

Reconciling Faith and Sufferings: Insights from Sa'id Ramadhan Al-Buti's Theodicy

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Abstract

The concept of divine justice is a pivotal issue within the philosophy of religion, frequently raising questions about how a Just and Benevolent God can permit the existence of evil in human life. This paper explores Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti's perspective on theodicy as articulated in his work *Man and Allah's Justice on Earth*. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study applies content analysis through a deductive approach to thoroughly examine al-Buti's conceptualization of divine justice. The analysis identifies two principal methods in al-Buti's understanding of theodicy: first, the acknowledgment of human existence and the role of humans as servants of God, and second, the recognition that human life constitutes a minor segment of a more comprehensive divine narrative. The findings underscore that a proper understanding of these aspects of theodicy is essential for maintaining the integrity of one's faith in the concepts of divine decree and predestination.

Keyword: Theodicy, Al-Buti, Divine Justice, Faith, Suffering.

Introduction

Why does a Just and Merciful God allow suffering and hardship? The question of why a Just and Merciful God allows evil and suffering has challenged thinkers and believers for centuries. Theodicy derives from the Greek words 'theo,' meaning God, and 'dike,' meaning justice. It seeks to address this profound dilemma by defending the goodness of God in a world filled with pain and hardship (Bagus, 2002). First introduced by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in the early 18th century, notably in his work *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, originally written in French and later translated into English by E.M. Huggard. Leibniz argued that, despite the existence of evil, this world is the best possible one among all alternatives—a radical proposition that continues to shape philosophical and theological debates today. Instead, he proposes that, despite the presence of evil, this world represents the best possible one among all conceivable alternatives. Theodicy thus endeavors to reconcile the apparent contradiction

between the existence of evil and the belief in a perfectly good God (Leahy, 1993), a challenge that has long been debated, particularly when considering the logical tension between a perfect God and the creator of evil (McCloskey, 1974).

Theodicy represents a theological and philosophical discourse aimed at addressing the problem of evil and reconciling the existence of evil with the belief in an entirely good and omnipotent God. Alvin Plantinga (1974), defines theodicy as "an answer to the question of why God allows evil." It seeks to justify God in response to the problem of evil, which appears to be inconsistent with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent deity. Another perspective on theodicy is its role in defending God's goodness despite the presence of evil in the world.

The concept of evil, especially when attributed to God, is a topic of intense debate in religious philosophy, both within Islamic and Western traditions. This debate is central to monotheistic religions, as it raises critical questions about divine power and love. The assumption that God, being All-Good, must eliminate evil is scrutinized in discussions about divine justice, particularly to understand the nature of evil and the suffering it causes among creatures (Ramli et al., 2022). These questions often challenge the validity of religion, particularly among those who reject religious belief, as the existence of evil can cast a negative light on the identity of a religion based on the notion of a Good and Perfect God (Syafieh, 2019).

John Hick (2004) highlights the significant issue of frustration felt by believers who struggle to reconcile their belief in an All-Good God with the occurrence of injustice, where God seemingly allows suffering without intervention. Theodicy attempts to resolve the tension between the existence of evil and the goodness of God (Leahy, 1993), confronting the apparent logical contradiction between a perfect God and the presence of evil (McCloskey, 1974). This contradiction is particularly challenging for atheists, who often find it difficult to grasp the concept of divine justice in the presence of evil. The philosophy of theodicy is linked to the theories of St. Augustine and Irenaeus, with Hick (2010) distinguishing between these two approaches in his work *Evil and the God of Love*.

Syah (2022) describes theodicy as a defense of God's justice in the context of disasters and human suffering. The ancient philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE) explored this issue, proposing three scenarios: first, that God is All-Good but not omnipotent and therefore unable to prevent suffering; second, that God is Omnipotent but not All-Good and thus does not eliminate suffering; and third, that God is All-Good but not Omnipotent, leading to the persistence of evil and suffering. The central question in theodicy, then, is why a good God permits evil. In his work *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick (2004) poses a critical question: "We do indeed have to ask ourselves whether it is possible to think of this world as the work of an omnipotent creator who is motivated by limitless love ... this is indeed the most serious challenge that there is to theistic faith" (p. 118). This statement underscores the challenge faced by believers in reconciling their faith in a loving and omnipotent God with the existence of injustice.

This tension is not unique to Western philosophy. In the Islamic tradition, scholars such as al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Ataillah, and Said Nursi have offered their own interpretations, seeking to

harmonize divine justice with human experience. Several studies have discussed the methods of understanding theodicy as elaborated by al-Ghazali (Senin, 2022), Izz al-Din (Wan Razali, 2023), Ibn 'Ataillah (Bagus, 2023), and Said Nursi (Maftukhin, 2018; Rouzati, 2018; Ozkan, 2015). These scholars challenge the notion that evil contradicts God's goodness, offering rich insights into how suffering can be understood as part of Allah's greater plan.

Hence, this paper attempts to delve into the theodicy of Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, focusing on his unique Islamic perspective on divine justice. Al-Buti, in his seminal work *Man and Allah's Justice on Earth*, offers profound guidance for the Islamic community, particularly for those wrestling with doubts about divine justice or questioning God's existence. His approach not only addresses these doubts but provides a roadmap for understanding suffering as a test of faith, offering believers a way to strengthen their conviction in the face of adversity.

By examining al-Buti's theodicy, this paper builds on centuries of theological debate, offering a fresh perspective that engages both contemporary and historical discussions on the nature of suffering and divine justice. Through al-Buti's wisdom, readers are invited to find solace in their faith, recognizing that trials, though painful, are part of a broader, divine narrative—a narrative that ultimately reaffirms the goodness and justice of God.

Methodology

This study employed a content analysis approach to systematically examine and interpret the text of Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti's work *Man and Allah's Justice on Earth*. The methodology began with defining the research question, which focused on understanding al-Buti's conceptualization of divine justice. Content was selected based on its relevance to this research question, specifically targeting passages that address key themes such as divine wisdom and human suffering. A coding scheme was developed to categorize these themes, with codes assigned to specific segments of the text to facilitate systematic analysis. The coding process was conducted manually, ensuring that each segment was tagged consistently according to the predefined categories. The results were then synthesized to provide insights into al-Buti's perspective on divine justice. This rigorous approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the theological concepts presented in al-Buti's writings.

Background of al-Buti and His Work

Imam Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti was a prominent Islamic thinker from Syria. Born in 1929 in Ayn Dewar in northern Syria, Sheikh al-Buti moved to Damascus at the age of four with his father, Mulla Ramadan al-Buti. His father was a respected and revered scholar who played a significant role in al-Buti's early education (Lock, 2021).

In 1953, al-Buti continued his studies at the Faculty of Sharia at Al-Azhar University in Egypt and graduated with first-class honors in 1955. Then, in 1958, he became a teacher at a secondary school in Homs and was subsequently appointed as a lecturer at the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Damascus in 1961. He received his doctorate in 1965 from Al-Azhar University and was later appointed as an assistant professor and full professor. He was also tasked with being the dean and head of the Usuluddin and Comparative Religion program (Lock, 2021).

Sheikh Sa'īd Ramadan al-Buti's stature as a scholar is clearly manifested through his writings, which encompass over 60 books in various religious disciplines, including tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis), fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), aqidah (Islamic creed), and Islamic thought. Among his most notable works are *Fiqh al-Sirah*, *Kubra al-Yaqiniyyat*, and his commentary on *al-Hikam* by Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Sakandari. He was very active in teaching at mosques in Damascus, particularly at the Al-Iman Mosque, and also served as the imam for Friday prayers and delivered sermons at the Great Umayyad Mosque. He was a respected Islamic scholar known for his knowledge and balanced views. He frequently appeared on television and radio, delivering lessons in various countries to promote a balanced approach to Islam and always called for unity in his teachings (Himami).

On March 21, 2013, al-Buti was killed in a bombing attack at the al-Iman Mosque while he was delivering a tafsir lecture. He was buried next to Salahuddin al-Ayyubi in the Bab al-Saghir cemetery in Damascus. Al-Buti's legacy lives on through his works and his widespread influence in the Islamic world. He is revered as one of the great scholars of the 20th and early 21st centuries. His views continue to be referenced by Muslims worldwide in understanding Islam and finding solutions to the challenges of modern thought (Lock, 2021).

In the preface of his book *Man and Allah's Justice on Earth*, Sheikh Sa'īd Ramadan al-Buti articulates that the primary purpose of writing this work was to address contemporary questions concerning God's justice, particularly among Muslim youth. The crises of modern life, exacerbated by the negative portrayal of Islam in the West, have led to an increase in doubts and questions regarding divine justice. Al-Buti recounts being asked, "Where is God's justice?" He explains that such questions often stem from confusion propagated by secular groups aiming to sow doubt about religion, or they may arise from personal trauma caused by bitter experiences and suffering (al-Buti, 2021).

Though brief, al-Buti's book is comprehensive in its provision of solutions, especially for readers who may be experiencing doubts about their faith in Allah due to personal experiences or broader societal events. He emphasizes that Muslims must learn to interpret such occurrences correctly and address them according to the true teachings of Islam (Himami).

Al-Buti observed that concerns about divine justice are prevalent among intellectuals and educated individuals. He deliberately wrote the book in a concise manner to appeal to young people, who often seek reading materials that are both brief and easy to comprehend. He noted that this demographic frequently desires quick and straightforward solutions, even in complex theological and philosophical matters. Thus, the book is designed to be succinct yet packed with precise answers to address the doubts and questions that may arise in the minds of those struggling with their faith (Himami).

Al-Buti regarded this book as an entry point for freethinkers to recognize the significance of discussing divine justice. He anticipated that if readers still had lingering questions after reading the book, they would be motivated to pursue further research on the topic (al-Buti, 2021).

In writing *Man and Allah's Justice on Earth*, al-Buti identified two primary target audiences. The first group consists of the general public, who believe in Allah, the prophets, and the Day of Judgment but may lack sufficient knowledge to protect their faith from challenging questions. The second group includes a minority whose thoughts have been influenced by ideologies that deny the existence of God, often as a result of life events that have shaken their faith. Al-Buti also acknowledged that some individuals might develop negative perceptions of religion due to psychological issues. These two groups, he suggests, are often at a crossroads between faith and atheism, leading them to question or even deny God's existence. Al-Buti directed his book toward these audiences, hoping to guide them back to the true creed of Islam (al-Buti, 2021).

However, al-Buti also notes the existence of another group that takes pleasure in denying Allah and religion, a mindset that has become deeply rooted in them. These individuals actively encourage others to deny God as well. Al-Buti suggests that discussions like those in his book are unlikely to satisfy this group, no matter how logical the arguments presented, because they are akin to the people described by Allah in the Quran 15: 14-15. The book was completed by al-Buti December 27, 1971 (al-Buti, 2021).

Theodicy According to Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti

Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti's approach to theodicy primarily encompasses two central ideas. First, it involves a firm affirmation of the existence of God as the Creator and Sovereign of the universe. This foundational belief underpins the entire theological framework. Second, it entails a correct understanding of trials and tribulations, alongside a nuanced conception of goodness and evil. Al-Buti's theodicy emphasizes that recognizing the divine purpose behind suffering and discerning the nature of goodness and evil are crucial for a comprehensive grasp of divine justice and wisdom.

Affirming the Existence of God the Creator and Owner of His Creation

In his discussion of divine justice, Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti notes that those who frequently question this issue are often individuals who do not believe in the existence of God and who use such questions as a means to deny His existence. For these individuals, religion is often seen as conflicting with reason, leading them to reject the concept of God altogether. They construct logical principles based on this rejection, which they present as intellectual arguments. However, according to al-Buti (2021), these arguments are merely a facade, as their underlying hypotheses are driven by personal desires rather than genuine intellectual inquiry. Al-Buti argues that these individuals deliberately ignore the reality before them, trapping themselves in an endless cycle of skepticism.

To comprehend one's circumstances and experiences fully, belief in the existence of God and the message brought by the Prophet is essential. Without belief in God, the fundamental questions concerning a person's life cannot be adequately addressed, as divine wisdom in managing the lives of His creatures must be acknowledged by every Muslim. Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti contends that those who adamantly disbelieve in God should not be given the platform for discussion, as any argument presented to them will inevitably be met with rejection of God's existence.

However, al-Buti makes a distinction for individuals who, while possessing some belief in God, have been influenced by secular and humanistic thought that denies divinity. These individuals, despite their confusion, can still be guided. Their doubts should be addressed with methods that are simple yet comprehensive. The responses provided are not intended to silence staunch atheists but rather to assist those who are sincerely seeking answers to questions raised by secular thinkers.

Logically, as a servant who is dependent on their Creator, it is not appropriate for the servant to dictate what is just for God. As the owner, God has the right to act as He wills towards His servants. Just as an owner has the authority to do as they please with their possessions according to their wisdom, so too does God with His creation. No one is entitled to interfere with or question the actions of the owner concerning their property. Thus, al-Buti concludes, Allah's actions toward His servants are justified. Everything that happens is part of Allah's purpose, designed to give meaning to human servitude toward Him (al-Buti, 2021).

Injustice refers to a situation where someone acts against the rights of another without the owner's permission. How then can this be attributed to Allah, who is the absolute owner of everything that exists in the world? If justice is attributed to God, it refers to divine justice towards His servants, which will be manifested on the Day of Judgment with rewards for those who do good and punishments for those who commit evil (al-Buti, 2021).

Thus, it can be concluded that humans cannot impose obligations on God to act in a certain way towards His creatures. Similarly, understanding good and evil is relative from a human perspective. God defines what is good based on adherence to divine law and what is evil based on its contradiction. Evil, from which Allah is exalted, is what He has decreed as evil. Perfection ascribed to Allah is what He has defined as perfection. Therefore, whatever God does to His servants is considered perfection and is free from any notion of evil or injustice (al-Buti, 2018). This is also in accordance with what al-Ghazali (2008) describes good and bad as parallel to the commandments of God and not as what appears to be good and bad in human preference.

A common question posed is why God allows the existence of both good and evil, pleasure and pain, when He can only provide pleasure and good and eliminating all suffering. According to al-Buti (2021), God intends to manifest His glory and majesty through the creation of humans as rational beings. By understanding the concept of servitude fully and sincerely, individuals can harmonize themselves with the reality of life by voluntarily submitting to whatever has been decreed by Allah and seeking wisdom in everything that happens. This understanding is attainable only if a person possesses a sound mind, which can foster feelings of hope and fear. If humans have responsibilities in life, their lives will inevitably be marked by happiness and suffering, pleasure and pain. Any dissatisfaction with these aspects indicates that one has not yet willingly accepted the responsibilities assigned by God (al-Buti, 2021).

If individuals further question why God made them servants without granting them complete autonomy to do whatever they wish, al-Buti argues that rational logic cannot answer this question, and it must be addressed directly to God, the Creator. Thus, it is essential for individuals to grasp the concept of servitude to recognize God as the true owner and creator.

Understanding the True Concept of Trials

In his discussion on theodicy, al-Buti first clarifies the true meaning of trials. He observes that humans typically perceive a trial as a physical or material deficiency encountered by an individual. For instance, someone who has lost a limb, is blind, or suffers from a disease is generally considered to be undergoing a trial. However, al-Buti argues that trials are not limited to external, observable circumstances but rather include those that affect the inner self, causing emotional pain and suffering. Trials impact the internal soul in ways that are not perceivable by the physical senses and are imposed in a broader and more profound manner than human thought can fully grasp. He asserts that no human can escape trials (al-Buti, 2021). Moreover, the hardships that befall an individual are, according to al-Buti, signs of Allah's goodness toward His servant, as they present opportunities to strengthen one's faith. As narrated by Abu Hurairah: "Whoever Allah wills good for, He inflicts him with trials." (al-Bukhari, 1997)

A common and fundamental error in human judgment arises when we observe a blind or deaf person and feel sympathy for their condition, assuming they must experience inner sadness. Conversely, when we see a wealthy person in a luxurious car, living in affluence, we often confidently believe they are happy. This assumption, based on external appearances, is a significant mistake. True happiness and sadness are not determined by outward circumstances, and it is erroneous to assess a person's inner state based solely on what is visible. According to Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, the hardships faced by an individual are not a direct consequence of the trial itself but rather a result of the soul's inability to accommodate and rise above the trial.

Al-Buti argues that true happiness and contentment can only be attained through belief in the existence of Allah. Every individual must come to understand the reality of human existence as defined by Allah, including their identity, life, origins, and responsibilities. Once this understanding is achieved, individuals recognize that they are servants owned by Allah. As servants, their role is to accept and obey all commands, without rebelling against Allah when trials occur (al-Buti, 2021).

Humans need to recognize that trials are not solely physical poverty and pain; trials also come in the form of blessings, where individuals must be grateful for every blessing they receive as mentioned in the Quran 21: 35 "Every soul shall taste death. We test you with evil and good as a trial; and to Us you will be returned." According to al-Buti (2021), the concepts of goodness, benefit, and happiness are often subject to individual interpretation and may not necessarily align with personal desires or perceptions of what constitutes goodness. Rather, these notions should be understood in accordance with an objective standard of goodness as defined by divine knowledge, which transcends human desires and subjective imaginings.

Some might question how the wealth and luxury enjoyed by the rich can be considered a trial that burdens them. The true trial for the wealthy is the command to be grateful for the blessings they have received. Gratitude is not merely expressed through words but must be manifested by ensuring that each blessing is used within the limits allowed by Allah, the Owner and Giver of all blessings. Thus, such circumstances are also considered a trial. Allah describes in the Qur'an 34:13 that only a few of His servants are truly grateful. This indicates

that the trial of being grateful is not as easy as one might think. Conversely, those who experience hardship, such as poverty, have no choice but to endure with patience.

Another question that may arise is why those unbelievers are given all kinds of blessings while believers are burdened with hardships in life. According to al-Buti (2021), this question should not be asked for the abundance of worldly goodness and pleasure is not a measure of human happiness or divine pleasure. It is also not a measure of the happiness and success of a nation that Allah is pleased with, even though today such a nation might be enjoying a comfortable and luxurious life. However, this is merely temporary, while the punishment in the Hereafter for such individuals is eternal as stated in the Qur'an 3: 196-197 & Qur'an 3:178. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself endured many hardships, to the extent that his household often went without food for months.

In sum, al-Buti affirms in his conclusion on the condition of people in the hereafter as different from what they went through in the world. Muslim who endures hardship with patience in this world would be envied in the hereafter due to the rewards they will receive. Conversely, individuals who indulge in luxury and excess in this world, spending extravagantly on themselves, may evoke sympathy in the hereafter because of the suffering and distress they will experience.

Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti concludes that understanding divine justice requires two key realizations. First, humans must comprehend and acknowledge the essence of their own existence and recognize themselves as servants of Allah, subject to His laws. Al-Buti emphasizes the necessity of understanding human reality before addressing other matters, underscoring the position of humans as beings entirely dependent on Allah's will and decree. This recognition requires accepting one's role within God's creation, which helps individuals understand that all events, whether perceived as good or bad, are part of Allah's will and serve a greater, often incomprehensible, purpose.

Second, humans must realize that the life they experience today is merely a small part of Allah's grand and perfect creation. Al-Buti (2021), suggests that worldly life should be viewed within the broader context of existence, which includes the afterlife. By recognizing that worldly life is transient and only a segment of the overall human journey, individuals can perceive suffering and evil not merely as random occurrences but as tests or elements of a larger divine plan, ultimately aimed at a perfect and greater good.

In summary, this long-standing discourse of reconciling faiths and sufferings has puzzled humanity for centuries, yet Sa'id Ramadhan al-Buti offers profound insights that reshape our understanding of divine justice and human trials. In his exploration of theodicy, al-Buti presents a balanced and deeply spiritual perspective, emphasizing two key approaches: the humble acceptance of human servitude to Allah and the recognition that this worldly life is but a fragment of a larger, perfect divine narrative.

Through al-Buti's wisdom, readers are invited to reflect on how challenges and adversities are not punishments, but part of Allah's wise and just plan. By comprehending the concept of *qada' and qadar* (divine decree and predestination), individuals can find peace amid suffering,

strengthen their faith, and gain resilience. Al-Buti's theodicy does not just explain suffering—it transforms it into an opportunity for spiritual growth and a deeper connection with the Divine.

This compelling approach enables readers to transcend doubt and despair, providing a robust framework for reconciling faith with the inevitable challenges of life. Al-Buti's theodicy offers a profound understanding of divine justice, inviting individuals to view suffering not as a contradiction of God's goodness, but as an integral part of a purposeful divine plan. By engaging with al-Buti's insights, readers are encouraged to cultivate a deeper, more resilient faith, transforming adversity into an opportunity for spiritual growth. Through this lens, the exploration of theodicy becomes not only a theological inquiry but a pathway to a more meaningful and enriched spiritual journey.

Conclusion

In summary, theodicy is a major issue discussed in religious philosophy concerning the concept of divine justice. This discussion is crucial for understanding how a Just and Good God can allow suffering to befall humanity. The study shows that al-Buti offers two main approaches to understanding Allah's justice. First, al-Buti emphasizes the importance of recognizing human reality and the position of humans as servants of Allah before all else. Second, he outlines that human life in this world is just a small part of a larger and perfect narrative. Overall, this study underscores that a deep and accurate understanding of theodicy, as explained by al-Buti, can help individuals develop a more balanced and mature perspective on divine justice, as well as strengthen their faith in facing all forms of trials and suffering in the world. The implications of a correct understanding of theodicy are crucial for the well-being of one's faith. By comprehending the concept of divine justice within the framework of *qada'* and *qadar*, individuals can reinforce their faith and accept God's decrees sincerely. This understanding also helps individuals avoid falling into doubt or despair when confronted with evil or suffering, as they recognize that all such experiences are part of God's wise and just plan.

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