greatly influenced by Ibn Sina, he made a considerable effort to highlight Aristotle’s original roots in Islamic philosophy, and remove the Neo-Platonism influence that had entered years later. Several centuries later, Mullā Sadrā became known as the Shiite philosopher who added a mystical layer to philosophical and theological debates. For more on the development of Islamic philosophy, see (Nasr 2006).

²⁹ See John Bowker, *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God* (Bowker 1978, p. 195).

³⁰ See Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal, Deliverance from Error* (Al-Ghazālī 2006, pp. 52–55).

suffering presented in the Qur'an.³¹ For al-Ghazālī, this apparent negative experience proved, in fact, to be positive and instrumental in the actualization of his intellectual and spiritual potentialities. As already mentioned, during his professorship in Baghdad, al-Ghazālī contributed greatly to shaping a variety of Muslim thoughts.³² Still, the practical implications of much of his teachings, particularly the relationship between theological and mystical discourses, are clearly articulated in his writings following his departure and the years he spent in seclusion. As Zarrinkūb pointed out, the authenticity of religious knowledge that al-Ghazālī pursued through rational deductions for much of his life bore fruit after his illness and major mystical experience.³³ The reflections of al-Ghazālī's renewal are presented in his *magnum opus* called *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* ("The Revival of the Religious Sciences"), composed during the next decade of his life. In this major work, al-Ghazālī illustrated through a highly detailed elucidation of personal religious experiences ways by which a profound inner life may be integrated with sound theological doctrines.³⁴

The reflection of this worldview and much of what may be called Ghazālian theodicy is encapsulated in his famous dictum of the best of all possible worlds: "There is not in possibility anything more wonderful than what is" (*laysa fi'l-imkān abda' minmā kān*). The statement presents itself in Book 35 of the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn: Kitāb al-tawḥīd wa' l-tawakkul*, Divine Unity and Trust in God:

Everything that God distributes among men such as sustenance, life-span '*ajal*', happiness and sadness, weakness and power, faith and unbelief, obedience and apostasy—all of it is unqualifiedly just with no injustice in it, true with no wrong infecting it. Indeed, all this happens according to a necessary and true order, according to what is appropriate as it is appropriate and in the measure that is proper to it; nor is anything more fitting, more perfect, and more attractive within the realm of possibility. For if something was to exist and remind one of the sheer omnipotence of God and not of the good things accomplished by His action, it would be miserliness that utterly contradicts God's generosity and injustice contrary to divine justice. And if God were not omnipotent, He would be impotent, thereby contradicting the nature of divinity.³⁵

Although a critical analysis of al-Ghazālī's statement is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be mentioned that he received much criticism from his opponents since taking this position—it is not possible for God to create a better world—is in conflict with the Ash'arite theological teachings relating to God's omnipotence.³⁶ However, it must be pointed out that the statement is embedded within a broader context of *tawakkul*, "trust in God," which is treated in the Qur'an extensively. In fact, *Al-Wakīl*, the trustee, is one of the divine attributes that the Qur'an references when it characterizes true believers, that is, those who hold full trust in God. This concept is also discussed by al-Ghazālī in his book called *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, '*al-Maḡṣad al-asnā fi sharḥ mā 'ānī asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*', where he provides a comprehensive discussion of the divine attribute of *Al-Wakīl*, and describes to his audience how God, in His essence, deserves to have matters entrusted to Him.³⁷

Therefore, while certain elements of a classical theodicy are articulated in al-Ghazālī's maxim of "the best of all possible worlds," one may infer that his objective was to provide practical guidelines to reach a high level of trust in God despite the apparent imperfections of the world. Furthermore, prior

³¹ For example, Quran, 2:216, "... you may dislike something although it is good for you, or like something although it is bad for you: God knows and you don't."

³² For a comprehensive study on al-Ghazālī's thoughts, see Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Griffel 2009). Also see Michael E. Marmura, 'Al-Ghazālī', in Peter Adamson and Richard Taylor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (Marmura 2005).

³³ See Abdolhusin Zarrinkub, *Farar Az Madrasah - Life and Teachings of Al-Ghazali* (Zarrinkub 1387, p. 124).

³⁴ For more on this, see (Watt 2007).

³⁵ See (Al-Ghazālī 2001, pp. 45–46).

³⁶ For a detailed discussion on al-Ghazālī's statement, see (Ormsby 1984). It should be noted that several centuries later this statement was raised by Leibnitz in the context of a consistent theodicy. Also see (Kermani 2011, p. 58).

³⁷ See (Al-Ghazālī 1992, pp. 375–76).

to making the aforementioned statement about the perfectness of the world, al-Ghazālī engages in an in-depth discussion on the divine attributes of “wisdom” and “will” to highlight their connection, as well as the importance of viewing the world as the most excellent work of the Creator. From the Ghazālian perspective, the signs of God’s will and wisdom are plentifully evident throughout His creation. Consequently, in order to fully trust in God that this world—including all of its seeming deficiencies—is the best of all possible worlds, one must be able to genuinely believe that the creation of the universe is planned and premeditated according to God’s will and wisdom. It should also be mentioned that this level of trust, *tawakkul*, is one of the highest stations in the mystic path and plays a significant role in man’s spiritual development.

As it may be inferred from the above discussion, al-Ghazālī’s theodicy is established on a strong relationship between man and God and the need to reach an elevated level of trust in God in the face of the world’s imperfections, adversities, and suffering. Nevertheless, it is in the teachings of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, one of the most prominent thinkers of Islam as well as a mystic and Sufi poet, where the comprehensive elucidations of the constructive aspects of hardship and suffering in man’s spiritual development come to light.³⁸

6. Evil from the Muslim Mystical Perspective: Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī

The mystical dimension of Islam, similar to other forms of religious mysticism discussed in Perennial Philosophy,³⁹ deals with the esoteric teachings of Islam and is traditionally represented by Sufism. Although the development of Sufism may be traced back to a century after the death of prophet Muhammad, the roots of its teachings go back to the Qur’an and the *Sunna* (normative behavior) of the prophet where contemplating on the spiritual realities of the universe is highly encouraged. That the external (*zāhir*) practices of Islam should guide to insight and inner realities (*bāṭin*) may be understood from the Qur’an where God is presented as both the Outward (*al-zāhir*) and the Inward (*al-bāṭin*).⁴⁰ Although the focus of Sufism is on the esoteric path (*tarīqah*) in order to reach a state of union with God, the doctrines and practices of the Sufi path are, nevertheless, founded on the exoteric framework specified in Islamic law (*sharī‘ah*).⁴¹

One of the most influential Sufis of Islam is Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273) who is known in the West for his mystical poetry. Rūmī was born in Balkh, the Persian province of Khorāsān, and received a high level of education under his father who was a distinguished jurist and Sufi, as well as a formal trainee to the mastery level in Sufism from one of the most well-known Sufi masters of the time, Burhān al-Dīn Tirmidhī. Being educated in the traditional religious sciences in addition to Sufism gained him widespread recognition as a religious scholar and influential teacher in both exoteric and esoteric teachings of Islam. In Shafiei Kadkani’s opinion, Rūmī is considered as one of the greatest intellectuals of the world mainly because of his extraordinary ability to engage with the mystical interpretation of some of the most difficult theological concepts, as well as their exposition in a poetic and inspirational language.⁴² Although Rūmī’s mystical elucidations are presented in much of his work, it is, however, his *magnum opus*, the *Mathnawī* that illuminates the mystical elements of the Qur’anic teachings, and is regarded as an esoteric commentary of the Qur’an.⁴³ In what follows, I will

³⁸ It is important to note that al-Ghazālī’s mystical teachings have greatly influenced Rūmī’s worldview. However, while the former emphasized more on God’s majesty, the latter established his teachings more on the notion of God’s love. For more on the mystical views of al-Ghazālī and Rūmī, see (Soroush 1379, pp. 33–37).

³⁹ Perennial Philosophy takes a universal approach in explaining the teachings of world religions, and brings to light a shared mystical vision among them. Viewed from this perspective, world religions and spiritual traditions, despite their cultural and historical differences, promote a deep understanding of the transcendent element, the Reality, which exists in the universe. For more on this, see (Huxley 2009, p. vii).

⁴⁰ Qur’an: 57:3, “He is the First and the Last; the Outer and the Inner: He has the knowledge of all things.”

⁴¹ For a comprehensive discussion about Islamic mysticism, see (Schimmel 1975). Also, see (Nasr 1987).

⁴² See (Shafiei Kadkani 1388, p. 2).

⁴³ For more on the influence of the Qur’an in shaping Rumi’s worldview, see (Zarrinkub 1388, p. 342).

attempt to summarize Rūmī's expositions on the notion of evil and human suffering as presented in the *Mathnawī*.

In Rūmī's worldview, the multiplicity that exists in this world is the effect of the manifestation of God's names (*asmā'*) and attributes (*sifāt*) that aim to reveal His creative power. In other words, while the form (*ṣūrat*) of the created entities is varied, their meaning (*ma'nā*), nevertheless, is indicative of One Reality.⁴⁴ Rūmī further expands the distinction between form and meaning to demonstrate that while man appears to be a being among other beings in the universe, the universe is, in fact, in man: "... in form thou art the microcosm, in reality thou art the macrocosm."⁴⁵ He also identifies man as the "fruit" of creation and uses the analogy of a tree to describe this highly elevated status: "The only reason that the gardener plants a tree is for the sake of the fruit. Man is the goal of the creation; therefore, he is the last creature that comes into existence; yet, in reality, he is the first."⁴⁶

The creation of Adam, as the exemplar of humankind in his ultimate closeness to God, is postulated at the center of Rūmī's teachings as it relates to the positive impact of trials and tribulations in man's spiritual development. According to Rūmī, the Qur'anic notion of the "knowledge of the names,"⁴⁷ taught to Adam upon his creation, reveals that humankind has the capacity to become the perfect mirror where God's names and attributes may be manifested. The knowledge of the names, Rūmī informs us, is not the external names of the created beings; rather, it is the mysteries and the inner meanings of the various elements within the creation of the cosmos. Man's responsibility is to live in accordance with his inner nature (*fitra*) and recognize that actualization of his potential is doable by his own volition, as well as the ability to differentiate between "form" and "meaning": to search for the truth behind the veils.

From the Rūmīan perspective, the most important phase in man's spiritual development is to get to know one's self, self-knowledge (*ma'rifat al-nafs*), and ultimately to recognize that he has been separated from his original Source (*aṣl*). By employing the analogy of a "reed," Rūmī explicates that this separation is the primary cause for humankind's unhappiness in this life.⁴⁸ Man tends to forget his divine origin and occupies himself with the worldly attainments; therefore, in order to awaken him from the state of negligence, he will be faced with adversities and sufferings. In other words, trials and tribulations are necessary as they assist man in self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), freeing him from material attachments and the inclinations of his ego. Rūmī expounds upon prophet Joseph's experience to describe the constructiveness of trials; Joseph's enslavement, as difficult as it was, freed him from slavery to other creatures so that he could become God's slave alone.⁴⁹ Furthermore, in Rūmī's scheme, when a person is faced with a negative *balā*, for example, a serious illness, his attitude and response towards his condition are of primary importance. The person whose goal in life is to satisfy the inclinations of his animal self will complain and bring to question the justice of God. On the other hand, a person whose goal is to purify the self (*nafs*), to go up the spiritual ladder, will find a deeper meaning in learning the lessons hidden within this experience.⁵⁰

As it was alluded to previously, from the Qur'anic perspective, man's entire life on earth, in "good" (*khayr*) and "bad" (*sharr*), is viewed as a trial and a test; the purpose is to grant him the opportunity to flourish his inner potential by exercising freedom of choice (*ikhtiār*) and to strive to find ways to return to his source. As Rūmī explains, mankind has the tendency to forget God in two situations: when he is granted wealth and during good health.

⁴⁴ See (Rumi 1926, VI:3172, 83).

⁴⁵ Ibid., IV:521.

⁴⁶ Ibid., III:1128–29.

⁴⁷ Qur'an: 2:30–37.

⁴⁸ See (Rumi 1926, I:1–2; 3; and 11).

⁴⁹ See (Renard 1994).

⁵⁰ See (Rumi 1926, III:682–68). For more on this, see (Zamani 1384).

Between God and His servant are just two veils and all other veils manifest out of these: they are health and wealth. The man who is well in body says, 'Where is God? I do not know and I do not see.' As soon as pain afflicts him he begins to say, 'O God! O God!', communing and conversing with God. So you see that health was his veil and God was hidden under that pain. As much as man has wealth and resources, he procures the means to gratify his desires and is preoccupied during the night and day with that. The moment indigence appears, his ego is weakened and he goes round about God.⁵¹

Rūmī further invites his reader to ponder about times of afflictions when his prayer in ending the suffering appears not to have been granted by God, and to recognize and appreciate that this is more beneficial for him: the longer the duration of the hardship, the longer he remains in this state of immanence to God.⁵² Also, as Chittick observes, in Rūmī's view, "if a person tries to flee from suffering through various stratagems, he is, in fact, fleeing God. The only way to flee from suffering is to seek refuge from one's own ego with God."⁵³ Moreover, another positive impact of adversity and sorrow is that it transforms and purifies human character.

When someone beats a rug with a stick, he is not beating the rug; his aim is to get rid of the dust.

Your inward is full of dust from the veil of I-ness and that dust will not leave all at once.⁵⁴

Finally, before closing the discussion on Rūmī's teachings, it should be pointed out that in his elucidations on the fruitfulness of hardships in man's life, Rūmī also provides practical guidelines that can be put to practice when one is faced with adversities. In an effort to benefit from spiritual growth, as well as overcome suffering without going into despair, Rūmī explicates two critical aspects of being a Muslim, namely, the Qur'anic virtues of patience (*ṣabr*) and trust in God (*tawakkul*). As trusting God is at the core of al-Ghazālī's teachings and has already been discussed in conjunction with the "best of all possible world" statement, we will now turn to a brief discussion on the concept of patience from the Rūmīan perspective.

In his explications of man's condition on this earth, Rūmī frequently sheds light on the virtue of patience. Nevertheless, it is in the parable of the "chickpea," one of the most well-known stories of the *Mathnawī*, where the importance of patience in the face of suffering fully comes to light. The story is about a fictional dialogue between a housewife and a chickpea that is being cooked as part of a meal. Similar to man at the time of his encounter with affliction, the chickpea complains to the housewife for cooking it in boiling water and it tries to escape by constantly jumping out of the pot. Finally, on realizing that it is not able to relieve itself from its misery, it desperately pleads with the housewife to take it out of the boiling water. The housewife then comes into a conversation to console the chickpea and help it learn that patiently enduring suffering is needed for its growth.

At the time of being boiled, the chickpea comes up continually to the top of the pot and raises a hundred cries,

Saying, 'Why are you setting the fire on me? Since you bought me, how are you turning me upside down?'

The housewife goes on hitting it with the ladle. 'No!' says she: 'boil nicely and don't jump away from the one who makes the fire.'

I do not boil you because you are hateful to me; nay, 'tis that you may get taste; this affliction of yours is not on account of you being despised.'

Continue, O chickpea, to boil in tribulation, that neither existence nor self may remain

⁵¹ See (Rumi 2004, p. 240).

⁵² See (Rumi 1926, VI:4222–26).

⁵³ See (Chittick 1983, p. 238).

⁵⁴ See (Rumi 1379).

to thee.

The chickpea said, 'since it is so, O lady, I will gladly boil: give me help in verity!
In this boiling thou art, as it were, my architect: smite me with the skimming-spoon, for
thou smites very delightfully.'⁵⁵

Recapitulating Rūmī's thought as presented in the final verse of the chickpea story, when man journeys in the mystic path and is able to attain the state of inner contentment (*rizā*) during times of suffering, he has truly submitted to the will of God—has become a *Muslim*. Consequently, in patiently enduring suffering, as well as trusting in God and the overall goodness of His creation, man will be able to overcome the anguish and move up the spiritual ladder to reach nearness with God. It should also be mentioned that in Rūmī's mystical path, love of God plays a significant role in the process of man's spiritual growth. As man is reminded of his separation from his Source (aṣl), the love of the Beloved is the means by which he will be able to endure the most difficult times, knowing that through God's love he has the potential to reach the elevated state of *rizā*—what the Qur'an refers to as the highest state of tranquility (*'nafs muṭma'inna'*)—where man is pleased with his Lord.⁵⁶

7. Conclusions

The notion of evil and human suffering is not portrayed in the Islamic revelation as a "problem" to be resolved but rather as part of the human experience. Therefore, since the Qur'an does not engage its readers in abstract ideas and theological discussions about evil, the formulation of a classical theodicy is not presented. Most of the Qur'anic verses on adversity and suffering suggest that human beings, including prophets, will be tested by difficult times. The ontological nature of evil is referred to as nonexistence and privation of good by Muslim philosophers, while the theologians attribute evil to man's conduct. The Muslim mystical literature as presented in the teachings of Rūmī demonstrates that trials in adversities are necessary to remove man from the state of negligence in order for him to realize his divine source and to choose to set forth on a spiritual journey. In this mystic path, exercising patience, trusting God, as well as loving God, are essential in assisting man reach the state of tranquility. Along the path, man, as the fruit of the creation, will be able to actualize the potentialities of his inner nature and purify his soul to become a perfect mirror in manifesting God's names and attributes.

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⁵⁵ See (Rumi 1926, III:4160–64; 78; 97–98).

⁵⁶ For more on the notion of love in Rumi's mysticism, see (Zarrinkub 1388). Also, see (Schimmel 1993).

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