

The Quran on Human Perfection

The Quran claims to be the revealed "book/prescription" (*al-kitab*) for the guidance of humankind on the straight path. ^[1] This straight path (*sirat al-mustaquim*) is the way of life that is intrinsic to the nature (*fitrah*) of all beings throughout the universe as they were originally formed by God. ^[2] It involves faith (*iman*) in the pure religion of monotheism, absolute obedience (*islam*) to the divine order, and spriritual excellence (*ihsan*) that perfects the soul (*nafs*) along with the rest of the world (*dunya*). According to the Quran, the basic knowledge of this path is innate in human beings but society became so corrupted that messengers were needed to deliver scriptures (such as the Torah, the Psalms, and Gospel) to their communities for guidance (*hidayah*) and remembrance (*dikr*). In continuance with this prophetic tradition, the Quran ("the [scriptural] recitation") was delivered to the people of the Arabian Peninsula to lead them on the straight path that ends in spiritual perfection.

In addition to the external guidance of the scriptures, the Quran continuously states that individual wayfarers on the path must receive direct personal guidance in order to perceive the divine reality (*al-haq*). The opening chapter in the Quran, which Muslims recite in the daily prayer, states: "Guide us to the straight path -The path of those upon whom You have bestowed favor, not of those who have evoked [Your] anger or of those who are astray." ^[3] Through this guidance, the wayfarer continues to increase in knowledge until one arrives at the esoteric fulfillment of the confession (*shahada*) of absolute monotheism which is the station of continual awareness of the all-pervading divine presence. ^[4]

According to the Quran, bad actions result in interior veils that conceal one's perception of *al-haq*. The veils must be removed through the purification of the self/soul (*nafs*). ^[5] In essence, this necessitates the abandonment of everything that is bad (especially that which is harmful) and enjoining of everything that is good (*ishan*: excellent, beneficial, noble, beautiful, praiseworthy,

etc.), a principle that the Quran continuously states. ^[6] This might seem like a simplistic formula, but it is the essence of religion (this is the case in every major religion of the world) ^[7] and humankind needs to be continually reminded of its seriousness. According to the Quran, when the principle of abandoning the bad and enjoining the good is systematically applied to the depths of every aspect of life then the result is spiritual success.

The Quran prescribes the fundamental practices that are in accordance with the true nature (*fitrah*) of the soul within the divine scheme. The foundation is the confession of faith, "I believe that there is no god but God" (*la illaha ila allah*), which is to be continuously and increasingly interiorized. Based on this absolute monotheism, these practices are extensions of the principle to enjoin everything that is good in accordance with the divine order: self-abandonment to the divine will (*qadar*), set times for spiritual observances (*salah*) which involve formal prayer, adoration with prostrations, and meditation, ritual ablutions (*wudu*), charity (*zakah*) to those in need, struggling (*jihad*) for the cause of God which includes fighting in defense of those who have been wronged, the discipline of fasting (*sawm*), religious pilgrimage (*hajj*), and continual mindfulness (*dikr*) of the divine presence in every circumstance. This is regarded as the natural religion (*deen*) of humankind from the beginning of time before it was corrupted by innovations of subtraction and addition.

One who is obedient (*muslim*) to this natural order with sincerity (*ikhlas*) is considered to be a true believer (*mumin*) among those who profess the faith. The defining characteristic of one in a state of *islam* is peace (*sakinah*): "He it is who sent down the peace into the hearts of the believers that they might add faith unto their faith." ^[8] In fact, another translation of the word *islam* is "peace." The full meaning of the word *islam* is therefore something along the lines of "obedience that leads to peace." This peace is the state of harmony with God, with one's soul, and with the rest of the creation that comes through living in accordance with the religion of humankind's true *fitrah*.

In the Quran, there is an absolute causal link between faith, obedience, and spirituality: true *iman* results in *islam*, and sincere *islam* results in *ishan*, which is the perfection of the religion. *Ishan*

is the performance of *islam* with excellence. It is the complete following of the principle to "abandon the bad and enjoin the good." In *ishan*, there is not only the rejection of everything that is forbidden but also the avoidance of anything that has nearness to sin (this includes uprooting even the slightest vice, avoiding every occasion and approximation of sin, and also abstinence from that which is disliked by God even though it is permitted) with a strong detestation of evil. Likewise, there is not only the doing of everything that is required but doing so with excellence, the beautification of the soul with every noble virtue, and the performance of supererogatory deeds with a love for what is praiseworthy to the point that one counts everything else as a loss in comparison. The chief among supererogatory deeds in the Quran is the night vigil. ^[9] Furthermore, in the state of *ishan*, one does not merely go through the actions of adoration but adores God as if God sees him and as if he sees God, and lives every moment in this realization of the divine presence in the complete interiorization of *la illaha ila allah* within the heart through the perfection of *dikr*.

Through acting with *ishan*, the wayfarer is raised to higher spiritual "stations" ^[10] unto God. The Quran even says that it is possible to become a "friend of God." ^[11] This is to be understood as a special "closeness to God" that comes through perfection in religion. It is the full stature of the human being. While this is arrived at through assiduous effort on the straight path, the Quran is very clear that every good action performed by humankind ultimately comes from the predestined decree of God. Therefore, one who has been raised to the highest spiritual station does not claim anything as his or her own doing but realizes that everything is from God alone. The tension in the spiritual life between human freedom and the divine decree is left unresolved in the Quran.

The other side of religion, which is regarded almost as important as the vertical relation of the soul to God, is humankind's relation to the creation. This constitutes at least half of *islam/ishan*. The Quran teaches that human beings who are in a state of *islam* are God's vicegerents on earth. This means that the *muslim* has the responsibility to be a steward of righteousness. As the Quran

stresses, moral perfection entails that one works not merely for one's own well-being (capitalism) but for the perfection of society as a whole. The principle social obligation that is binding on the *muslim* is to provide charity for people in need. Those who excel (*ishan*) in giving are most loved by God. On the other end of this, those who risk their lives fighting in the cause of God for the defense and establishment of *islam*-ic society against infidels (*kafir*) receive the greatest reward. The establishment of this society entails *sharia*, the way/order/law that sets moral limits by outlawing everything that is excessively harmful to faith, morals, and spirituality. But ultimately, the perfect society according to the Quran is one that obeys the command to: "establish prayer and give zakah and bow with those who bow [in worship and obedience]." ^[12] The Quranic mission is to completely establish the spiritual civilization on earth.

*All translations of the Quran are from Sahih International version.

[1] Quran 39:41 "Indeed, We sent down to you the Book for the people in truth."

Quran 17:9 "Indeed, this Qur'an guides to that which is most suitable and gives good tidings to the believers who do righteous deeds that they will have a great reward."

Quran 10:37 "And it was not [possible] for this Qur'an to be produced by other than Allah , but [it is] a confirmation of what was before it and a detailed explanation of the [former] Scripture, about which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the worlds."

[2] Quran 30:30 "So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah . That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know."

[3] Quran 1:6-7

[4] Quran 3:191 "Who remember Allah while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying], "Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly; exalted are You [above such a thing]; then protect us from the punishment of the Fire."

Quran 57:4 "He is with you wherever you are. And Allah, of what you do, is Seeing"

[5] Quran 79:18 "And say to him, 'Would you [be willing to] purify yourself."

[6] Quran 3:104 "And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful."

[7] For example, in Buddhism the essence of religion is often expressed in the threefold formula: "to abstain from all evil, to cultivate the good, to purify the mind."

[8] Quran 48:4

[9] Quran 17:79 "And from [part of] the night, pray with it as additional [worship] for you; it is expected that your Lord will resurrect you to a praised station."

[10] Quran 19:57 "And we raised him to a high station."

[11] Quran 4:125 "And who is better in religion than one who submits himself to Allah while being a doer of good and follows the religion of Abraham, inclining toward truth? And Allah took Abraham as an intimate friend."

[12] Quran 20:43

