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Philosophical Tools & Persuasive Techniques Needed by Imams on Contemporary Issues

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"الأراء في هذا البحث تعبر عن رأي الباحث وليس بالضرورة عن رأي أمجا"
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Abstract

The Argument for God: Islam being immoral (especially to women and non-Muslims): The purpose of this paper is to equip the imams with the philosophical tools to answer this genre of questions. It should address the limitations of the mind; the different biases that affect our judgment; the difficulty in defining 'morality' without Divine guidance. It should select a few popular misconceptions as prototypes and show how they may be answered. We may suggest violence and the place of women in Islam.

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

Introduction

How can imams better answer questions that doubt the moral integrity of Islam? There are in fact two questions in one here. The first is the what, or the actual theological issues themselves. The second is the how: what are the best ways to answer them. The how involves philosophical and logical tools, which are rational. We often treat radd al-shubuhaat, or refuting falsehoods, as a purely rational, scholarly endeavor. This is a big mistake. Popular attacks on Islam are perhaps one-fifth rational, and four-fifths emotional. Emotional arguments appeal to disgust, fear, distrust, temptation, or patriotism. For example, the age of Aisha question is meant to incite disgust within a person. The "Sharia Law" is invoked to create fear. Terrorism is meant to induce distrust. Hatred of Muslims is cloaked in patriotism. All of these are feelings, not arguments. They affect the gut, not the intellect. Therefore, Imams should not just know ʿaqida and fiqh, they must know how to persuade. Persuasive techniques allow one to guide a discussion to more favorable grounds. They are often more useful in the short term than logic.

Right Attitude

We also enter radd al-shubuhaat as if it is a war. Even when it is, "The greatest victory is that which requires no battle" (Sun Tzu). Once we approach a conversation with an adversarial attitude, we have already guaranteed some losses, even if we win overall. The biggest loss is that our opponent will not become our ally. "Respond with what is better, for perhaps the one with whom have animosity will become a strong ally." How to do this is covered below. Furthermore, an aggressive approach may destroy your opponent, but it sheds a bad light upon us, as the Prophet ﷺ said, "Do not kill him lest people say Muhammad kills his companions." We therefore have to consider how onlookers will view our back and forth. The true adversary is the situation, the injustice, or the ignorance. The more we give husn al-zann to the person, the more attractive we will appear to onlookers, even when we know that our discussant is canniving and ill-willed. This does not always work; sometimes confrontation is necessary, but at least we go into battle having attempted to make an ally not an enemy.

Too Much Debate

Debate hardens the heart and creates animosity. It is an unhealthy for the common Muslim. As imams, we must be sure to establish spiritually warm environments in our masajid as well as social media pages. This serves our end goals because hearts filled with light and iman will be immune to such shubuhaat. We nurture this through a constant stream of shamaʼil, descriptions of the Prophet ﷺ, as well as qasas, stories of Prophets, Companions, and the righteous, as well as targhib wa tarhib,

describing Paradise and Hell and motivations for them. These are, in sum, raqa'iq, heart softeners. The common person responds to raqa'iq, not jidal (argumentation). A community or social media page dedicated to constant debate will do the opposite. it will attract more proponents of shubuhaat, and dry up any sense of emotional attachment to Allah and His Messenger ﷺ.

1. The Fundamentals of *Mantiq* and Their Application

Mantiq, or logic, is a self-evident knowledge. Namely, by mere contemplation, people can discern these principles. Logic is not a Greek invention, even though they may have been the first to author books about it. Just as *usul al-fiqh* is the methodology of understanding the Quran and Sunna, *mantiq* is the broader methodology of how to think and understand in general. Various civilizations have summarized the rules of logic. In my opinion, there are only two fundamental laws of formal logic that everyone should know. All other principles are secondary.[1]

1.1 The Law of Identity

In sum, this is the idea that things are what they are. The terms we use must have clear definitions.

1.2 The Law of Non-Contradiction

Two opposite statements cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time.

When analysing statements, the first thing we should examine are these two principles: a) what are the actual meanings of the words used, and b) are there any inconsistencies within the statement? It is that simple. More often than not, untrained writers or speakers will be guilty of inconsistencies in their speech. To be specific, writers untrained in *logic* will make these mistakes, even when they are experts in other fields. Let's look at an example.

After Stephen Hawking published *The Grand Design*, media all over the world were declaring, "Hawking says universe not created by God," "Stephen Hawking says physics leaves no room for God," and so on. The book became a best-seller, immediately assigned in both physics and philosophy classes. What then, is Hawking's thesis? How did the universe come about? He writes:

> *Because there is a law of gravity, the universe can and will create itself out of nothing.*

[1] Most compilations add the Law of the Excluded Middle, which states that for any proposition, either that proposition is true or its negation is true. In Arabic, this is the concept of the *naqid*, or the mutual exclusive. The strongest move in a debate is to corner the issue into one of two *naqid*'s, then show that your opponent's view is impossible. However, it's application is less than the above two in my view.

This is the thesis of the world's most renowned physicist's most important book. It contains three glaring inconsistencies that can be determined by anyone cognizant of the two laws of logic. The errors are:

1 The end of the statement asserts that there was nothing, but the beginning of the statement establishes that there was a law of gravity.

2 He asserts that the universe created itself. For anything to create itself it must—at least for an instant—exist and not exist at the same time.

3 He asserts that there always was a law of gravity. Laws, however, are the result of repeated observations of physical entities. For a law of gravity to exist, there must exist at least two objects and a sense of time in which the movement of these objects could be discerned.

Logicians and philosophers, such as John Lennox, cringed at the blatancy of the errors in this thesis. Logically contradictory things, such as universes that are uncreated yet creating simultaneously are not real and do exist. In constrast, the conclusion of a sound syllogism, *must* be true. We shall expand.

1.3 A Sound Syllogism

The crispest form of argumentation is the syllogism, which consists of a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion. The major premise is a rationa, abstract truth. The minor premise is a specific concrete example. The conclusion represents the merger of the two: the application of the abstract to the concrete. For example:

1 Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2 The universe began to exist.
Therefore,
3 The universe has a cause that itself has no cause.

This is the famous Kalam Cosmological Argument (technically, we would use the term *creator* in the conclusion, since Allah is not a cause, or *sabab*).

1.4 Syllogisms in the Quran

The short form of a syllogism is known as an enthymeme, in which the major premise is left out or assumed. This is the form found in the Quran. For example:

"Allah has not begotten a son, nor is there any god besides Him, for otherwise, each would have taken what they created and overcome the other—how exalted is Allah above what they describe!" (Qur'an 23:91)

In syllogism form:

1 A "god" means a being with an omnipotent will.
2 The omnipotent will of more than one such being would impose a limit on the omnipotence of the other, which is absurd.
Therefore,
3 God is therefore one, and has not begotten a son, nor is there any god besides Him.

The major premise is not stated explicitly and left for the reader to understand by himself. We can also say that it is stated explicitly elsewhere in the Quran, and therefore did not need to be restated here.

A second proof is in the verse,

"Were there other gods in [the heavens and earth] besides Allah, [the heavens and earth] would have come to ruin" (Qur'an 21:22)

In syllogism form:

1 A "god" is a being that sustains everything in the universe.
2 If the universe were subject to a number of omnipotent gods, its fabric would be disrupted by the exercise of their several wills, while no such disruption is evident in the universe.
Therefore,
3 God is therefore one, and there are no other gods.

Again, the major premise is left for the reader to understand and/or is stated explicitly in other verses.

2. The Most Important Factor In Persuasion

We can have all the knowledge in the world, but if we are not *percieved* as authoritative, then our knowledge is to naught. It has been proven through behavior science studies over and over that human beings follow those who are authoritative. The biggest crisis we are facing is that "people have taken ignorant ones as leaders." We can cut out all of the misguidance those ignorant ones have to say if the imams can define themselves and demonstrate why they are authorities in matters of deen.

In his time, Imam Malik was very concerned with how people percieved the *'ulama*. For this reason, he never appeared in anything less than the most expensive clothes and never attended a *majlis* except that he sat at the front. We too must establish with strength that the deen cannot be commented on without peer-reviewed (*sanad* system) training. However, this must be done in the right time and place, or else it can backfire. "For every time, there is an appropriate speech."

Appealing to one's authority as a scholar in the heat of a debate may be technically sound, but is the wrong move. It makes one appear arrogant, dismissive, and further, leaves questions unanswered. Instead, scholars must utilize 'peace time,' the time where there is no raging debate, to show that Shari'a is a complex science, and that non-specialists are better off consulting those who studied before making their own conclusions. This is done by explaining verses and hadiths that may mean one thing at face value, but in fact mean something completely different. The *salaf* would often test preachers with the abrogated verses.[2] We can also discuss these in public to show our audience that what they think is true, is actually not.

For example, Surat al-Baqara 2:184 would imply that fasting Ramadan is preferable, while in fact it is abroaged by the next verse. Another example is that would seem from al-Baqara 2:180 that inheritence is left at-will, in whatever is conidered decent, (*bil ma'ruf*). 2:240 appears to require one year's maintainence after death for one's wife. Both are abrogated by 4:11-12.

Another method is explaining difficult concepts such as the use of the *ahaad* (single chained) hadiths between the earlier two *madhhabs* and the later two *madhhabs*. Or the different types of weak hadiths and in what topics they can be cited and used, and for topics they cannot be used. Yet another example is the purpose behind the early *tafsir* and *hadith* compilations: Al-Tabari was encyclopedic, citing everything narrated about a verse, then accepting and rejecting in his conclusion. Malik in his *Muwatta* cited hadiths he did not use in his *fiqh* just to show others that he was not ignorant of them. Ahmad in his *Musnad* was citing whatever reputable scholars used as evidence, even if he himself did not use it. Bukhari was summarizing the Sunna.

[2] See Ibn al-Jawzi's *Kitab al-Qussas wal-Mudhakkireen*

All in all, the purpose behind this is the establishment of the authority of scholars over matters of deen. We must address, however, the elements of *kibr*, or ostentation in this process. Like all things, this question goes back to intention. If one's intention is to establish the authority of the *'ulama*, then this is praiseworthy, whereas if it is to elevate ourselves, then it is dangerous.

3. Morality

3.1 Why Is Everything *Haram*? - The High Ground Maneuver

"Why are tatoos haram?" "Why can't Muslim woman marry a Christian man?" "Why do we have to wear *hijab*?" These are all popular questions that imams see every day. Anything that involves *do* or *don't,* or *good* or *bad*, is a moral question. Moral questions are treated differently depending on the questioner.

If the questioner appears firm in their deen and is asking why something is forbidden, then one may simply refer to the bifurcation of the Shari'a in which rulings are either *ta'abbudi* or *ma'qul al-ma'na.* Namely, they are accepted purely on the basis of submission, or they are rationally comprehensible. In such as a case, all one needs to furnish is the evidence as well as the presence or absence of a *'illa* (legal cause), which is the text informing us the reason for the prohibition. A popular example of this regards the current craze over CBD products. We know that the prohibition of intoxicants is due to the *'illa* (legal cause) of losing control of one's intellect. CBD is the non-psychoactive portion of the cannibis plant, and as a rule does not alter one's mind.[3]

More relevant to this discussion is the questioner who is something of a Modernist, namely that to follow a ruling it must "make sense" to our minds. For such a person, it is futile to discuss the individual points. Rather, one must utilize the high ground maneuver. This technique shifts the discussion from the specific issue at hand to a general principle which is more easily tackled. In our case, we would shift from, "How is it fair that men can marry *kitabis* but women can't," to "Who determined fairness, human beings or Allah?" No Muslim in their right mind would deny that Allah is the most just and fair in His judgement. Appealing to Allah's knowledge is also a very effective high ground maneuver. "Why is lesbian activity *haram* if no children can be born nor STD's transmitted?" The best answer is, "Who knows best what is good for the human being?" Again, no normal Muslim will say anything but Allah.

Keep in mind that there may be short and fair answers to such questions that one may use. For example, on marrying Ahl al-Kitab, a logical answer is that Allah commanded the Muslim man to allow *kitabi* women to observe their religion, where as the Tawrat and Injil have not done the same for Muslim women. Still however, one may respond saying that this assumes that men have more power in the marriage than women, and that it's possible that the opposite is the case. Citing a speculative *'illa* or a *hikma*, wisdom, behind a ruling may or may not work with a Modernist. Therefore, one will likely need to resort to a high ground maneuver anyway.

[3] However, people with allergies to the likes of Advil and Tylenol may experience mind alteration.

Imams ought to pre-empt all of this by placing such general principles, such as Allah being All-Knowing and Most Just, at the core of their teaching and preaching. The Baqara verse, "Allah knows and you do not know," and the Aal 'Imran verses of, "Whosoever judges by other than what Allah decreed, they are…" must be repeated early and often.

3.2 Can You Be Moral Without God? - The Deep Ground Maneuver

This technique goes deeper into the question, showing that what the questioner wants is not enough. Even if they were to have it, they would remain unsatisfied. When an atheist asks, why can't I be moral without God, we reply: you can, but your morality will be merely subjective, with no objective reality or purpose. According to the atheist worldview, the entire universe is random. Everything is a "cosmic fluke." If the human being came about randomly, then it logically follows that his thoughts too are random. Our moral systems then nothing but ideas to make us feel good about ourselves. Morality in this worldview is an illusion fabiricated by the evolutionary process.

Another deep ground maneuver is to again confirm that without God, people can be moral and good, but can they *justify* their goodness? If "the right thing to do" was to cost us our wealth or reputation, let alone life, why would anyone do it if there wasn't an All-Seeing God that rewards and punishes?

This approach has also been used successfully with 'progressive,' or reform Muslim individuals. When a group of young ladies in England insisted to pray in the men's section on a campus mosque, the imam did not resist nor push back. Some time later, he asked, "Did it increase your *khushu'*?" The answer was no and the case was closed.

3.3 Why Can't We Define Our Own Morality? - Reductio Ad Absurdum

The issue of intellect and morality can be tackled in a different manner too. Namely, we can take the opponent's statement and draw it out to its logical conclusion, showing that eventually, Whenever someone brings up t rational questions, they are moral onesquestions surround good and bad, or The vast The following method of argumentation involves drawing out the logical conclusion. It is to accept the premise of your rival until you can show that it ends in an absurdity or contradiction. This is known as <u>reductio ad absurdum</u>, or the argument from absurdity. Let's look at an example:

Question: Why can't we (human beings) define our own morality?

Answer: If you (or your entire generation) decide to throw out history and tradition so as to determine from scratch what's right and what's wrong, you can stick to it for a few decades and feel in your conscience that you're doing the right thing. Inevitably, however, the next generation

will come along and—using the precedent you set—throw out the past and decide on their own version of right and wrong.

Every new generation is a sequel to the one that preceded it. In this movie, set in 2060, you, who used to be trendy and maybe woke in 2020, are now in the role of that 'history and tradition' that needs to be thrown out. Things you said in 2020 are offensive in the sensitivities of the 2060's. You're now set in your ways, too old to change, so the new generation casts you aside as a retrograde 'obstacle to progress.'

A third party comes along. A new character in the trilogy. Your grandson is an intelligent young person who sympathetically observes how his older siblings have summarily tossed you aside, despite you having been so trendy and full of certainty in your youth. "If every generation tosses out the morality of the previous one," he thinks to himself, "then this new cohort will likewise be discarded by our grandkids' generation. If this is the inevitable reality, then what's the point of committing to any of these new principles?" With this throught in the back of his mind, your grandson proceeds to follow along with his older siblings solely out of fear of being banishment for not falling into line, but not due to any core conviction.

In sum, there is little to no long-term value in morality rooted in the subjective opinions of human beings. In fact, there is long term loss, as every new generation will think they are right and their parents are wrong, leading to never-ending generational conflict. And following a morality just because the rest of the herd is following is not morality at all. It is mere convenience and expedience supported by might makes right.

3.4 I Disagree! Morals Are Totally Rational: Snuck Premises & Arguments from Ignorance

Eventually, you will come upon a person who insists that morals are rational. "Morality," they will say, "is all about avoiding harm." We can agree with this premise, as the *mu'amalat* laws of the Shari'a are predicated on *dar' al-mafasid wa jalb al-manafi'*, avoiding harm and attracting benefit. So we do not need to argue this point (even though philosophically, there are no rational underpinning to 'benefit' and 'harm; there is merely a social consensus. Furthermore, the very notion that humans are rationally is also contested.) it is an assumption not a fact; there is no rational reason that harming people is). They will continue, holding that, "Provided an action is not harming anyone, it is moral." The first flaw here is the snuck premise that we human beings with our subjectivity, biases, and limitations, can assess the long term harms of things. We can assess the short term but not the long term. The second flaw is that it rests on the concept that an action is nuetral or beneficial because we can't see any harm. This is known as an argument from

ignorance. From a rational perspective, we must suspend judgement until evidence is brought forth. Gender reassignment is a great example of this. As Muslims, we believe, based on revelation, that there is harm in it, but our line of argument with a non-believer must be purely rational, as they do not accept our unseen sources. Our response will be that there is not enough evidence to claim benefit, nuetrality, or harm. At the very least, a rational person should suspend any action on gender reassignment until he sees what the effects are over decades and across a large diverse population.[4]

[4] There have been studies, but they have been critiqued, and none of them qualify as longitudinal. You can see a review of these critiques in *What We Don t Know: Does Gender Transition Improve the Lives of People with Gender Dysphoria?* by Nathanael Black of ThePublicDiscourse.com.

4. Feminism

Feminism is one of the most contentious debate issues in America at large and the Muslim community in specific. In this section, we do not get into the actual issues, but as mentioned in the abstract of this paper, we are focusing on the logical tools and persuasive techniques needed when entering these discussions.

4.1 Mirroring & Empathy

"The greatest victory is that which requires no battle" (Sun Tzu). As mentioned in the abstract, not all of the tools we need are logical. The following is a persuasive method meant to remove the adversarial tone from the conversation. Mirroring is the idea of taking on the other person's emotions, language, concerns, and even physical posturing. Islamically, there is grounds for this as well. The *umma* is like a body, if one part of it complaints, the remainder stays away in fever. Therefore, this is both a persuasion technique and a *sunna* of the Messenger ﷺ. Mirroring may involve repeating the concerns of the person in front of you, preferably using the same exact words that they used. This spills over into the next step, define and disarm.

4.2 Define & Disarm

Your next step is one of the important elements in a discussion on Feminism: defining terms. Feminism can be described very generally as "a concern with matters relating to women and society," or very specifically as, "a series of political campaigns for reforms on reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, women's suffrage, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and patriarchal structures." Furthermore, this intellectual movement employs more indefinite terms within itself, such as 'equality' and 'patriarchy.' Is justice equality? Is equality sameness? Etc. When engaging in these dicussions, it is important to agree on the exact definitions of the words being used. There is no right or wrong answer to these definitions. *La mushahata fil istilah*, there should be no debate about definitions. All that is important is that the individual in front of you define clearly the terms they use.

Fortunately, most times 'Feminism' is defined succinctly as "equal rights for women" or "fair treatment of women in social institutions." These definitions are general enough to accept. And so you should immediately pounce on it and declare that you fully agree! Then, pull out the high ground maneuver and ask, "*Who* do you believe should determine what constitutes *fair*?" One of two things will happen. Either they will say the Quran and Sunna, in which case, you've now exited Feminism and entered epistemology (the sources of truth), which places us in the arena of the

Quran and Sunna. We can proceed to rely on verses, hadiths, and rulings. Or, they will say something else, in which case there is no point in continuing the discussion.

4.3 Aiming For the Cause

This is another shift that has been employed often in discussions on Feminism and Islam. If Feminism is framed as a solution to injustices, then it is more fruitful to dicuss the maladies than the problems with the cure. In fact, by attacking Feminism, one may inadvertantly cause a greater commitment to it. A woman involved in community work once said to me, "No Muslim woman gets [into Feminism] except because of a personal grievance or bad experience that went through." Another said, "Calling out 'the patriarchy' is often representative of the frustration of women who do not see their concerns taken seriously, and do not see themselves reflected as integral to their own communities."[5]

4.4 Shifting From the Abstract to the Concrete

If the discussion proceeds and accusations of inequality, patriarchy, and injustice follow, then the best approach here is to shift the discussion from the abstract to the concrete. "Can you give an example of misogyny in Islam?" "Are we talking about a specific ruling or an experience?" This is the opposite of the high ground maneuver. Throughout the debate, it is important to be the one asking the questions. It will appear to your discussant that they are in control, where in fact it is you who is in control. This is known as, "Letting the other side have your way."

[5] Alkiek, Tasneem, *Is Feminism the Problem? Why Ideological Bandwagons Fail Islam*, Yaqeen Institute, 2017.

5. Disgust

A very common mode of attack is the use of disgust to embarass one's opposition. For example, "How can you accept your Prophet marrying a child?" Or, "Do you really believe in stoning a human being to death?" Or, "It's 2020 and your law still has slavery." The most important point to understand about this type of attack is that they are meant to embarass, nor prove a point. Disgust is created over time in a culture, and there is simply no way to reverse the feeling through a rational argument. Therefore, never attempt to reply with logic and reasoning. If you do, you will appear to be in denial, digging your heals in, and explaining away something bad. It will be a failed venture and you will appear terrible. Rather—and many will find this solution quite strange—you must divert the *feeling* in the room, and this can only be done through humor and laughter. No amount of words can alter the mood of disgust, but a hearty laugh can. One of my first teachers on *da'wa* told us that when he first moved from Syria to Sweden, he purchased a book of local jokes so as to understand the humor of the Swedish people.

In the back of your mind, you are likely saying, "Yes, but you're not answering the question; you're not solving the problem of things like Aisha's age, stoning, or slavery." The answer in short is that you can't and you don't have to, because it's not an argument, it's a feeling. Humans are not fully rational. This is a cultural problem in which disgust has been linked to an element of Shari'a through decades and centuries of conditioning. Traditional Western disgust with homosexuality, for example, has been eroded away by constant relinking of gays to love, sympathy, fashion, and style. Being that human beings are not fully rational, their feelings can easily be displaced and relinked by consistent re-association. The long-term solution is to relink "Shari'a," or Muslims, to positive things like intelligence, beauty, wealth, and kindness. But in a quick interaction, you have no time for this. Thus, you must opt for the fastest displacement mecahnism, which is laughter. Physically, one cannot be disgusted or angry and laugh at the same time. After a good laugh, any short comment on these phenomena will suffice. For example, one may point to similar verses in the Bible. By then, the mood will have already been changed.

Conclusion: Signs You've Won A Debate

Unlike other achievements, winning a debate rarely ever feels like winning. This is because when a person loses a debate, they begin hurling nasty and hurtful remarks at you that have no response. If you take the bait and start answering, you risk taking away from your success in a pointless back and forth. Worse off, you often risk transforming yourself into someone of low character. Therefore, it is important to know the signs of winning a debate so that you can pull out immediately. Here are some of the most common reactions when someone has lost a debate.

The Absurd Conclusion

"Financing through money-lending is *haram*." "Oh so we should all be poor?" This is an example of the absurd conclusion. It seeks to misrepresent your conclusion and mire you in a correction.

The Absurd Analogy

"So you're saying the ruler has to implement Shari'a? Then what's the difference between him and Hitler?" Again, it is a way of misrepresenting a conclusion which they failed to refute.

Reprioritizing

"The meat we eat must be slaughtered through proper *dhakat*." "This is the problem, people are dying in Gaza, and we're talking about how to eat meat."

Others

Other responses are diversion, changing the subject, character assasination, and hurling insults. There are no real responses to these except to step away.

In sum, I have sought to emphasize the *how* of debate, and that it is equally, if not more, important than the *what* of debate. This is specifically because rhetoric is just as much about persuasion as it is about logic. This paper has concisely explained the fundamentals of *mantiq*, logic, such as the laws of identity and non-contradiction, and the structure of a syllogism. Through the sub-topics of morality, feminism, and disgust, we've also looked at basic persuasion techniques, like the high ground maneuver, the deep ground maneuver, mirroring, and the use of humor. I hope that readers will absorb these points and apply them in a world increasingly rife with debate and competition for world views. Imams need logic and persuasive techniques as much as they need knowledge.