

Human Dignity in Islamic Bioethics

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ABSTRACT

The normative implications of the conception of human dignity affects on both secular and religious moral thoughts as they pertain to a range of human life issues, including health care ethics. In this article I discuss the main Islamic viewpoints regarding human dignity and their implications in Islamic bioethics.

This article offers my comprehension of the literature on human dignity and its implications in Islamic bioethics.

Human dignity is one of the most emphasized theme in the Holy Qur'an. There are two main theological schools in Islamic tradition which are called: Ash'ariyyah and Mu'tazilah.

According to Ash'ariyyah thoughts, human dignity is based on the explicit arguments in the scripture but in the Mu'tazilah's thoughts, concepts such as human dignity could have independent logical basis. Accordingly, they could be found by reason and emphasized by the scripture.

Using human dignity as a reliable basis which is emphasized by the scripture, it can shed light to many of contentious bioethical issues in the Islamic world.

Key words: Ash'ariyyah; Human Dignity; Islam; Mu'tazilah

INTRODUCTION

Human dignity is the conceptual basis for human rights, both in secular and in most religious schools of thought. The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with an emphatic recognition of the human dignity as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.¹

While providing the basis of many normative declares in bioethics and other branches of ethics, one direct normative implication of human dignity is that "every human being should be acknowledged as an

inherently valuable member of the human community and as a unique expression of life, with an integrated bodily and spiritual nature."² The normative implications of this conception of human dignity much of both secular and religious moral thoughts as they pertain to a range of human life issues, including health care ethics.

In the secular background, it was not always straightforward to assume an implicit nature or definite implications for the concept of human dignity. In the field of medical research and practice, it has been argued that the human dignity is nothing other than what is implied by the principle of medical ethics, respect for person: the need to obtain voluntarily, informed consent; the requirement to protect confidentiality; and the need to avoid discrimination and abusive practices.³ However, even this group of

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philosophers, mount their critique by attacking dignity based theories, rather than dignity as such.⁴

Human dignity is a frequent and very important theme in religious moral perspectives. In the theistic religious schools, human dignity has a real source in the God's will. The importance of this concept is similar among main theistic religions in the world.

From the Catholic perspective (which is the most popular Christian perspective), the notion of human dignity is rooted in the concept of Imago Dei¹ which denotes the theological theory that human beings are made in the likeness and image of God.⁵

According to Jewish conception of human dignity, the original source of human dignity is not intrinsic to the human being but extrinsic, namely in God. Also, it is argued that the "dignity of the people" has precedence over personal autonomy and liberty, which are core secular and liberal principles. In the cases of conflict between personal autonomy and liberty, and God's commandments, the Jewish religious and secular-liberal conceptions obviously pull in different directions.⁶

In contrast to the theistic religions, it is by no means apparent that how human dignity is to be grounded in Buddhist doctrine. The concept of human dignity sounds as alien in the Buddhist context when dealing with the concept of human rights. The theistic religions seem much better equipped to provide an account of human dignity. Christians, Muslims and Jews typically refer to the ultimate source of human dignity as divine. As mentioned above, they consider the dignity of the human person as is rooted in his creation by God and in the God's will. Buddhism, clearly, would not wish to make such a claim. Some of Buddhist theorists, however, have argued that the Buddhist concepts of Nirvana, Shunyata and Dharmakaya fulfill comparable functions to the concept of God; however, some problems arise in regarding these concepts as the source of human dignity. For instance, it is difficult to see how any of these concepts can be the source of human dignity in the way that God can, since no school of Buddhism believes that human beings are created by them. Of course, some other bases of human rights can be found in the Buddhism, for example, it has been argued that there is an intimate and vital relationship of the Buddhist norm or Dharma with that of human

rights, and the concept of human rights can be seen as a legal extension of human nature.⁷

Bioethical discussions in the Islamic world are greatly influenced by jurisprudential ideas, which on their own are based upon theological schools. Almost all of bioethical topics are considered jurisprudential in nature, or having a major jurisprudential component, by most Islamic scholars and authorities.

One of the most emphasized themes in Islamic theology is the human dignity, which can be used as a basis for many jurisprudential and bioethical decrees in the Islamic bioethics. In this article I discuss the main Islamic viewpoints regarding human dignity and their implications in Islamic bioethics.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article offers my interpretation of the literature on human dignity and its implications in Islamic bioethics. I examined related books, articles and websites, collected through searches of databases such as Medline and ISI and search engines such as Google and Yahoo, also, the library of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine Research Centre and digital library of the Tehran University.

I benefited a selected collection of above mentioned references according to their relevance to the subject of this article and I based my discussion on my understanding and interpretation of them as well as my discussion with experts.

I discussed the meaning and importance of the concept of human dignity in the Islamic schools of theology and their implications in the Islamic bioethics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Human dignity is one of most emphasized theme in the Holy Qur'an. For example:

"We have honored the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things, good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of Our creation" (17:70).

And: "Proclaim! (Or read!) In the name of Thy Lord and Cherisher, who created- Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed Blood- Proclaim! And Thy Lord is Most Bountiful- He who taught (the use of) the

pen- Taught man that which He knew not." (96:1-5). According to teachings of the Holy Qur'an, God (Allah) gave human beings the best shape and form: "O Iblis! What prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I have created with my hands? Art thou haughty? Or art thou one of the high (and mighty) ones?" (95:4) Not only that He created human being by His hands and gave humans the best form, but He called the spirit of human being His spirit to give honor and dignity to human beings: "I breathed into him my spirit." (15:29; 38:72) He taught him all the names. "And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: "Tell Me the names of these if ye are right." (2:31) "And behold, we said to the angels: "Bow down to Adam:" and they bowed down: not so Iblis: he refused and was haughty: he was of those who reject Faith. (2:34) He gave human being intellect and freedom of the will. (16:78; 23:78; 32; 9; 46:26; 67:23) And He made human being His Khalifah (Representative) in the earth. (2:30; 33:72).⁸

Human dignity is foundational for the tradition's understanding of distributive justice, the common good, the right to life and the right to health care. Other perspectives, both religious and secular, may conceive of human dignity in similar terms with a similar sense of its inherent worth or value and other implications, but may posit different sources for that dignity.⁹

There are two main theological schools in Islamic tradition which are called: Ash'ariyyah and Mu'tazilah.¹⁰ According to Ash'ariyyah thoughts, there is no such thing as intrinsic and essential goodness and badness, morally speaking, and the way in which concepts such as human dignity are discussed and evaluated in secular ethics is unjustified and implausible, because reason and its products cannot stand on their own feet in a way that they have not epistemic justification at all. Rather, they should be taken into account in the light of scripture and the prophetic tradition in order to grasp their own epistemological value.^{10,11} By other words, according to Ash'ariyyah thoughts, human dignity is based on the explicit arguments in the scripture as mentioned above, and If there was any other point of view in the scripture, the Muslims had to accept that.

On the other hand, according to Mu'tazilah's perspective, moral goodness and badness can be

discovered by reason, on its own; without considering the scripture.¹² According to Mu'tazilah's thoughts, concepts such as human dignity could have independent logical basis and are not rooted only in the Scripture or prophetic tradition. Accordingly, they could be found by reason and emphasized by the scripture.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of aforementioned two different theological attitudes, we are confronted with two different jurisprudential frameworks. According to the first one, which is associated with Ash'ariyyah's thoughts, every jurisprudential topic including bioethical issues should be examined only based on the scripture and the prophetic tradition. So, one can not rely on the concepts such as human dignity as a basis for jurisprudential decision making. However, according to the second jurisprudence framework, jurisprudential topics should be categorized and discussed in the light of both reason and the scripture. Accordingly, one can use human dignity as a reliable basis which is emphasized by the scripture; therefore, It can shed light to many of contentious bioethical issues in the Islamic world. As an example, regarding controversial issues such as organ donation, in addition to conclusions based on the scripture one can use reason and rely on concepts such as human dignity.

Of course, in this way, the human dignity is not only the result of reason by its own, but also is rooted in the God's will which can make it more reliable and more acceptable by Muslim communities.

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