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Gratitude (*shukr*) and ingratitude

Gratitude, *shukr* or *shukūr*, according to Muslim authors, is an attribute of God and of the virtuous person, which entails recognising and openly appreciating any benefit received; moreover, it deals with scarcity repaid with abundance, with increase and multiplication, and in this sense the only Absolutely Grateful One is God. Being grateful towards God is an essential ingredient of faith; it follows that its opposite, **ingratitude**, or *kufṛān*, implies faithlessness, or *kufṛ*. Furthermore, gratitude is to be understood as not only

a religious duty but also a social one, insofar as a well-known Prophetic saying links ingratitude towards one’s fellow human beings with ingratitude towards God.

1. GRATITUDE, AN ATTRIBUTE OF GOD AND OF THE VIRTUOUS PERSON

“The Exceedingly Grateful” (*shakūr*) is among the so-called Most Beautiful Names of God; it traces back to the Qur’ān. Some writers (among them al-Ḥākim al-Nisābūrī, d. 405/1014) include among the Names *shākīr*, “The Grateful,” which too appears in the Qur’ān (Q 2:158, 4:147). At the same time, both terms are also attributes of pious believers (*shakūr*: Q 14:5, 17:3, 31:31, 34:19, 42:33; *shākīr*: 16:121, 76:3) and therefore, following the reasoning set forth by al-Ghazālī (d. 555/1111) in *al-Maqṣad*, can be referred to as “shared” (*mushtaraka*) or “equivalent” (*mutashābiha*) Names (al-Ghazālī, 47–59).

According to Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311–2), gratitude, or *shukr*, with its synonym *shukūr*, is recognition and open appreciation of a benefit received, with words, actions, and intentions, as well as singing the praises (*ḥamd, thanāʾ*) of the originator of the good deed (*munʿim*). This author insists on the material aspect of gratitude, either God’s or man’s: *shukr* derives from the expression *shakarāt al-ibil*, applied to “camels that fatten at pasture,” and therefore it deals with scarcity repaid with abundance, with increase (*ziyāda*) and multiplication (*mudāʾafa*) (*Lisān*, 4:423–7).

On increase as a necessary ingredient of gratitude, al-Ghazālī writes that “the only Absolutely Grateful One (*shakūr muṭlaq*) is God; in fact, that which He adds is without limit, because there is nothing beyond the beatitude of paradise” (*Maqṣad*, 114). The great theologian makes clear the interconnection between the divine and

the human inherent in *shukr* and notes that God's praise, although directed towards the actions of His servants, is nonetheless returned to Himself, in that human actions are created by Him and human-kind's gratitude towards God also derives from Himself, for He is the only One to sanction it. Similar are the reflections of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) in *Uddat al-ṣābirīn* ("The tools of the patient ones"). This Ḥanbalī scholar teaches that God too is grateful to the obedient servant, as the servant is to Him, and that "God is the Grateful and loves those who are grateful" (Ibn Qayyim, 282–3).

2. GRATITUDE AS A RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL DUTY

As Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894) points out in a well-known work of traditional content titled *al-Shukr li-llāh* ("Gratitude towards God"), *shukr* means to declare "praise be to God" on every occasion, because everything is grace (food and drink, new clothes, the body that has been given to the person, his or her very breath, and so forth, and even the human capacity for being grateful) and because, as the wise person knows, grace may lie as much in what does not go ill for him as in what goes well (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *passim*). In this book there also appear occasional references to patience (*ṣabr*): according to a Prophetic saying: "He who is afflicted must show patience, he who receives a gift must show gratitude" (65–6). A certain apotropaic efficacy is also associated with gratitude: "grace is shackled with the instrument of gratitude" (19). Among the exemplary figures cited by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā are Moses (cf. Q 34:13) and David (cf. Q 7:144). Worth remembering is the relationship linking David to the "prostration in thankfulness," *sajdat* or *ṣujūd al-shukr*, to be performed, fol-

lowing the Prophet's example, on every instance of receiving good news.) This author reports as well a Prophetic saying, *lā yashkuru Allāh man lā yashkuru al-nās* (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, 31; Abū Dāwud; Reinhart, *Thanking*, 119), that is, "he who is not grateful to others is not grateful to God" or, quite differently, "God is not grateful to him who is not grateful to others."

This maxim is quoted by al-Kharā'īṭī (d. 327/939) in *Faḍīlat al-shukr* ("The excellence of gratitude"), followed by Ibn Muflīḥ (d. 763/1361) in *al-Ādāb al-shar'iyya* ("The lawful customs"). These authors incline to an entirely human interpretation of the saying and inaugurate a discussion of gratitude as a social duty: precisely because it is an attribute of God, *shukr* should be an attribute of the virtuous person, towards God and also towards fellow human beings, in so far as what the believer owes to God, he or she owes also, *mutatis mutandis*, to fellow human benefactors (al-Kharā'īṭī, 61–71; Ibn Muflīḥ, 1:330–5).

3. INGRATITUDE TO GOD AND TO PEOPLE AS A SYNONYM OF UNBELIEF

When Ibn Manẓūr writes that "gratitude is the opposite of ingratitude (*kufṛān*)," he mirrors the similar contrast of gratitude and unbelief (*kufṛ*) that occurs several times in the Qur'ān (for example, "if anyone is grateful, it is for his own good, if anyone is ungrateful [or "unbelieving," *man kafara*], then my Lord is sufficient unto Himself" Q 27:40) and recalls an amplified version of the Prophetic saying just quoted—*lā yashkuru Allāh man lā yashkuru al-nās*—reported many times over in Ibn Ḥanbal's (d. 241/855) *Musnad*, which begins in this way: "To speak of benefits received means to be grateful, and to pass over them in silence signifies impiety

(*kufī*); he who is not grateful for little is not grateful for much.” Thus, overlooking benefits received and being unthankful become a common way of indicating faithlessness towards God.

Nevertheless, ingratitude—a disposition of the soul which may equally be generated in humankind by the arrival of ill fortune after good or after the arrival of good after ill (Zilio-Grandi, 33–4)—is part and parcel of human nature, as many passages of the Qurʾān dealing with humankind in general (*al-insān*) seem to assert. But according to a number of authoritative commentators (among them, al-Ṭabarī, d. 310/923, and al-Rāzī, d. 606/1209), in these cases it is merely a question of those who are distinguished by their propensity for remembering only their afflictions and forgetting favours received.

Another Qurʾānic expression indicating the person who is ungrateful to God is *kanūd* (Q 100:6), which denotes someone who breaks the bond with divine favour in the manner of a son who repudiates his father, with possible reference to the name of the ancient Arab tribe the Kinda (Ibn Manzūr, 3:382).

The same concomitance of ingratitude and impiety resurfaces in al-Kharāʾīṭ’s work on the subject of man’s behaviour towards his brother; for example, from the Prophet: “There are servants to whom, on the day of the resurrection, God will not speak...they are those who deny their parents...those who deny their own sons, and those who receive help from others and repudiate (*kafara*) that help and disown them” (al-Kharāʾīṭ, 70; cf. Ibn Muflīḥ, 333). In the same work there also appears a no less relevant form of human ingratitude to the benefactor (*kufī al-munʿim*), which is that of the wife towards her husband, in a parable recounted by Asmāʾ bt. Yazīd b. al-Sakan

(d. 30/650–1), the celebrated “preacher of the women” (al-Kharāʾīṭ, 71).

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