

Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Answer to Modernism

Summarized by Ali Altaf Mian

Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863-1943) is the foremost representative of Islam in the last century. In his era some “New-Age Muslims” had fallen prey to Empiricism, and had begun to challenge and object to the most fundamental tenets of Islamic belief. Mawlana Thanawi proves that the objections raised by the Western-oriented Muslims are irrational. Not only are Islamic creedal tenets defined in revelation (the Qur’an and the Hadiths), but they are rational as well. In his famous treatise, *Answer to Modernism*, he lays down seven principles by which all of these modern objections can be refuted. The study of these principles will prove to be an intellectual tool for Muslims living in contemporary times. These principles will rationally aid the Muslims to refute all modern notions in contradiction with the Qur’an and the Hadiths.

Mawlana Thanawi's Seven First Principles¹

1. One's inability to understand something is no argument for its being false.

This principle is based on Ibn Sina's famous philosophical notion:

عدم الوجدان لا يدل على عدم الوجود

“Absence of understanding does not warrant absence of existence.”

For example, 200 years ago, if a commoner was informed that in the future there would be airplanes and satellites, he or she would not understand this concept; however, he or she could not make an argument that airplanes and satellites are impossible. Thus, not understanding a concept of something unobserved does not warrant its non-existence.

2. If a thing is rationally possible, and its existence is attested by sound report, then it is necessary to accept its existence. On the other hand, if its non-existence is attested by sound report, then it is equally necessary to accept its non-existence.

According to Ibn Sina, “Being” is of three kinds:

1. Necessary (*wajib*)—e.g. $1+1=2$
2. Impossible (*mumtani*)—e.g. $1=2$
3. Possible (*mumkin*)—e.g. There are 200,000 trees in Santa Barbara, California.

The first two types are clear. The third type is contingent upon further verification. If information is received from a person that there are 200,000 trees in Santa Barbara, it is possible that they may be right. There are two ways one can go about verifying this report:

1. Counting all the trees in Santa Barbara (a task which is very difficult).
- Or
2. Evaluating the reliability and credibility of the reporter.

¹ Before any discussion and explanation between two contradicting parties, there are some principles that they should agree on to reach an answer. Thus, they are called “First Principles,” because before further discussion it is necessary to agree on them first.

If the conveyer is a sound reporter (*mukhbir al-sadiq*), then it is rational to accept their report. However, if the conveyer is unsound and unauthentic, then one can not rely on his or her report, and must conduct the verification by him or herself. In Islam, the Messenger of Allah, Muhammad (peace be upon him), is the conveyer of revelation to his followers. We rely on him and accept his reports unconditionally because of his matchless genuineness and truthfulness. The Qur'an says about him:

وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ

Nor does he speak of (his own) desire.

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ

It is only a Revelation revealed (al-Najm: 3-4)

He conveyed to the Muslims that there is one God, Allah, and that there is paradise (*jannah*), hellfire (*jahannam*), the Day of Judgment (*yawm al-qiyamah*), the Jinn, the angels (*al-mala'ika*), etc. Allah revealed to him the Qur'an that informs of their existence, thus, whatever he conveyed to us, we believe wholeheartedly. Furthermore, it is rational to accept the attestation of possible existences by a sound reporter. The reason that we claim that these credal beliefs of ours are rational is because irrationality arises upon impossibility, which in turn arises upon the following two conditions:

1. Gathering of opposites (*jam'al-didayn*)—e.g. If one says that at this time (let us suppose its 2:30 P.M) there is both day and night, or if one says that I am here and not here, etc.
2. Absence of opposites (*raf'al-didayn*)—e.g. If one says that it is neither day or night at this time, or says that I am not here and not anywhere else, etc.

Opposites in this context refer to the four logical statements:

1. Universal Affirmative—e.g. all humans are mammals.
2. Particular Affirmative—e.g. some humans are Africans.
3. Universal Negative—e.g. no humans are trees.
4. Particular Negative—e.g. some humans are not Asians.

Each of the four has an opposite:

The opposite of Universal Affirmative is Particular Negative (in other words, only a particular negative is needed to cancel out a universal affirmative).

The opposite of Particular Affirmative is Universal Negative.

To claim that the above two sets of opposites are both true is to gather two opposites and to assert that both are false is to have both opposites absent. Both conditions warrant impossibility. If the existence of something does not fall in the two categories mentioned above, then its existence is not Impossible (*mumtani*), but either Necessary (*wajib*) or Possible (*mumkin*). The presence of paradise and hellfire is "Possible" and not "Impossible," and when a sound reporter informs of their existence then it is rational to accept this report, because relying on sound report is not irrational.

3. **What is rationally impossible is something totally different from what is merely possible. The impossible is opposed to reason itself, while the possible is opposed**

merely to habit. The predicates of reason and those of habit are quite distinct, and it is erroneous to identify them with each other. What is impossible can never exist, but what is merely possible may exist. It is the impossible alone which can be described as irrational, while the possible is only something which reason cannot understand by itself. It is a great error to confuse one with the other.

This principle corresponds to the explanations of the previous principle. By “habit,” Thanawi means the usual nature of things. It is correct to say the possible is unusual but it is wrong to say that the possible is impossible.

4. If a thing exists, it is not necessary that it must also be sensible and visible.

This principle is Thanawi’s main refutation of Empiricism. He points out that there are three ways of ascertaining the truth of a fact:

1. Through personal observation—e.g. I see Zaid, therefore I believe that Zaid exists.²
2. Through sound report from a truthful/genuine reporter—e.g. someone honest and trustworthy informs me of Zaid’s presence, therefore I believe that Zaid exists.
3. Through Rational Argument—e.g. Although, I do not see the sun, but seeing its light from the window, I believe it is day and not night.

Note that among these three ways of ascertaining the truth of a fact, Thanawi explains, existence is present in all, but sensory observation is involved in only one. Similarly the Qur’an says that there are seven heavens, and just because we do not see them, it does not mean that they do not exist.

5. It is not possible to prove a purely reported fact by a purely rational argument. So it is not also permissible to demand a rational argument for it.

Mawlana Thanawi gives the following example to illustrate this principle:

Someone tells us that Alexander and Darius were two kings who went into battle against each other. Now, if another person were to demand a rational argument in order to establish this fact, even the greatest philosopher would not be able to present any other argument except this—the existence of two such kings and a war between them is not impossible, but possible enough, and trustworthy historians have reported that this possibility did come into existence, and since it is rationally necessary to affirm a fact as real when we learn from a truthful reporter that what was possible did really happen, we must necessarily accept the report about the two kings as an actual fact (25).

Similar is the case with believing in the previous Prophets of God and the events associated with them. One can not demand a rational argument from the believer, because relying on the report of a truthful reporter is not irrational to begin with. We believe in history based on the report of historians. Today, people believe in Abraham Lincoln not

² Zaid is a common Arabic name, often used as an example in literature.

because they have seen him, but because historians have recorded and reported to us that he existed and these are his conditions and this is his picture, etc.

6. There is some difference between a precedent and an argument. It may be justifiable to demand an argument from the man who makes an assertion, but it is not valid to demand a precedent from him.

It is not just to demand an example from the past to prove an argument. For example, if a person is informed that South East Asia was recently hit by a Tsunami (December 2004), one cannot demand an earlier example of a Tsunami, and say, "I will only believe in this Tsunami if you give me the example of an earlier Tsunami." Such a demand would not only be irrational but also absurd.

Allah says:

الْيَوْمَ نَخْتِمُ عَلَىٰ أَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَتُكَلِّمُنَا أَيْدِيهِمْ وَتَشْهَدُ أَرْجُلُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

This Day, We shall seal up their mouths, and their hands will speak to Us, and their legs will bear witness to what they used to do. (Yasin: 65)

On the Day of Judgment, limbs of the human body will testify. If anybody says, "I will only believe in this if you show me speaking limbs in this world." Such a demand would be absurd as well.

7. There are two types of arguments: conclusive and approximate. A conclusive argument is a logical argument that cannot be contradicted. An approximate argument is one of the possible explanations that may be contradicted. Reason and religious reports have four relationships as far as contradiction is concerned.

- 1. Conclusive contradicting arguments are presented by both reason and report. This is impossible, for two truths cannot contradict each other.**
- 2. Conclusive argument is found with report and an approximate argument is found with reason. In this case, the report would be accepted and reason would be rejected.**
- 3. Both contradicting arguments, from reason and report, are approximate. In this case, report would be accepted and reason would be rejected.**
- 4. Reason gives a conclusive argument and an approximate argument is conveyed by report, either because of its connotation or its authenticity. In this case, the report is to be interpreted in a non-literal way that does not contradict reason.**

Thus, it is only the last of the above four cases, in which reason (*dirayah*) is given superiority over a religious report (*riwayah*).³

The application of this last principle is not the task of every person, but such investigations can only be carried out by Islamic theologians who are well-versed in the knowledge needed for such a task.

³ The wording of this last principle (number seven) has been edited for clarity.

May Allah guide us all to accept, practice, and explain the truth. Amin.

Bibliography

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