

Understanding Islam

Series Three: Building a Just Society

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Part Eight: An ethical framework

Human beings were created for no other reason than that we should worship God. To worship God entails living according to God's commands and observing God's prohibitions, therefore the basis of an ethical life is to believe in the divine guidance and put it into practice. This is the basis of a good human life, which will develop into a good character after the example of Prophet Muhammad, who was possessed the highest of human qualities [Q. 68:4]. To live in this way, as the *abd* of God, leads human beings to fulfilment in this life and proximity to God in the life after death.

In order that human beings should strive to live in this way, we have been given the two high dignities of intellect and free will. Our intellect allows us to know the path that we should tread and our freedom enables us freely to choose to put it into action. This gives us the ability to achieve our second human duty, that of being the *khalifa* or regent of God on earth. This is an awesome responsibility which is spoken of as the trust that God has placed in human beings [Q. 34:72]. We have been given the ability to rise above our base nature and instincts and, through faith and intellect, to grow in purity and wisdom so that ultimately we might grow into sublime proximity to the infinite God in Paradise.

God created human beings to seek God, to grow in truth and to lead a life striving for perfection [Q. 30:30]. This is our true human nature; therefore a life of obedience to God's commands is not an imposition or a burden but rather a fulfilment of our deepest needs. In this sense, the greatest gift that God has given to human beings is the guidance and ability to know the divine will and the freedom to put it into practice [Q. 90:8-10]. This will lead to happiness both in this life and in the life to come.

The medicine of the spirit

The freedom that God has given to human beings allows us to choose to obey or to enter into rebellion and sin, which diminishes our human dignity. Human beings have the tendency to be forgetful and our freedom carries with it the pull of our lower instincts, which can lead to a spiral of disobedience that can ultimately lead to disbelief. In this sense, human beings are necessarily involved in an inner spiritual battle between these tendencies and the natural disposition to seek God's pleasure and thus attain peace [Q. 89:27-30]. Ethics is sometimes called "the medicine of the spirit" (*al-tibb al-ruhani*); it provides the means to preserve spiritual health. The human conscience plays an important part in this process as it accuses us of wrongdoing and thus prompts us to strive for the right path [Q. 91:7-8; 75:14]. To live an ethical life requires firm belief in God, which finds its necessary outcome in good deeds [Q. 103:1-3]. Such faith and acts are a bastion against rebellion and sin, and

thus they form a self-sustaining power to strengthen belief and thus avoid lapsing into disbelief, thus taking us on the journey to Paradise [Q. 79:40-41].

Development of character

Ethics can be described as the science, knowledge or philosophy of morality (*'ilm al-akhlaq*), thus providing the structure for living a good or moral life. The Muslim life is the middle way between two extremes; thus generosity is the middle way between extravagance and meanness. It emphasises good characteristics, e.g., honesty, courage, wisdom and justice, which in turn, when exercised, will lead to the formation of a good character in the individual believer, and good people will build a good society. Indeed, the poet Rumi emphasises that real happiness will not be attained just through personal perfection but through the common perfection of the whole of society. I may be able to cultivate the virtue of patience living alone in a cave but the real test of the virtue will be when I exercise it in community alongside other people; thus there is always a communal or societal outcome of ethical living. Muhammad is reported to have said that the most perfect amongst people is the one who possesses the most perfect character.

Muslim tradition records the story of Abu Hanifa's father who saw a fig floating down a river, so took it and ate it. He then realised that the fig must have belonged to someone and so traced the river upstream to find the farmer from whose plantation it had come. Upon explaining to the farmer what he had done, the farmer refused to take any money for the fig but, by way of recompense, said that he wanted him to marry his blind and dumb daughter. The man agreed in order to clear his conscience. After the marriage, Abu Hanifa's father found that his new wife was beautiful and possessed all her faculties. He asked his new father-in-law why he had lied to him. The farmer replied that he had not lied but rather had told the truth in a different way because he wanted a man of the highest character to marry his daughter. She was "dumb" because she had never heard or spoken evil and was "blind" because she had never seen evil.

A Muslim is required to do good for the sake of God, in its own right, and not through expediency or through the hope of a reward. This is extended beyond the individual to be the ethic of society in which Muslims are required to promote the good (*al-ma'ruf*) and oppose the evil (*al-munkar*) [Q. 3:104]. This public dimension is seen in another report from the Prophet, that he was going through the market one day and saw a man selling figs with the best on top but rotting ones concealed beneath. The seller explained that they had been affected by the rain but Muhammad corrected him and told him to display his goods so that people could see what they were buying. This led, in Muslim societies, to the institution of the role of the market supervisor (*muhtasib*), whose task it was to enforce good marketing practice; we could think of this as the forerunner of our modern trading standards officers.

On not seeking minute certainty

Certain limits have been set: the guidance is to obey the commands and observe the prohibitions set out by God but the Prophet counsels people not to keep pressing for certainty. It is reported that when he announced the annual pilgrimage as an obligation, one person asked if they should do it every year. He replied:

If I were to say “yes,” this would mean that it was prescribed; if you were obliged to perform it yearly, you would hardly comply with that; leave me in peace as I leave you... So, when I forbid you something avoid it; if I command you something, you only have to put it into practice as much as you are able.

Again, it is made even clearer in the following Hadith, which sources record to have been spoken in a context similar to the revelation of Q. 5:101-102:

God established limits which you must not exceed, prescribed duties which you must not neglect and instituted precautions which you must never violate; but he has also omitted things, not out of forgetfulness but out of compassion for you; in such cases, do not enquire too much.

This leaves people room to exercise intellectual and moral faculties. The Qur'an is a book of ethical guidance that needs to be applied in changing daily living and not a book of rigid laws. This can be seen worked out in practice by the five-fold division of human actions. A small number of things are forbidden (*haram*) or obligatory (*fard/wajib/halal*). This leaves room for the overwhelming bulk of human life to be lived in accordance with ethical guidance rather than command or prohibition. Within these two distant parameters, some acts are noted as being recommended (*sunna/mustahabb*), meaning that they carry a reward if performed but do not incur a punishment if omitted, and some are disapproved or detested (*makruh*) but attract no prescribed punishment. This leaves the vast majority of human actions as being neutral (*mubah*) leaving people free to choose. This scope for ethical living highlights the importance of character development; the person of good character will seek to do more than is required and thus draw closer to the divine embrace as indicated by the saying of God given to Muhammad (*hadith qudsi*):

My servant draws near to me through nothing that I love more than what I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to me through additional voluntary works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks.

As with all things for Muslims, Muhammad is the role-model in human living, the one who submits totally to the divine will [Q. 6:163] and the possessor of an exemplary character [Q. 33:21,45-46]; therefore the second source of ethical living is following his *sunna* [Q. 4:85,80; 24:56; 59:7].

Guiding principles

There are certain ethical guiding principles that help to shape a Muslim life. One is that God does not command the impossible, e.g., those who lack the physical capacity to make the prescribed movements in prayer are only expected to make them to the degree possible, for example, by sitting on a chair and moving the upper body only. Similarly, God does not want our harm but rather our good, e.g., during the days of fasting, those for whom fasting would cause serious harm are exempt, for example, women who are pregnant, travellers or the sick. This can require a moral judgement by the individual before God: when is sickness of such gravity or the distance and mode of travel such that one decides not to fast? Obligations are placed on people according to their ability, e.g., poor people whose wealth does not reach a certain level do not pay *zakat*. Circumstances can alter normal requirements, e.g., those who live in the polar regions where they do not experience the usual alternation of daylight and darkness at certain times of the year are not expected to observe endless “daylight fasts” during Ramadan but to take their timings from another region where the days are of such a length as one could reasonably fast. God wants our ease and not our hardship; therefore if two outcomes to a question are equally possible, then one is bound to take the easier solution. There is a hierarchy of ethical values, so that, in extreme circumstances, one may break a general prohibition in order to achieve the higher goal, e.g., the Muslim who is deprived of any other form of food and drink may eat pork and drink alcohol in such quantities and for such a length of time as is necessary to preserve life because the preservation of human life is more important than even these clearly established prohibitions; this is summarised in the legal saying: “necessity knows no laws.” The Qur’anic principle that God did not create us for sport [Q. 21:16] is important in living an ethical life. This life is a test from God [Q. 2:155] but God is not like the picture painted of the ancient Greek gods, who sent hardship on people as an amusement. Rather, God is purposeful in Islamic understanding, therefore through the use of human reason, guided by the revelation and precedents, can derive guidance in life’s challenges with a good conscience, on which people can rely.