254408 - Refutation of those who say that man is an actor in a figurative sense and his actions have no impact

the question

One of the brothers commented in a group discussion studying *Tafsir as-Sa`di* with a comment that I could not comprehend about the issue of the divine decree (al-qadar). This is the passage in question from as-Sa`di's commentary on Surat al-Fatihah:

"It [this surah] affirms the divine decree and also tells us that humans act on the basis of free will, which is contrary to the views of the Qadaris [those who deny the divine will and say that man has absolute free will] and Jabris [those who say that man has no free will and is compelled to do whatever he does of good or evil]. In fact, it refutes all the followers of innovation [and misguidance] in the verse {Guide us to the straight path}, because the straight path is knowing the truth and acting upon it, but everyone who follows innovation [and misguidance] does the opposite of that.

It speaks of being sincere towards Allah in terms of worship and seeking help, in the verse {It is You we worship and You we ask for help}."

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

And this is the brother's comment that I could not comprehend:

"It is essential to note an important, subtle issue, namely that there is no actor in a true sense of the word except Allah, may He be exalted, and this is one of the basic pillars of Tawhid, and that man is an actor by choice, and he is an actor in a figurative sense, not in a true sense. And Allah knows best."

I hope that you can explain this complex issue.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

To say that man is an actor in a true sense of the word by means of his ability and will, and that Allah is his Creator and the Creator of his ability and will is the view of Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama`ah.

As-Safarini (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The view of the early generations and leading scholars of the ummah, and of the majority of Ahl as-Sunnah of all groups who affirm the divine decree, is that man is an actor who does his actions in the true sense of the word, and that he has power and ability in a true sense.

End quote from *Lawami` al-Anwar al-Bahiyyah*, 1/312.

As for the view that man is an actor in a figurative sense, this is an invalid view that is contrary to the Quran and Sunnah; it is the view of the Jabris and those who agreed with them, and this view may lead to many corrupt notions and open the door to heresy and apostasy. Those corrupt notions include the following:

1. The notion that if man is not an actor in a true sense and Allah is the only actor in a true sense, this implies that the one who prays, fasts and worships is Allah, and that the adulterer, the thief and the murderer are Allah – exalted be Allah far above that.
2. If man is not an actor in a true sense, then punishing him for sin would be injustice and unfairness, and rewarding him for obedience to Allah would be pointless.
3. If man is not an actor in a true sense, then sending the messengers, sending down the Books, and sending glad tidings and warnings would be meaningless, because no one could be regarded as being obedient or disobedient in a true sense.

How could a person be an actor with free will, then you say that his actions are only figurative? In that case, there is no true action on his part.

Why should there be any reservations about man being an actor in a true sense, when Allah is his

Creator and the Creator of his ability and will, as there is no creator except Allah, and the Creator of the cause is also the Creator of the effect?

Moreover, this false notion is known to be false to any rational person on the basis of what is obvious. For example, we see people eating, drinking and getting married, so who is doing that in a true sense? Is it not they who are doing these actions in a true sense? Glory be to You [O Allah]! This is a grievous lie!

If someone were to come up to the one who holds that false view then slap him, insult him and transgress his honour, would he blame him for his actions, or would he excuse him because he is not an actor in a true sense?

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

People are actors in a true sense, and Allah is the Creator of their actions. A man may be a believer or a disbeliever, righteous or an evildoer, one who prays and fasts. People have the ability to do their actions, and they have free will, and Allah is their Creator and the Creator of their ability and will, as He, may He be Exalted, says:

{It [the Quran] is but a reminder to the worlds,

for whoever among you wills to tread the straight path.

But you cannot will it unless Allah, the Lord of the worlds, so wills it} [At-Takwir 81:28].

This concept of al-qadar (the divine will) is rejected by most of the Qadaris, whom the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) called the Magians of this ummah.

End quote from *Al-`Aqidah al-Wasitiyyah*.

Shaykh `Abd ar-Rahman as-Sa`di (may Allah have mercy on him) said in *At-Ta`liq `ala al-Wasitiyyah*, p. 100:

What that means is that if a person prays, fasts and does good, or he commits some sins, he is the

actor who does that righteous deed or that bad deed.

The action in question undoubtedly happens by his choice, and he inevitably and naturally feels that he is not compelled to do or not do that action, and that if he wanted, he would not do it. As this is the reality, it is also stated in the Book of Allah and in the hadiths of His Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), as the texts attribute deeds, good or bad, to people, and state that they are the doers of those actions; they are to be praised and rewarded for those actions if they are good, and they are to be blamed and punished for them if they are bad.

Thus it becomes clear that these actions were done by them, by their choice and free will; that if they wish, they do those actions, and if they wish, they do not do them; and that this matter is proven on the basis of reason, tangible evidence, textual evidence and observation.

Moreover, if you want to know that these actions are carried out by their doers, and someone disagrees with you regarding that and says: How could it come under the divine will and decree?

The response is: How can these deeds – good or bad – be carried out by their doers?

These deeds are done by their ability and free will, and this is something that is acknowledged by everyone.

We may add: Is it not Allah Who created their ability and free will?

The answer to that is also accepted by everyone. Everyone accepts that it is Allah Who created their ability and free will, and it is He Who creates the consequences of their actions, for He is the Creator of their actions too. In this way the confusion is resolved, and the individual will be able to fully understand that the divine will and decree, and free will, are in harmony.

In addition to that, Allah has provided the believers with various ways and means to help them adhere to the right way and to avert impediments from them. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “As for those who are destined to be among the people of bliss, Allah will make it easy for them to do the deeds of the people of bliss.”

Similarly, He leaves the evildoers to their own devices and does not help them, because they do not believe in Him or put their trust in Him. Therefore He leaves them to their own devices. End quote.

Some people may become confused about this matter, so they cannot reconcile between the fact that man is an actor in a true sense and what we have said about Allah being the Creator of people's actions.

We may give a threefold response to that, as Shaykh Ibn `Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Regarding the phrase "our actions are created by Allah," what is meant by our actions is what we do of acts of obedience or disobedience, whether those actions are done with the hand, foot, eye, nose or ear. All of those actions are created by Allah, and that is on the basis of the following:

1. That our actions are among our attributes, and we are created by Allah; the Creator of the being is the Creator of that being's attributes, so if man is created by Allah, then his attributes are also created by Him. Our actions are attributes of ours, and the Creator of the being is the Creator of the being's attributes, hence it is true to say that our actions are created by Allah. This is one point.
2. The second point is that a person's actions result from two things: from will and ability.

As for ability, it is Allah, may He be Exalted, Who has created it, and this is clear. If Allah, may He be glorified and Exalted, willed, He could take away man's ability and he would become incapable of acting.

The same applies to man's will. It is Allah Who has created it, for it is He Who instils this will in man's heart. How often a person will something, then at the last moment he wills something else.

Sometimes you leave home, intending to go and visit a friend, then on the way you change your mind and go back home, and give up the idea of visiting him, and you say: I will go and visit him tomorrow, or the day after. A Bedouin was asked: How do you know your Lord? He said: By the

fact that one may resolve to do something then decide not to do it.

This response from the Bedouin was based on his common sense. Changing one's mind about what one had resolved to do means that man may formly resolves to do something, with no doubts, then he changes his mind for no reason, or he may even start to do it, then stop.

Hence the Bedouin said that he came to know Allah through this phenomenon, because resolving to do something then changing one's mind has no known reason to which it may be attributed, so there must be a divine reason for it.

So our deeds are created by Allah, and the evidence for that is twofold:

1. Our deeds are attributes of ours, and the Creator of the being is the Creator of the being's attributes.
2. Our deeds result from will and ability, and the One Who created the will and the ability in us is Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, and the Creator of the cause, which is will and ability, is the Creator of the effect, which is the action that results from the will and ability.
3. Allah is the Creator of all things, as He says:

{Allah is the Creator of all things} [Ar-Ra`d 13:16].

The general meaning of these words includes people's deeds, because people's deeds come under the heading of things.

End quote from *Sharh as-Safarini*, 1/323.

Conclusion:

We cannot say that man is an actor in a figurative sense, because this is contrary to the religious texts and what we can observe, and it leads to reprehensible false conclusions.

Some people think that man acts in a true sense on the basis of what he possesses of ability and power, but his ability has no impact. This is also a false notion, because in reality it boils down to the same view as that of the Jabris and it implies the same as their view implies, to the extent that

al-Juwayni (may Allah have mercy on him) regarded the view that a person's ability has no impact – which is the view of his Ash`ari companions – as being akin to rejecting the message of the messengers and cancelling out the religious obligations.

He (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The first pillar has to do with man's ability and its impact.

We say that everyone who has the power of rational thinking and is not merely a blind imitator when it comes to the foundations of Tawhid, affirms that the Lord, may He be Glorified and Exalted, will requite His slaves for what they do during their lifetimes and will hold them responsible for their deeds, and He will reward or punish them on the basis of their deeds in the hereafter. It is clear on the basis of religious texts that are unambiguous and not open to misinterpretation that Allah has given them the ability to fulfil what is demanded of them and has enabled them to comply with His commands, and refrain from what He has prohibited. If I were to list the verses that affirm this meaning, the list would be long and there is no need to list them, as is clear to any smart and fair-minded man.

Whoever reads the religious texts and what they contain of urging people to do righteous deeds and warning them against committing immoral and evil deeds, and what they mention of hadd punishments for some of these evil deeds, then he reads the text which speak of promises and warnings, and the obligation to believe in what the messengers told us about what awaits these rebellious evildoers of reckoning, punishment and a bad end…

Whoever studies all of that, then doubts the fact that people's actions are based on their choice, free will and ability is lacking in reason, or is persisting in blind following and ignorance.

The idea that man's ability and actions have no impact would lead us to invalidate the religious obligations and prohibitions, and reject the message of the messengers.

The claim that the ability that Allah has created in man has no impact on the deed done with that ability is like claiming that a man's knowledge has no impact on what he knows, so holding a person accountable for his actions in that case is like asking him to prove that in his mind there are different sorts of ideas and thoughts. This is extreme and is going beyond the bounds of what

is appropriate to that which is false and impossible. It is also invalidating the message of Islam and rejecting what the prophets (peace be upon them) brought.

End quote from *Al-`Aqidah an-Nizamiyyah*, annotated by al-Kawthari, p. 42 ff.

It was narrated from ash-Shahrastani that claiming that there is ability and power that has no impact at all is like denying that there is ability in the first place.

End quote from *Al-Milal wan-Nihal*, 1/98.

And Allah knows best.