

On Listening: Hearing God's Voice in the Face of Suffering

By *Mohammed Rustom*

Anecdote

Nearly a decade ago, I delivered a lecture which was part of a monthly philosophy colloquium series hosted by the philosophy department at my University. Unlike most of if not every other paper delivered in the series, my topic had to do with a non-European philosophical tradition—Islamic philosophy. The title of the lecture was on death and dreaming in Islamic philosophy, and this I suspect was the reason so many people had attended—professors and students alike. After all, we all dream, and we all experience death in one way or another, so the title would quite naturally speak to diverse kinds of people.

One of the main points made in the paper was that we cannot view Islamic philosophy as simply an extension of the Western philosophical tradition. We have to see it on its own terms, and in conversation not just with Late Antiquity, but also as representative of a philosophical tradition that addresses its own theoretical problems through its own perspectives and worldviews. My task would have been made a lot easier if Peter Adamson's *Philosophy in the Islamic World*¹ had been published at that time. At any rate, I simply stated the position just mentioned as I moved along in the lecture.

By the end of the talk, I was surprised to see how many people in the audience, including the colloquium organizers, were pleased and perhaps even relieved to hear of something so familiar and yet so different. Most of the questions and comments were well thought

This article is dedicated to the memory of Shaykh Muhammad Touray al-Kabir al-Tijani.

¹ *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy without any Gaps, Volume 3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

out and incisive. But then a philosophy professor put up his hand and proceeded with voicing his “main objection” to the points presented: “You said that for the Islamic philosophers, God is a so-called ‘best of plotters.’ But ‘plotting’ implies deceit and deception, and these can hardly be qualities of a benevolent and omniscient God. If God plots, then He schemes, and if He schemes, then this implies some kind of badness, which means He cannot be God.”

Flabbergasted, I offered the following response: “Firstly, it is not the Muslim philosophers who call God ‘the best of plotters.’ That phrase goes back to the Quran 3:54 and 8:30, which say that God is *kbayr al-makirin*. It is true that plotting implies some kind of scheming, but what is wrong with that? In the Quran, God’s scheming is juxtaposed to human scheming, which is of course fraught with folly.

I then presented a proposition and an example, both of which most people can understand and perhaps with which they can even identify. The proposition: “plotting” can be motivated by love and a fundamental care of people. The example: in order to make it on time for the lecture, I literally had to come up with a plot with my wife of how we would divert our one year old son’s attention to another part of the house in order for me to make my escape. Simply making an attempt to walk out of the house was not an option since it would sadden the child, which would mean I would have to console him, which would mean I would likely be late to the lecture. Or, worse, I would have to drive faster than usual to work, and then put myself and others in danger on the road. I continued: “So, you can see how ‘plotting’ need not always be ‘evil’ and ‘bad’ even on the human scale; this applies, a fortiori, on the Divine scale.”

My interlocutor was silenced. A whole other way of thinking about God had been presented to him through the example of human “plotting,” and one which I hope would have challenged the very categories with which he would henceforth approach issues in philosophy of religion. Then I concluded: “Allow me to zero in on your question: saying that God ‘plots’ or ‘schemes’ may be troublesome for a certain kind of thinker whose focus is traditional, Western ‘philosophy of religion,’ which has always been dictated by Christian and largely Eurocentric problem sets and categories (i.e. analytic philosophy). If we look outside of that perspective, we will see that, apart from one particular worldview, other philosophical worldviews, like the Islamic, have their own ways

of conceiving of their indigenous problems. And if God’s plotting means something in that worldview, which it certainly does, then let it stand on its own and let us hear what Muslims have to say about it. We can then evaluate the position’s coherence, value, and the like.”

Divine Silence?

Had another book been published at that time, namely Timothy Knepper’s *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion*,² I would have certainly drawn my questioner’s attention to it. In this work, Knepper argues that philosophy of religion has to move far beyond the traditional confines and issues that have animated this tradition in the modern Western academy. It is a much more global phenomenon, and this because other major philosophical and religious traditions have also been concerned with what we would call “philosophy of religion.” It is just that the problems posed by these other traditions’ worldviews have often been quite different from, but no less important than, the fundamental philosophical and religious problems identified by Christianity. Indeed, viewing philosophy of religion through a global perspective can, at minimum, help enliven and reshape the narrow and ill-defined but still quite dominant field which bears this name.

One issue that can fall within the purview of philosophy of religion on the one hand, and the domain of theology on the other, is that of the “silence of God.” This can refer to God’s being “silent” today as juxtaposed to His having spoken at some point in the past. Framed in context, this has to do with the manner in which God spoke to Jews and Christians in the past, but does not appear to do so any more, at least not through the medium of revelation.

Related to the Judeo-Christian problem of God no longer communicating to human beings is the more universal fact of God’s perceived silence in the face of human suffering. For many theologians today, this does not mean that God is somehow unaware of or oblivious to the plight of humans. Rather, in spite of His omniscience and benevolence, God seems to allow certain kinds of wrongs to happen to people. Making sense of why this is the case and what this can mean in the long run all pertain to reflections on what can perhaps be referred to as “silence

² *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

of God theology.”

One may argue that silence of God theology is marked by a fundamental humility, since believers can accept the fact of human suffering and the very real possibility that God is not doing something about this suffering *in real time*, but that there is a profound wisdom behind this divine silence which will be made known at some point in the future, if not in the Afterlife. Some who delve into this question are certainly led to opposing conclusions: God is more like a clock maker as posited by Deism rather than being a real actor in and through human affairs; or, since there is no God, speaking of the silence of God is tantamount to saying that if there were a God, there would not be human suffering, especially on such grandiose scales as we have seen over the past century.

Taking Knepper’s insights on the importance of conceiving of philosophy of religion through a global lens, what kind of problem, if at all, is the so-called silence of God in the Islamic metaphysical universe? As William Chittick puts it, if the Islamic metaphysicians of the past were presented with this idea, their response would likely be, “Try listening for once.”³ After all, one of God’s fundamental attributes in Islamic thought is that of “speech” (*kalam*). God is thus the Speaking, which is taken to mean that God speaks eternally, without ceasing speech at any point. The great thinkers of the Islamic tradition have delved deeply into what this divine speech entails, and how it relates to God’s self-reflexivity and to the created order.

I will not attempt to engage these points here since they will take us too far afield. What is essential to keep in mind is that in Islamic metaphysics God’s being a speaking agent entails a cosmic picture in which all things are not only addressees of divine speech, but are themselves acts and embodiments of this speech. That is to say that God’s speech in Islamic metaphysics has a self-reflexive aspect and it also has a generative or ontologically productive aspect. For the Muslim sages in particular, all things in the cosmic order form so many individual parts of God’s speech. They each arise within the divine creative breath (*nafas*) which brought the cosmos into existence. Or, framed differently, we can say that each thing in the cosmos constitutes a reverberation of the divine

³ “The Sound of Silence”: <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/the-sound-of-silence> (accessed February 13th, 2020).

command (*amr*) which itself brought the cosmos into being. Thus, human beings are themselves living proof that God is always speaking, since they exist as so many words which collectively account for one aspect of God’s speech.⁴

God is therefore never silent, cosmologically speaking. Nor is He silent, anthropologically speaking. But what about the actual problem of God’s seeming silence in the face of human suffering? In order to do justice to this problem, some comments are in order concerning the existence of “evil.”

Evil

The attempt to reconcile divine goodness with the existence of evil in the world is known as the problem of “theodicy,” a term which ultimately goes back to Leibniz. Well before him, however, the basic issue fundamental to theodicy was dealt with in many different civilizations and in a variety of ways. In the Islamic tradition, one of the earliest attempts at presenting a robust defence of divine goodness in the face of evil is to be found in the writings of Avicenna, which had a long life in the Islamic intellectual tradition. The basic features of his defence of divine goodness take us to the question of the presence of evil in the world. By “evil” is meant anything that is bad, and which displays an absence, to some degree, of what is good.

The answer to the question, “does evil exist?,” is given in the affirmative. It is clear that all kinds of evils exist in the cosmos, both on grandiose and miniscule scales. Avicenna distinguishes between accidental and essential evils in the *Metaphysics* section of his *Book of Healing*.⁵ Accidental evils arise as a natural consequence of the created order. That is to say that bad things occur in the world by virtue of the world being what it is.

On an elemental level, this means something like fire, which contains much benefit for people, by virtue of its intrinsic properties, can and does exercise much harm. Fire can thus warm a home, but it can also burn a person. If fire could not warm a home, it could also not burn a person. But by force of nature, it will necessarily do both. Essential evils

⁴ This and several related points have been masterfully presented in Chittick, “The Sound of Silence.”

⁵ *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), IX.6.

are rather different. They amount to a thing's not being realized in a particular substrate which by nature ought to have that thing in question realized in it. Avicenna gives us the well-known case of blindness. It is an instance of essential evil because it entails the lack or privation of sight in a receptacle—the ocular faculty—which itself exists in order for the end of sight to be realized within it.

“Evils” are therefore an inherent feature of our universe. Asking why evil exists if God is all-good is tantamount to asking why the world exists if God is all-good. Given what the world and the order of nature are, there will naturally be all kinds of disparities, variations, and even evils amongst the things in them, which is to say nothing of human freedom, which itself is the cause of much evil in the world. To seek a world where such features are not present is to ask for another kind of world than the present one, and if we could do that, then the very question of theodicy—which likely only has meaning in our current cosmic configuration—would be meaningless.⁶

Having come away with a basic picture of how the Islamic metaphysical tradition *thinks* about the presence of evils in the world, we can now turn our attention to how the tradition *deals* with them, practically speaking.

Human Silence

Since it has already been established that, from an Islamic metaphysical perspective, God is never silent, and that evils are a real and necessary feature of the cosmic order, what can be said about human suffering and the divine response to it? In other words, when humans suffer, especially in the worst of possible ways, where is God's voice amid all of it? Part of the problem, as I see it, with speaking of the so-called “silence” of God is that it assumes that the presence and even persistence of human suffering *require* God to respond *in a certain way* and perhaps even *at a certain time*. This is quite a natural human tendency, and is evinced by both the Bible (i.e. Job 30:20, Psalms 22:1-2) and the Quran (2:214).

But in a person's weakest and darkest moments, does God really abandon him, or is something else at work? Does He not always respond,

⁶ For an approach to evil that emphasizes its illusory (but not unreal) nature, see the penetrating remarks in Ali Lakhani, “Editorial: The Problem of Evil,” *Sacred Web* 18 (2006): 7-12.

even if we do not “hear” Him? One can do no better here than call to mind the beloved twentieth century poem, *Footprints*: during our most downtrodden and awful times, the poem teaches us, we drag ourselves along thinking that we are alone in suffering our plight only to realize that it was God who was carrying us all the while.

This also calls to mind a story in Jalal al-Din Rumi’s famous *Masnawi*. He tells a tale of a man who calls out to God in earnest all night in prayer. But the man hears no divine response. It is then that Satan comes upon the scene and tries to convince the dejected person that there is no God to hear him, and that he should thus give up hope in the divine all together. At this point, the broken-hearted servant falls asleep and has a dream in which he comes to learn that God had in fact been answering his call all along:

The fear and love you express are what tie you to My bounty—
Under every “O Lord!” from you are many *labbayks* from Me.⁷

“*Labbayk*” or “Here I am!” is the well-known phrase that Muslims utter during the rites of the pilgrimage to Mecca. For Rumi, it is not man who says “Here I am!” Rather, it is God who says it to man, and this not only in some circumstances but always and forever. In other words, God’s presence and aid are always there, however imperceptible they may be to our limited human understanding and experience of the world. On a more subtle level, Rumi is also driving home the point that our very calling out to God is itself the divine response to our prayers.

For the Muslim metaphysicians, being able to hear God’s call, “Here I am,” goes back to the fundamental importance of cultivating the right kind of hearing. How can this be done? The answer lies in *human silence*. By bringing the soul to rest and eliminating what the Islamic psychologists call “internal chatter” (*badith al-nafs*), our souls become more prone to attentively hearing God’s voice within us. In our world, filled as it is with all kinds of cacophonous sounds and alarming images, cultivating this kind of inwardness is difficult indeed. But the more engrossed we remain in these sounds and images, the less will we be able to hear God’s voice and see His signs.

⁷ Rumi, *Masnawi-yi ma’navi*, ed. and trans. R.A. Nicholson as *The Mathnawi of Jalal’uddin Rumi* (London: Luzac 1925-1940), book 3, line 197 (the translation is my own).

Teaching ourselves to be silent not only takes away the internal noises within; it also can drown out the noises without, one of which are our own voices. This is not to say that one should be silent in the world, or in the face of oppression and the like. Rather, the silence in question is an attitude of the soul: it is something of a fundamental spiritual orientation in the world that allows man's own "voice" to recede to the background. By becoming silent in this way, man therefore ceases to be deaf to God's eternal audition.

Hearing God's voice in the face of terrible suffering will certainly not help explain the suffering away or somehow relativize or trivialize it. By the same token, cultivating the ability to hear God's voice is not preconditioned on man's being able to figure out the *why* and the *how* of suffering. What is certain is that for those not spiritually tone-deaf to God's speech, the very sound of the divine voice amidst all of the pain in the world can serve as a soothing balm for the soul, healing even the deepest of wounds.