

Inner Call Podcast #145 – Man’s Sense of Justice October 13, 2021

Several groups of friends recently had thoughtful conversations about a phrase from Vadan Boulas: ‘To judge man, God borrows man’s sense of justice.’ The discussions were not easy – no one likes to think about being judged, and there are many who have sought refuge in Sufism after a religious education that portrayed the Divine as a severe and punishing judge who scrutinizes not only our actions but every hidden thought as well. In apparent contrast, the Sufi teachings say that God is the perfection of love, harmony and beauty, which suggests Sufism should be a safe haven. And yet, here we are told that even for a Sufi, God is a judge.

To add to the puzzle, we might ask, “Why should God, all knowing and all powerful, need to borrow anything from a human being?” It seems paradoxical.

What can we find in this thought? First, yes, it is true that Sufism is the path of the heart, and we describe the Creator as the perfection of love – He has made all from His love, and loves all of His creation unconditionally, from the saint to the worst sinner. But in Sufism we also speak of the Spirit of Guidance, present in all names and forms. If there is guidance, that means there must be some goal toward which we are aiming, and with guidance there must also be some feedback. A person who wants to develop their singing voice, for example, needs a teacher who will understand the student’s potential, and will try to correct the singer’s errors, all in the service of beauty. A good teacher will not remain silent about the student’s mistakes, but not all students are good listeners.

This is true not only of external teachers, but also of our inner teacher. If the Spirit of Guidance is in all names and forms, it is in us, too, as our conscience, that inner compass that we sometimes remember to consult. But even when our navigation system sits neglected and dust-covered on a shelf, it is registering all that we think, say and do, and that is the record that will confront us when we leave this earthly world.

Virtually every religion has some tradition of being judged at the end of our time on earth, and the imagery shows us something very interesting. In ancient Egypt, the moment of judgment was portrayed as the weighing of the person’s heart against a feather; if the heart was lighter than the feather, the soul would be happy in the hereafter, and if it was dense and heavy, the soul was condemned. It is our own heart, or our own inner condition, that determines our fate, a truth not only in eternity but right here in everyday life as well. We see something similar in the Hindu religion, where it is the god of death Yama who is charged with determining the soul’s future. But Yama was not created as a god - he holds that role because he was originally a human being, and was the first person to die. In other words, judgment arises from human experience.

The phrase from the Vadan, then, tells us that we will be judged by our own sense of justice, which is so not only when we leave this world, but every single moment of our life. And if that sounds discouraging, since no one is ever free from errors, then we should recall that the line of the prayer Saum that speaks of God as the Judge also calls Him, ‘the Forgiver of our shortcomings.’

Perhaps that is the real meaning of the image of Pandora opening the box: discord went flying everywhere, but what remained was hope. When the cup of our heart is examined, as limited beings we can expect lots of dust, but if we have sincere hope in our hearts for Divine Mercy, there will also be the light of forgiveness, and by the alchemy of love that compassionate sunlight can turn the countless dust-motes into dancing constellations.