

The Ethics and Pro-Social Values of Islam

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Human Nature

In Islam, God endowed humanity with a good, purposeful nature and with a deep inner awareness of God. At this most basic level, humankind has an in-built ability to naturally and independently perceive what is right, good and ethical. Muslims understand their faith as *din al-fitrah* (natural religiousness), which at its purest level is in a state of instinctual and natural surrender to God (30:30). By heeding this deeply-seated calling of conscience, humankind pursues the highest good for self and others, and thereby fulfills the purpose of creation in service and worship of God (51:56).

The challenge for humanity is to remember their “pure heart”¹ and act in faithful accordance: the consequences of having an innate sense of right and wrong, in addition to the blessings of critical reasoning and free will, means that individuals will be strictly judged by God on the basis of their actions. The central message of Islam is one of uncompromising moral accountability (103, 82; 15:92-93; 35:18). While humankind may be inherently decent and compassionate, we are also most prone to forgetfulness, willfulness and distraction.

To help live authentically and consistently with our true natures, and to remind humanity of the consequences of our actions, Muslims believe humanity has been given divine guidance through the Qur’an, as revealed through the Prophet Mohammed. The Qur’an is understood as a “mercy” to humankind, enjoining Muslims to use their gifts and act on their innate sense of decency in service and obedience to God through the creation of a just and peaceful society (6:157; 21:107, 6:165). The Qur’an is replete with reminders for Muslims to remember God frequently in their lives, in thought, word and deed (76:25, 4:103, 3:41, 33:41-42, 2:198-200, 5:4, 6:118, 7:201; 8:2-4; 13:26-28; 14:24-27; 20:14; 20:33-34; 24:1; 29:45; 33:35; 35:10; 39:9; 50:37; 51:55-58).

This abiding awareness of God in human nature (*al-fitrah*) is a core truth on which religion and society are based. The Qur’an therefore concretely and repeatedly links “right belief” with “right action” as most pleasing to God, as a fulfillment of God’s highest aims for humankind, and as representative of the meaning of being a “Muslim” – one who submits to God. This also aligns the pursuit of the highest individual good in Islam with the greatest collective good, serving as the basis of a just, ordered and peaceful society.

¹ The Qur’an states “And whomever believeth in God, He guideth his heart. And God is Knower of All things.” (64:11) Other verses state that the Day of Judgment is “The day when wealth and sons avail not (any man), save him who bringeth unto God a whole heart.” (26:88-89) Hadiths report the Prophet saying that “Within every body is a piece of flesh: when it thrives, the whole body thrives, and when it rots, the whole body rots, and that is the heart.” (Bukhari, no. 52, Kitab al-Iman, and Muslim, no. 4178, Kitab al-Masafah)

Being a Muslim implies not only a belief in the one God, angels, the prophets, the scripture and the Day of Judgment, but also actively upholding a set of personal obligations to community and abiding by a clearly defined codes of social and moral conduct. The Qur'an "emphasizes the mutual expectations and relations fostered by a universal parentage" (4:1-2), connecting individual belief in God to social responsibilities:

Humankind, be aware of your duties to your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered many men and women; and be aware of your duties to God [through whose relationship] you demand of one another, and the wombs [that relate you]; surely God watches over you. (4:1-2)

Sachedina² writes that the Qur'an specifically "promotes human sociability and positive bonds between people because of their common ethical responsibility toward one another." (2001: 76) When the Prophet Mohammed was asked, "Who among men is most favored by God?" He replied: "A man who does the most good to people."³ Chief among these are deep ethical commitments to equality and justice, and social obligations to the poorest and least powerful in the community.

Translating beliefs into action: Creating a Just Society

As God revealed Himself to the Jewish and Christian communities in times of extreme oppression, Islamic tradition holds that God's revelation to Muslims came in a period of oppression by ignorance, corruption and internecine violence tearing apart the fabric of Arabian tribes. This time of *al-jahiliyya* (ignorance) was ended with God's revelation of the Qur'an through the Prophet Mohammed, whose leadership ultimately united the disparate, warring tribes of Arabia into a unified Muslim community (*ummah*).

The most important Islamic social ethics articulated in the Qur'an are reinforced by the example and leadership of the Prophet in Medina, the first organized Muslim community. Muslims throughout history view this period as a time of righteousness, human affirmation, dignity and social justice, and a model for the ideal implementation of Islamic social ethics.

The Abrahamic Ethic: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Social Justice

Islamic values are derived primarily from the Qur'an and the corpus of writings that follow the words and personal example of the Prophet Mohammed (the *Hadiths*) in Mecca and in the first Muslim community, from which different legal schools of thought are based (33:21). These also form the basis of the *Sunnah*, the Muslim way of life. Both the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* reflect a great preoccupation with issues of social justice and social ethics, as the very purpose of Islam is to bring individuals in harmony with God's will for creation, which for Muslims means creating a just society to stand as a model for the rest of the world.

² Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 2001.

³ Reported by Al-Tabarani and others on the authority of Ibn Umar, see *Al-Makasid Al-Hasanah*, pp. 200-201.

The core beliefs in liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice – the “Abrahamic ethics” – are foundational religious values which carry significant social and political implications.⁴ Beliefs rooted in human dignity and freedom of conscience influence social values on how society is structured. Some of the social values that emerge from these fundamental principles in Islam include those emphasizing *Ta’aruf* (knowing one another), *Ta’awun* (cooperation, mutual assistance, in transactions), and *Takamul* (complementarity and completion).

Equality and Justice

The Constitution of Medina promulgated a new set of laws in accordance with the Islamic vision of equality and human dignity, doing away with traditional forms of justice which long privileged the powerful (Sachedina, 2001). By reformulating the tribal retributive ethos with laws based on fundamental equality and restorative justice⁵ (2:179; 2:194), the Prophet introduced a radically new model for society where a principled, overarching vision of justice serves as a centrifugal, uniting force.

The preeminence of justice in Islam informs all aspects of theology as well as individual behavior and social values. God’s very purpose for creation and for the Muslim community itself is deeply intertwined with the concept of justice: “We sent aforetime our messengers with clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance, that men may stand forth in Justice.” (57:25) Justice provides the very basis and rationale for human free will, reason, and the need for divine guidance.

The Qur’an makes clear that justice itself is a command from God (16:90, 5:8), enjoining believers to that which is just and kind (16:90), as well as forbidding that which is unjust (72:15; 60:8). The primacy of justice among Islamic values is demonstrated by God’s command to pursue it above all other considerations:

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even if it be against yourselves, your parents, and your relatives, or whether it is against the rich or the poor, for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.”(4:35)

Justice is to permeate all actions, thought and speech: “When you speak, speak with justice, even if it is against someone close to you...” (6:152) The Qur’an makes it equally clear that the practice of justice is as important with those with whom one is estranged or in conflict with:

“O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to Piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.” (5:8)

⁴ Faisel Abdel Raouf, *What’s Right with Islam*.

⁵ Sachedina notes that “Retributive justice, according to the Koran, should aim at redressing the wrong by making the offender acknowledge responsibility and encouraging the victim to consider alternatives to the perpetuation of violence.” (2001: 112)

Equality and Social Justice

Radical Egalitarianism and Human Dignity

In Islam, social justice is rooted in a strong underlying egalitarian ethic, based on the Qur'anic principle that for God, the only differentiation among creation is in piety (*taqwa*) or righteousness (*birr*):

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) (49:13)

Other verses reinforce this core of idea of equality: “It is neither their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah: it is your piety that reaches Him” (22:37). A number of Hadiths support this message: Abu Huraira reported that the Prophet said “Verily, Allah does not look to your faces and your wealth but He looks to your hearts and to your deeds” (Muslim, the Book of Virtue, Good Manners, and the Ties of Relationship, Hadith 6221; see also Sahih Muslim no. 6707, Kitab al-Birr wa'l-Silah wa'l Adab). In his final sermon, the Prophet famously reminded his followers:

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white, except by piety and good action...

The Prophet enacted a series of social reforms based on fundamental principles of equality and the dignity of God's creation, including undermining the practice of slavery and improving the status and rights of women. Early on, the Prophet outlawed one of the underlying causes for slavery in the Muslim community – the practice of usury, a commonplace practice of lending money at exorbitant rates, which further exacerbated wealth inequalities and led many to crushing poverty, and some into slavery.

The Prophet sought to ameliorate the condition of slaves by enjoining kindnesses and fairness, reminding believers that “slaves are your brothers”, and should be treated accordingly. The Prophet was specific as to what ethical treatment involved: one “should feed him of what he eats, and give him dresses of what he wears, and should not ask him to do a thing beyond his capacity. And if at all he asks him to do a hard task, he should help him therein.” Another Hadith reports the Prophet saying that “He will not enter Paradise who behaveth ill to his slaves.”

Slaves were accorded legal protections and basic human rights in Medina⁶, and the practice of slavery itself was curbed by the generous rewards given to those who freed them. (Bukhari, 1/2, no. 29) The freeing of slaves was seen as the highest form of charity, and which also earned remittances for sins. The importance placed on the Prophet's own

⁶ Among the reforms and protections put forward by the Prophet on the issue of slavery included erring on the side of slaves on contractual disputes, inheritance rights and freedom for the children of slaves, the freeing of one's slaves as punishment for wrongdoing, and the right for slaves to earn enough money through their labors to buy their freedom.

example also served to mitigate practice of slavery. Prophet Mohammed frequently freed slaves and gave them prominent positions in the Muslim community.⁷ The Prophet declared that "Indeed it is obligatory upon the Muslims to free their captives or to pay their ransoms."⁸

The most radical social reforms advanced by Islam regarded the status of women, who were given unprecedented rights and status in the Muslim community, where they emerged in all aspects of community life, including battle, where they fought alongside men. The principle of strict individual moral accountability to God gave an equal status to women as believers (or unbelievers). Numerous verses go to great lengths to support the principle of gender equality in the sight of God:

Men and women who have surrendered, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, enduring men and enduring women, humble men and humble women, men and women who give charity, men who fast and women who fast, men and women who guard their private parts, men and women who remember God often - for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward. (73:36)

The Qur'an makes clear that there is no gender difference where righteousness is concerned (4:1; 4:124; 9:71, 6: 97). Believing men and women "are leaders one of the other, they bid to honor, and forbid dishonor; they perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and they obey God and his Messenger. Those - upon them God will have mercy; God is All-mighty, All wise." (9:73). Another verse notes: "I waste not the labor of any that labors among you, be you male or female - the one of you is as the other." (3:194) The fate of unbelief for men and women was likewise equally shared: "That God may chastise the hypocrites, men and women alike, and the idolaters, men and women alike; and that God may turn again unto the believers, men and women alike." (33:73)

Among the advances in women's dignity are punishments for those accusing or defaming women (a false accusation of adultery becoming one of eight mortal sins) and added protections for women where their rights and status were concerned.⁹ So radical were these reforms¹⁰ – deeply controversial during the Prophet's time – that the progress of gender equality suffered from severe, consecutive backlashes and a prolonged rollback in rights after his death (Ahmed 1992).

⁷ Notable examples include Bilal, the first muezzin to call Muslims to prayer and who is still well-respected by Muslims today, and a Coptic Christian slave given to the Prophet whom he subsequently freed and married.

⁸ As narrated by Saeed through his chain from Hibban bin Jabalah.

⁹ These included the right of women to choose one's spouse, the right of inheritance, the right of due process when charged with improprieties, the right to own property independently, the right to enter into business contracts and deals independently, the right to divorce, the right to recourse against husbands and male relatives, the right to travel independently, the right to guardianship of children, a ban on isolating women, a ban on arbitrary divorce, the right to teach, learn and advocate their views, the right to participate in community decision-making, and freedom of expression.

¹⁰ In pre-Islamic Arabia, female infants were buried alive and women were regarded as property, with no independent status or rightful claims. In this sense, the independence, equality in legal and religious rights and duties accorded women in Medina was considered revolutionary.

Liberty and Freedom of Conscience

Islam's core message of justice and strict moral accountability for believers not only speaks to equality, free will, and reason, but also to the absence of mediation in the individual relationship with God. In Islam there can be no "bearing the burdens of another". It also means that there can be no compulsion in religion on matters of faith, since true belief can only be known to God (2:256). This principle of freedom of conscience was enshrined in the founding document of the Muslim community, the Constitution of Medina.

Given the endowment of reason, free will and fundamental equality with others, humanity possesses at all times the freedom to accept or reject God and to choose actions that are good or bad. The Qur'an accords a tremendous amount of personal freedom in matters of religion: "The Truth is from your Lord; so let whomever wills, believe, and let whomever wills, disbelieve." (18:29)

The Muslim profession of belief in the Day of Judgment is a not-so-subtle reminder to use these God-given liberties well, as they are also "a test" from God (3:142; 18:7; 2:155). This freedom of thought in matters of ultimate belief not only underscores human choice, reason and dignity in Islam, but also forms the basis for diversity, pluralism and tolerance in Islam – essential building blocks for a just and peaceful society. The Qur'an explains:

"Had God willed, He would have made into one community (*ummah*); but [it was His will] to test you in what He gave you. So compete with each other in doing good works. To God you are all returning, and He will inform you about how you differed." (5:48)

Pluralism and Tolerance

The Qur'anic vision of pluralism is closely related to the belief in fundamental equality of humanity, the divine gifts of reason and free will, and God's plan for creation (49:13). The Qur'an states that God sent out different prophets to different people at different times to reveal the same truth of the oneness of God and of individual moral accountability (2:213).

Pluralism and diversity are therefore to be approached through the principles of justice and egalitarianism, where the doing of good deeds are the only forms of distinction acceptable to God. Diversity exists today as a call to know others, and "view with one another to attain your Sustainer's forgiveness... for God loves those who do good." (3:133-134). Where religious pluralism is concerned, the Qur'an states:

Had God willed, He would have made you into one community; but [it was His will] to test you in what He gave you. So compete with each other in doing good works. To God you are all returning, and He will inform you about how you differed." (5:48)

Sachedina writes that "Religious pluralism is a prerequisite for a peaceful accommodation of the differences in the individual and the communal sense of the highest good." (2001: 77) From this understanding of pluralism and diversity, the Islamic

concept of tolerance (*tasamuh*) was developed. The Qur'an and the Hadiths confer legitimacy to and demonstrate a strong respect for the Jewish and Christian communities living within and alongside the Muslim community. The Qur'an states:

"Those who believe (in the Quran), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians...and (all) who believe in God and the last day and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." (2:62)

Islam offers "Peoples of the Book" a broad scope of religious freedoms, protections, and minority group rights within Muslim communities as a religious moral duty. In one Hadith recorded by Abu Daud, the Prophet warned,

"Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on a non-Muslim minority, or curtails their rights, or burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I will complain against the person on the Day of Judgment."

Muslims are encouraged to invite non-Muslims into a "respectful" and "gentle" dialogue on religion, with "wisdom and beautiful preaching," (16:125, 22:67-69), though nothing more. Where disagreement or acrimony enters into dialogue, Muslims are instructed to part ways, saying "To you your beliefs, and to me mine" (109:6) (1:107-9). On interfaith disputes, the Qur'an reminds Muslims that only God can be the final arbiter on matters of ultimate truth: "God will judge between you on the Day of Judgment concerning the matters in which you differ." (22:76-69)

Fraternity

The individual in Islam is inescapably linked to his or her social context: it is *in* community that Muslims manifest belief, fulfilling God's purpose for humanity in the establishment of a just society. Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes that "community implies above all a human collectivity held together by religious bonds that are themselves the foundations for social, juridical, political, economic, and ethical links between its members" (Nasr, 160).¹¹

Of the five pillars of Islam, only one is accomplished by and for the individual alone (the *shehada*, profession of faith). The remaining four pillars involve individual participation or experience in the community, self-consciously linking belief to action. While individuals are to be judged on the Day of Judgment in Islam, Nasr explains that ... the human community is judged in the Qur'an according to the degree to which it allows its members to live the good life, in the religious sense, based on moral principles... a community as a whole can be judged and punished by God in this world, but a whole community does not enter paradise or hell as a collectivity (Nasr, 159-160).

The Qur'an also makes clear that the Muslim community is called upon by God to serve as a model of true human fraternity and social justice in this world (2:143). Far from suggesting superiority over other communities, the Qur'an makes clear that all

¹¹ Nasr, Seyyed Hussein. *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*.

communities have been given the same core theological message, and their own sacred rituals and institutions and prophets, by God's own design. (22:34)

Numerous verses in the Qur'an and Hadiths promote an ethic of social duty and responsibility toward fellow Muslims and non-Muslims. The Qur'an states that "Verily, the believers are brothers" (49:9), a message reinforced by various Hadiths:

Muslims are brothers in religion and they must not oppress one another, nor abandon assisting each other, nor hold one another in contempt.

The seat of righteousness is the heart; therefore that heart which is righteous, does not hold a Muslim in contempt; and all the things of one Muslim are unlawful to another: his blood, property, and reputation.

On a Muslim variation of the Golden Rule, with application for all *Ummahs*, the Prophet Mohammed once said that "no man is a believer until he wishes for his brother that which he wishes for himself." (Bukhari, Kitab Al-Iman, Hadith no. 12) When asked the "most excellent parts of *Iman* (faith)", the Prophet replied that in addition to worshipping God, it is "To do unto all men as you would wish to have done unto you, and to reject for others what you would reject for yourself."

Many of the Prophet's sayings reflect great concern with a compassionate community: "He is not a believer who eats his fill when his neighbor beside him is hungry," and "He does not believe whose neighbors are not safe from his injurious conduct." (Bayhaqi) Suhrawardi relates another Hadith where the Prophet observed that "Ye will not enter Paradise until ye have faith, and ye will not complete your faith until ye love one another."

The Qur'an and Hadiths reinforce the importance of overcoming old divisions and sharing a greater community identity rooted in worship of God:

And hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of Allah, and do not separate. And remember Allah's favor unto you: How ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that ye became as brothers by His grace; and (how) ye were upon the brink of an abyss of fire, and He did save you from it. Thus Allah makes clear His revelations unto you, that haply ye may be guided, (3:103)

The Compassionate Community: Mercy and Charity

The Islamic pursuit of social justice and the ideals of fraternity also manifests into a deep and long-standing concern for the plight of the poor and the oppressed. The Prophet was passionately committed to improving the status of the community's impoverished and powerless, introducing sweeping social and economic reforms deemed revolutionary at the time.

As Jesus declared that "Blessed are the poor," the Prophet said "Poverty is my pride." (Nasr, 171) The Prophet informed his followers that "He who helps his fellow-creature in the hour of need, and he who helps the oppressed, him will God help in the Day of

Travail.” When asked which actions were the most excellent in the eyes of God, Prophet Mohammed replied:

To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured.

Feed the hungry and visit the sick, and free the captive, if he be unjustly confined. Assist any person oppressed, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.

The Prophet himself lived in great simplicity and was known for his humanity, fairness and generosity toward others, asking his supporters to “seek for my satisfaction in that of the poor and needy.” One Hadith reports the Prophet proclaiming, “O Lord! Keep me alive a poor man, and let me die poor; and raise me amongst the poor.” The dignity and divine favor associated with the vulnerable is also shown in the Hadith that echoes Judaism and Christianity’s reference to God among ‘the least of these’:

“O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not.” He will say: “O Guardian-Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? God will say: “Did you not know that My servant so- and so- had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him?”

[Then God will say]: “O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not.” He will say: “O Guardian-Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds?” God will say: “Did you not know that My servant so-and-so asked you for food you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found Me with him?”

[Then God will say]: “O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink.” He will say: “O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds?” God will say: “My servant so-and-so asked you for drink, and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found Me with him.”

Widows and Orphans

The Prophet was deeply concerned for the welfare of the poor and the powerless in his community, urging Muslims to be especially mindful that the treatment of widows and orphans be both just and kind. Having been orphaned at the age of six, in a highly tribal social context, the Prophet spent considerable time and attention on the issue of justice and proper care for orphans. Mentioning orphans twenty-three times in twenty-two chapters, the Qur’an instructs Muslims to “stand firm for justice to orphans. There is not a good deed which you do, but God is well-acquainted therewith” (4:127). Other chapters warn against unjust dealings with orphans in their care (4:2-8, 4:36, 6:152; 17:34; 89:17; 107:2), reminding Muslims to “treat not the orphan with harshness” (93:9), and threatening those who deal with them unjustly with “blazing fire” (4:10). In other chapters, the Qur’an notes that

“The best thing to do is what is for their good; if ye mix their affairs with yours, they are your brethren; but Allah knows the man who means mischief from the

man who means good. And if Allah had wished, He could have put you into difficulties: He is indeed Exalted in Power, Wise." (2:220).

Numerous Hadiths have the Prophet encouraging his followers to take considered care of orphans in their homes, look after their interests and property justly and educate them. He once told a group of Muslims that those who care for orphans are guaranteed a place in Paradise with the Prophet himself: "I and the person who looks after an orphan and provides for him, will be like *this* in paradise," and joined his index and middle finger together (Bukhari, italics added).

On several occasions, the Prophet reminded Muslims that mercy will be shown to those who demonstrate mercy themselves. When a man once told the Prophet that he had never kissed any of his ten children, the Prophet replied that "Whoever is not merciful to others will not be treated mercifully." (Bukhari no.6063, Kitab al-Adab) Another Hadith states, "The merciful are shown mercy by the Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, and He who is in heaven will be merciful to you," (Al-Tirmidhi, no.2049, Kitab al-Birr wa'l-Silah) while Bukhari (no. 7465, Kitab al-Tawhid) reports that "God is not merciful to one who is not merciful to people."

Charity/Zakat: "and repel not the beggar" (Al-Duha: 93:9)

In the prophetic tradition, Mohammed warned against the attachment to material things at the expense of community and compassion. The Prophet warned believers that "the love of the world is the root of all evil," and that "It is difficult for a man laden with riches to climb the steep path which leads to bliss." The Qur'an rails against those who "amass wealth, hoarding it to himself" (104:1-6) and those who withheld things commonly used by others (107:1-7).

Therefore, believers should "be in the world like a traveler, or like a passer-on, and reckon yourself as of the dead," since "Cursed is this world and cursed is all that is in this world, except the remembrance of God and that which aids thereto." At the same time, Islam is not a world-renouncing religion, encouraging believers instead to honest labor and equitable accumulation of wealth. "It is no sin for you," says the Qur'an, "that you seek the bounty of your Lord (by trading)" (2:198). Another Hadith states that "Wealth, properly employed, is a blessing; and a man may lawfully endeavor to increase it by honest means."

The Prophet Mohammed was also well aware that inequalities of wealth and economic injustices, including the lack of economic opportunity, had consequences for both individual and community. One Hadith from Suhrawardi quotes the Prophet in saying, "Poverty may well become a cause of infidelity (to God's law)." The Qur'an also states that the path of the righteous involves conscientious charity: "Ye will not attain unto righteousness until ye spend that which ye love. And whatsoever ye spend, God is Aware thereof." (3:92)

The Prophet recognized that building a just and peaceful society required more than reformulated legal institutions and calls to heed moral conscience. The Prophet

Mohammed sought to manifest the spiritual equality of Islam in the *ummah* by institutionalizing practices of charity to make sure that wealth would be more equitably shared in the community. One of the most important ways of doing this was the making of alms-giving a core pillar of Islam and a central focus of Muslim life. “The payment of *zakat* [one of the Five Pillars of Islam] was seen as the primary means for achieving social justice by alleviating the sufferings of those in severe need and bridging the gap between the poor and the rich” (Cakmak, 112¹²).

The Islamic concept of charity proclaims the right of the less privileged to have access to and receive community support (51:19). The Qur’an states: “The believers ... are steadfast in prayers, and in whose wealth there is a right acknowledged, for the poor and the destitute.” (70:22-24). Islamic teaching makes it clear that it is the duty of society’s privileged to care for the poor (2:273).¹³ While dignifying the underprivileged through the assertion of their community rights, easing social tensions through a regularized rotation of wealth from richer members to the poorer members of the community, the Qur’an simultaneously rewards charitable deeds as among the greatest acts of piety.

In spirit, charity is an act of worship, on par in the Qur’an with *salat* (prayer). Indeed, the two are frequently used together in the Qur’an, representing both personal and social worship of God (2:110, 2:227). The Qur’an frequently extols the virtues of charity (2: 261-266), adding that the best use of charity is for caring for parents, kin, orphans, the needy, and wayfarers (2:215; 59:7; 76:8).

Charity in Islam is either obligatory (*zakat*) or voluntary (*sadaqa*). *Zakat* is derived from the verb *Zakah*, meaning “to thrive,” “to be wholesome,” or “to be pure”. The Qur’an speaks of alms-giving as a means of purification and sanctification (9:103). *Zakat* is fixed amount (2.5%) of net worth (after basic expenses are covered) every year. The spending of one’s earnings on *zakat* is a material acknowledgement that God is the source of all bounty, and that believers are obligated to support certain categories of people in the Qur’an (2:177). These include the poor and destitute, travelers, the bankrupt, the needy, converts, captives, the collectors of *zakat* and the cause of God (which includes everything associated with general welfare, such as education, public works, etc).

Assuring wealthier Muslims that they won’t suffer for their alms-giving, the Prophet famously said that God declared, “Spend (on charity), O son of Adam, and I shall spend on you.” (Bukhari, Hadith Qudsi 11) In fact, the Qur’an makes clear that God rewards charity with a like bounty (2: 245, 2:268). One Hadith reports the Prophet Mohammed said,

¹² Cakmak, Cenap, “Charity in Islam,” in Greenberg, *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, Vol. I.

¹³ Abdullah Ibn Umar writes that the Prophet once remarked: “In one’s wealth there is a due (to God and His men) besides *zakat*.” Ibn Umar’s commentary reads that “If the *zakat* levy is insufficient to meet the needs of the poor, then it is the duty of the rich of every town to put the poor on their feet.” The fourth Caliph Ali understood this hadith in the following way: “God has ordained that the rich are to pay out of their wealth to that extent which is sufficient for the needs of the poor; so that if they do not find food and clothing, or any other need remains to be fulfilled, it would be because the rich are not doing their duty, and for this God will take them to task on the Day of Judgment.”

How excellent the wealth of the Muslim is, if it is collected through legal means and is spent in Allah's Cause and on orphans, poor people and travelers. But he who does not take it legally is like an eater who is never satisfied and his wealth will be a witness against him on the Day of Resurrection." (Bukhari, Book 52, Hadith 95)

Moreover, the Prophet also said that

A man's true wealth, as regards the Hereafter, is the good he does in this world to his fellow men. When he dies, people will say "what property has he left behind him?" But the angels will ask, "what good deeds has he sent before him?"

Sadaqat (meaning 'righteousness', from the root word *sadaqa*, "to speak the truth" or "to be true") is also a form of worship, understood to be spontaneous, sincere and direct forms of charity performed, which can include material gifts as well as any act or speech or even gesture which benefits another (17:23, 2:83, 4:8). These acts are also understood to involve 'moral learning', insofar as they inspire recipients to do well or reciprocate good deeds also. The Qur'an encourages believers to do acts of *sadaqa* privately and publicly, day and night to seek God's pleasure (2:274). Charitable acts praised in the Qur'an include: the emancipation of slaves (90:13; 2:177), the feeding of the poor (69:34; 90:11-16; 107:1-3), and taking care of orphans (17:34; 76:8; 89:17; 90:15; 93:9, 107:2).

So-called "permanent alms" (*sadaqa al-jaria*) include those acts of charity that help set up a business, pay for education, establish scholarships, and giving material aid to orphanages. These voluntary acts of inspired charity are due not only to Muslims, but to non-Muslims (2:272) and creation in general (51:19). Examples of this type of charity abound in Hadiths:

Charity is a duty unto every Muslim. He who hath not the means thereto, let him do a good act or abstain from an evil one. That is his charity.

The best of almsgiving is that which springs from the heart, and is uttered by the lips to soften the wounds of the injured.

Every good act is charity.

Charity that is concealed appeases the wrath of God.

The best charity is to satisfy a hungry person.

Doing justice between two people is charity; and assisting a man upon his beast, and lifting his baggage is charity; and pure, comforting words are charity; and answering a questioner with mildness, is charity; and removing that which is an inconvenience to wayfarers, such as thorns and stones, is a charity.

Your smiling in your brother's face is charity; and your exhorting man to virtuous deeds is charity; and your prohibiting the forbidden is charity; and your showing

men the road, in the land in which they lose it, is charity; and your assisting the blind is charity.

Voluntary alms-giving also facilitates the expiation of sins in Islamic tradition, which is urged upon anyone immediately after committing any transgression (Ihya-e-Ulumuddin, Al-Ghazzali, 1/298). *Sadaqa* also helps to protect believers from evil and punishments in the Hereafter (Ismail Hakki, Tafsir Ruh-alBayan, 1/418). In this way, it is believed to be preferable to give a little constantly than the occasional giving of much.

As an act of worship, the motives and intention of the giver of charity assumes greater importance. The Prophet said that “All deeds are based on the intention, and everyone will be rewarded according to what he intended (from his action).” The Qur’an makes it clear that “By no means shall you attain righteousness, unless you give of that which you love.” (3:92)

Cakmak argues that “Although it is voluntary, Islam is founded on the principle of charity in its broadest sense... Giving away willingly the things most valued and loved in the p. 111-112) The Prophet, when asked about the best of all charities, responded that “The best charity is what you give during your life while you are in need of it.” name of Allah is a pivotal concept in Islamic thought and practice.” (Cakmak, pp. 111-12.)

The highest praise was reserved for those who gave anonymously and without expectation: “And they give food (in spite of their love for it) to the poor, the orphan and the captive. Saying; we feed you seeking Allah's countenance only, we wish for no reward nor thanks from you.” (76: 8-9). The Prophet once remarked that “The best of alms is that which the right hand gives, and the left hand knows not of.” One tradition has the Prophet remarking that “The reward for giving voluntary alms in secret is seventy times that of giving it publicly.” (Al-Baydawi, Anwar al-Tanzil, 2/211).

At the same time, the Prophet warned Muslims against ‘false’ charity: “O you who believe, cancel not your charities by reminders of your generosity, or by harm.” (2: 264) Another verse warns (107:1-7):

Have you seen the one who denies the Religion? Such is he who repulses the orphan, and who does not urge others to feed the poor. Woe to worshippers, who are absent-minded to their prayer, those who make a show (of piety), and refuse to render small acts of kindness (towards others).

The Conquest of Self: The Greater Jihad

The Qur’an also seeks to cultivate internal personal fortitude and character among believers. The conquest of the self, or the struggle over the ego, is an effort eliciting the highest praise in Islam. As the Prophet Mohammed famously said, “The most excellent Jihad [struggle] is that for the conquest of the self” (Suhrawardy, 63).¹⁴ Moreover, on leaving the battlefield victoriously, the Prophet remarked that Muslims were leaving “the lesser jihad” (the physical struggle against oppression) for “the greater jihad” (the internal struggle over the self).

¹⁴ Al Suhrawardy, Abdullah Al-Mamun. *Sayings of Muhammad*.

As part of the conquest of self, or the greater jihad, Muslims are asked to curb their passions, appetites and impulses. When the Prophet Mohammed was once approached for general advice, he responded simply by saying: "Be not angry." (Bukhari, no. 6184, Kitab al-Adab, and Tirmidhi, no. 2152, Kitab al-Birr wa'l-Silah). Subduing anger to please God and avoid errors with others was praised by the Prophet, who once said "May God fill the heart of that person who suppresses his anger with safety and faith." For those in power, self-control is even more valued: "Whoever suppresses his anger, when he hath in his power to show it, God will give him great reward."

One Hadith remarks on the greater power of self-control: "He is not strong and powerful who throws people down; but he is strong who withholds himself from anger." Self-control is associated with faithfulness, trust and love of God alongside the practice of warding off evil with patience and humility.

Muhammad once said to Anas, "Son, if you are able, keep your heart from morning till night and from night till morning, free from malice towards anyone;" then he said, "Oh! my son, this is one of my laws, and he who loves my laws verily loves me."

Forgiveness and Humility

Conquering the self through God-consciousness and self-control involves more than the suppression of negative qualities. Muslims are asked to actively develop positive qualities and noble practices as well. Beyond non-retribution is forgiveness, a practice crucial to reconnecting with God and restoring relationships within society. The Qur'an states:

"And hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of God, and do not separate. And remember God's favor unto you: How ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that he became as brothers by His grace, and (how) ye were on the brink of an abyss of fire, and He did save you from it. Thus God maketh clear His revelations unto you, that haply ye may be guided." (3:103)

The Prophet declared that God had said: "Verily those who are patient in adversity and forgive wrongs are the doers of excellence." The Qur'an teaches that forgiveness is both a necessity and a commandment, frequently practiced by the Prophet Mohammed even with those who tormented and tried to kill him.¹⁵ "The reward of the evil is the evil thereof, but whosoever forgives and makes amends, his reward is with God" (42:40). The Prophet was once asked, as Jesus was, about the limits of forgiveness:

"O Apostle of God!" How many times are we to forgive our servant's faults?" He was silent. Again the questioner asked, and [the Prophet] Muhammad gave no answer. But when the man asked a third time, he said, "Forgive your servants seventy times a day."

¹⁵ Once when the Prophet was abused and tormented in the city of Taif so badly that "blood poured from his sandals", he took refuge under a tree where the angel Gabriel appeared and announced that he could crush the city, with all of his inhabitants, for their actions. Mohammed "then prayed for the people's forgiveness by saying, 'O God, forgive them for they do not know.'" Sultan adds that it was "after this incident that God gave Prophet Mohammed the title of 'mercy for all creatures'." (Sultan, 54)

The Qur'an makes clear that while God will call humanity to strict accountability, God is also merciful and forgives often, beginning with teaching Adam the words of forgiveness in the Garden of Eden (2:37). According to Sahih Muslim (no.7146, Kitab al-Tawhah), "God says, Great and Glorious is He, 'My mercy outstrips my wrath'". The Qur'an (25: 70-71) states: "[Those] who repent and attain to faith, and act with righteousness – in their case God transforms their evil into good, for God is most forgiving, most merciful. And whoever repents and does good is turning to God repentant."

Two of the most oft-repeated qualities of God are gracious and merciful – the opening statements in each of the chapters of the Qur'an. Given the frequency of mention of these qualities of God, Muslims who are mindful of God seek to incorporate them into their own lives. In At-Talaq (65:4-5), the Qur'an speaks to mindfulness of God and forgiveness for Muslims:

"whoever is careful of (his duty to) Allah, He will make easy for him his affair. And whoso keeps his duty to Allah, he will remit from him his evil deeds and magnify reward for him."

As in Christianity, sincere repentance is key to God's forgiveness: "those who do ill-deeds and afterward repent and believe – lo! For them, afterward, Allah is Forgiving, merciful" (Al-Araf, 7:153) The Prophet once remarked that "A sincere repenter of faults is like him who hath committed none." God loves those who repent (2:222). One Hadith reports the Prophet saying,

"I would not have the whole wealth of the world in the place of this revelation. . . O My servants who have oppressed your own souls by sinning, despair not of the mercy of God." A man said, "What of him who hath associated others with God?" Muhammad remained silent for a while and then said, "Know that him also God forgives; but on repentance."

Once again, intentions, sincerity of God-consciousness and effort play an important role in influencing God's decision-making: "If ye love Allah, follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (3:31). The Qur'an states that "Your Lord hath inscribed for Himself (the rule of) mercy: verily, if any of you did evil in ignorance, and thereafter repented, and amend (his conduct), lo! He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (6:54, see also 39:53).

Pride is the biggest obstacle to a Muslim's submission to God and a leading cause of sin and division, tempting believers to take refuge away from God, forget God, and close their ears and hearts to truth and guidance (2:206; 4:36; 16:23; 22:9; 31:7; 38:2; 40:56; 44:19; 45:8; 91:11). For this reason, the Prophet stated that

"He will not enter hell who hath faith equal to a mustard seed in his heart; and he will not enter Paradise who hath a single grain of pride, equal to a mustard seed, in his heart." (Sahih Muslim, no. 275, Kitab al-Iman)

Sahih Muslim reports the Prophet saying that "God is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride is to disregard the truth and to scorn people." (ibid) The Prophet Mohammed noted that "verily God instructs me to be humble and lowly and not proud; and that no one should

oppress another.” Following the example of the Prophet, one Hadith states that “Whoever is humble to men for God’s sake, may God exalt his eminence.” Muslims are called upon to enjoin humility in their relationship with God, as this is associated with virtue and harmony:

“O mankind! Call upon your Lord humbly and in secret. Lo! He loveth not aggressors. Work not confusion in the earth after the fair ordering (thereof), and call on Him in ear and hope. Lo! The mercy of God is near unto the virtuous.” (7:55-56)

Modesty and Patience

Patience (*sabr*) is a key virtue in Islam, as a one of the paths laid out by God that brings humanity from darkness to light (14:1), and is rewarded and loved by God (3:158). It is patience which gives dignity to the striving for self-conquest: “O you who believe! be patient and excel in patience and remain steadfast, and be careful of (your duty to) Allah, that you may be successful.” (3:200) Another verse reminds Muslims to “Seek help in patience and prayer; and truly it is hard save for the humble-minded.” (2:45) The Qur’an states, “O you who believe! seek assistance through patience and prayer; surely Allah is with the patient. (2:153) The Qur’an describes those who are patient as among the God-fearing, righteous and sincere in belief (2:177; 16:126-127).

Righteousness

Through worship, acts of piety and charity, a Muslim is to be identified not only by faith, but by their actions. Submitting to God is in effect the pursuit of the highest personal good, which also advances the good of the community. A Muslim is therefore a believer who worships God, and one who does so in the pursuit of the collective good. Each commitment brings about the peace, the *slm* root word for peace, from which both *Muslim* and *Islam* are derived.

The Qur’an is unequivocal in emphasizing the link and balance between religious beliefs and righteous actions, and not only through ritual. One verse (2:177) particularly demonstrates the integration of inner values with social outcomes, reminding believers that adherence to form is not true worship:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces Towards East or West [in prayer]. Rather, truly righteous are those who believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Scriptures, and the Prophets; *and* who give material gifts out of love for God, even of what they care for, to relatives and orphans, and the poor and the traveler and the needy, and for the freeing of slaves; and who establish prayer and give alms; and who fulfill their promises which they have made; and those who are patient in misfortune, affliction, and hardship – such are the people of truth, and they are the God-conscious ones.

While righteousness is found in the purity of one’s own heart, in one’s original state before distractions, willfulness and ignorance lead believers astray, the Qur’an also makes it clear that it is a path of striving. The Qur’an (90:8-18) describes the virtues of the righteous as those who “brave the steep uphill road”:

And what will explain to you what the steep uphill road is? [It is] freeing the slave, or the giving of food on a day of hunger to the orphaned relative or a needy stranger lying in the dust. Then will he be of those who believe, and enjoin patience and enjoin compassion. Such are the companions of the right hand.

A Prophetic Hadith emphasizes the effort behind righteousness: “This life is but a tillage for the next, do good that you may reap there; for striving is the ordinance of God and whatever God hath ordained can only be attained by striving.” (Suhrawardy, p. 74)

Conclusion

While God endowed humankind with a decent and God-fearing nature, the Qur’an also makes it clear that God’s purpose for creation is to test humanity in the application and manifestation of our greatest potential and ideals. The Qur’an asks, “Do you think that you will enter the garden while Allah has not yet known those who strive hard from among you, and (He has not) known the patient?” (3:142) The Prophet Mohammed once remarked that

“A servant of God will remain standing on the Day of Judgment till he is questioned about his life on earth and how he spent it, and about his knowledge and how he utilized it, and his wealth and how he acquired it and in what did he spend it, and about his body and how he used it.”

Islam seeks to provide the moral and spiritual guidance through the Qur’an and the Prophet’s example for individual believers to fulfill their divine purpose in worshipping God and establishing a just and peaceful society. Given the human capacity to know God and choose moral actions accordingly, the Abrahamic ethic speaks to fundamental human dignity. The Abrahamic principles of liberty, equality and fraternity also serve as important moral guideposts to structure and evaluate progress in society. The Qur’an asks, “And who turns away from the religion of Abraham but such as debase their souls with folly?” (2:130) The path of Abraham not only provides a means of ennobling the soul, but also bringing believers in harmony with one another, and in proximity to God:

“And who better in faith than the one who willingly surrenders his being to God, and is a doer of good, and follows the way of Abraham the rightly oriented? For God took Abraham as a friend.” (4:125)