

# Ethical Dimension of Islam

by  
Azhar Ibrahim Alvee  
National Institute of Education

*“Man ought at the same time to be both spiritually introverted, interiorised and extroverted by going out in creative activity to the world and to men.”<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction: The Centrality of Ethics in Religion

Without ethics, no religious system could ever claim of its universality. Spiritualness alone cannot guarantee a wholesomeness of religiosity, nor ethics in itself. Yet in the popular conception of religion, the portrayal of spirituality (not uncommonly associated with some kind of magicalness) often takes centre stage, in comparison to the demonstration of ethical life and its practices. The primacy of Ethics to human life, need no intricate justification here. Primarily it serves the function to combat or at least mitigate ( a ) moral ambivalence ; ( b ) unethical practices ; ( c ) corruption of meanings ; ( d ) narcissistic preoccupation ; ( e ) moral exclusivism ; ( f ) rhetoric of superficial thinking and anti-intellectualism ; ( g ) ostentatious hedonism/consumerism and the likes.

Generally, the basic values as enjoined in Islamic traditions are : ( a ) respect for human personality ; ( b ) recognition of man's capability of realizing his full potential ; ( c ) respect for human life ( reverence of life ) ; ( d ) high value place on the use of reason and intellect by man to determine his well-being ; ( e ) emphasis of social justice and equality in society ; ( f ) recognition of the dignity of labour and work and ( g ) emphasis of disciplined and frugal living ; ( h ) a commitment to do charity to those in need ; ( i ) recognizing and respecting the Others ; ( j ) inclusivity in human relations [ *ummah* being an inclusive term for common humanity ] ; ( k ) tolerance for plurality and differences of opinion that are to be respected ; ( l ) moral courage to speak and act truth yet ( m ) affirming moral restraint and forgiveness in times of provocation ; ( n ) accountability of one's action and opinion and ( o ) the primacy of justice (*adl*) for every human being and his social environment.

## The Ethical Neglect

The Ethical dimension of religion is most neglected in the contemporary Muslim religious discourse. Unfortunately we see increasingly the propensity of moral panic than a

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, ( London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944), p. 138

serious diagnosis of the problems encountered. In the era of the so-called religious resurgence, we witness an ever-increasing of pamphleteer Islam, an epitome of anti-intellectualism and the arrogant persistence of a reductionistic and essentialistic frame of mind. Therefore, it is timely to ask as to why an *underdeveloped Ethics in our religious traditions prevailed for so long*? Without elaborating, we shall enumerate the following points in suggesting the possible reasons for neglect. These are: ( a ) the Predominance of *Fiqh* ; ( b ) the Tyrannical Past and Present ; ( c ) Weakness of Social Philosophy, whereby Individual ethic triumphs over Social Ethic ; ( d ) A Fettered Freedom of Opinion – Different views easily denounced ( eg. *aqidah* in suspect ) ; ( e ) The Challenges of Modern Context, and ( f ) The Failure of Recognizing Universalism and Particularism.

Niyazi Berkes opined as to why ethical discourse stagnate in Muslim intellectual-religious discourse:

“The dynamism and variety of Islamic ethics were affected deeply, however, by the strains contingent upon the decline of medieval Muslim civilization. The first result was stagnation. This stagnation was fostered by the increasing ascendancy of one moral view of Islam – the dogmatic theology and doctrine of conduct – through the zealous efforts of religious fundamentalists, who strove to remedy the apparent illness of the Muslim civilization symptomatically. Rather than seeing the plurality of tradition within Islam as a source of strength, the fundamentalists have seen it as a source of weakness, as the aberration of an assumed Islam that never existed historically. The second result has been a continuous process of moral anomie....[in relation to Muslim contacts with western ideas]”

## Ethics in Contexts

“...the ethical norms which [society] inherited from earlier times, correspond less and less to man’s life and actions in the contemporary social structure. Here, and not in a general decadence, lies the cause why the mass is losing belief in norms generally.”<sup>2</sup>

It is not uncommon that when we speak of ethics, we still remained textual bound. Certainly, textual/scriptural sources become a normative reference in our discourse of ethics. But no text exists in an historical and cultural vacuum. This mean, we must be sensitive of the normative injunction/enjoinment of the text, whereby we are able to discern the universal spirit in those enjoinment, in comparison to its local or particular colourings. The point here is not to limit the Textual role in our ethics deliberation, but to expand the meaning and interpretation, taking into consideration of our context of today and challenges of tomorrow.

---

<sup>2</sup> From Karl Mannheim, p. 530

### **( a ) A Pluralist Ethos**

The opposite of inclusive and pluralistic frame of mind is the exclusivism in one's thinking. The call for inclusivity and openness towards others is not the exclusive of modern thought. Instead the Qur'anic injunctions on the importance of a pluralistic ethos are clear and abundant [e.g. the Qur'anic recognition of the People of the Book, of *hanifs*, of Sabaeans etc.]. It emphasizes the continuity of Truth that God had delivered to mankind through prophets, rather than speaking in exclusive terms. The Prophet himself speaks in the language of inclusivity and the historical experiences of Muslim of the past demonstrated in that direction. Living in a multi-racial and multi-religious society obviously requires a deep sense of appreciating plurality and diversity. However, when an ethical system remains exclusively parochial, then the claim of universality of Islam remained largely rhetorical.

### **( b ) The Unfolding of Meaning of Life through Ethical Affirmation and Practices**

Human excellence of unfolding the best in the midst of diversity is clearly stated a supreme value in which man must strive for. The ethical living gives meaning to the life of one's own, as much as it is for others surrounding him. One does an act/duty, not because of expectation of return ("remuneration") but because it has to be done (duty), incumbent for him/her so as to give meaning to his/her own life (rights). Also when one speaks of ethics, it cannot be narrowed simply to the level of duties. Certainly fulfillment of duties is expected in an ethical living, but without the affirmation of one's own rights, as well as the rights of others, then that notion of ethics is severely a limited one.

### **( c ) Individual and Social Compassion**

Speaking of compassion, one of the great challenges to embrace it is the prevalence of prejudicial frame of thinking. This includes an exclusive attitude towards religion. At the time when we affirm the fact that the universal teachings of the religions informed our sense of humanity, we must also be wary of the fact that there are religious sentiments that have and will be appropriated (conscious or otherwise) to harness prejudices, through seeing others as the all embodiments of negativities, while the self as paragon of virtues and completion. As Paulo Freire once pointed out, "We have a strong tendency to affirm that what is different from us is inferior. We start from the belief that our way of being is not only good but better than that of others who are different from us. This is intolerance. It is the irresistible preference to reject differences."

## **The Vocation to be Ethical**

Recognizing and commitment to ethics is the quest and endeavour for human completion. Ethics is a means to unfold our human potential – that is, to humanize our

lives. And one of the ways of humanizing our lives is through dialogue with others. To be ethical is to be human, the very foundation of existence – human as God’s steward on earth. In the vocation of affirming ethics, some basic requirement must be fully met. Amongst these are ( 1 ) the recognition / utterance – to name – to communicate – the rights of man to speak, to utter ( to name the world ) ; ( 2 ) the will and commitment to act – the duty to act/do – praxis .

The vocation to be ethical is about human choice, both of his strength and limitation. The commitment to do good/just to yourself and others is a choice of either humanizing or dehumanizing our life. But it must be remembered that ethical choice/decision is never devoid of time and context. Herein lies the importance of critical thinking to evaluate one’s position on certain contexts. For instance, the very notion of Ethical Virtues should also enable us to name the very opposite of the Ideal. When we speak of, say justice, we should also be concerned of the injustice/ oppression.

### **Individual Ethic Cannot be *Asocial***

The notion of individual ethic for personal salvation is a strong motif, not uncommon in the popular religious conception. The view of one writer is useful:

“Many religious people have a tendency to say that if we reform individual person, if we get our own heads and hearts straight then love and justice will reign. Individual ethical persons do not add up necessarily to a moral society. ...We have to think of ethics for society by starting with ‘social’ terms and understanding, not just personal ones. We miss the communal-cultural environment in which all ethical thought and action takes place, even personal ethics....while personal ethics may ground and serve as an exemplary lure for social ethics, personal ethics are not adequate for the integrity of God’s Creation. We are called to social responsibility.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Humanization of Ethics**

When speaking of humanization of ethics, then it will not be possible to understand it as isolated, individualistic activity/endeavour. Ethics is a form of praxis which means the “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it”, including that of one’s self. The final objective of humanization of ethics, which is an endeavour of becoming more fully human, is beyond doubt, a cardinal religious command. “To live well... , is to transform the world through reflective, critical, dialogical action. The vocation of all human beings is to

---

<sup>3</sup> H Frederick Reisz, Jr. “The Idolatry of Social Neglect: Religious Humanity and Social Ethical Involvement.” *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. 34, 1, 1977, pp. 28-29

realize this capacity in the fullest way possible. The pursuit of humanization is a quest to become more profoundly what we already are as humans: that is beings of praxis.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the ethical vocation of man is not only to ensure that he is able and conscious of transforming his own self, but also of others around him. “Making the world ethical is a necessary consequence of producing human existence, or of extending life into existence.”<sup>5</sup> The neglect of it means affirming religion to the level of ritual and habitual, thus emptying the meaning of religion for man’s life. A similar point made by Martin Luther King Jr. points to this question: “Any religion that professes to be concerned with the soul of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion. Such a religion is the kind the Marxist likes to see—an opiate of the people.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Pedagogy of Ethics Deliberation**

“I insist that history is possibility and not determinism. We are conditioned beings but not determined beings. It is impossible to understand history as possibility if we do not recognize human beings as beings who make free decisions. Without this form of exercise it is not worth speaking about ethics.”<sup>7</sup>

The pedagogy of ethics deliberation is a task that must be taken up by every responsible members of the community, especially by its ethico-moral (religious) and intellectual leadership. The subject of Ethics is not abstraction, nor could it be dispensed simply from the pedestal of superiority. Also ethics deliberation could only have meaning if it is carried out in a dialogical manner, instead of a monological fashion. In other words, instead of a one way “banking approach” to teach ethics, the latter is best served when it is approached from a problem-posing angle.<sup>8</sup> The primary responsibility is to examine, enumerate, and suggests solutions, rather than simply through exhortation. This mean, those who want to be the “concerned” ethics observers, must first fulfill the criteria of commitment towards a diagnostic frame of thinking. The task is to diagnose, not simply denouncement. The task is to (re)construct and not to (re)condemn.

It is also important that when one deliberates the issue of ethics, it should be looked at from various lens of human knowledge. To solely speak of ethics in theological term may have its own limitations. This is also a point raised by a scholar: “The ethical teachings of Islam must be discussed in terms of Islamic civilization rather than in terms of the Islamic

---

<sup>4</sup> Read, Peter Roberts, “Knowledge, Dialogue, and Humanization: The Moral Philosophy of Paulo Freire,” *Journal of Educational Thought*, Vol. 32, No.2, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation*. (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), p.98

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Leo Tolstoy, *The Wisdom of Humankind*. ( Ada, MI: CoNexus Press, 1999), p. 194

<sup>7</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Heart*, p. 37

<sup>8</sup> For full discussion of problem posing education vis-a-vis the banking approach, read Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

creed because the actual conduct of Muslim has been shaped by a variety of traditions...”<sup>9</sup> Hence, to be able to do this, our commitment to learn from the deliberation of ethics from other cultures and from the various human sciences (such as social psychology, sociology and pedagogy) must be made available in our discourse on ethics. Simply put, in the context of a complex society and its intricate challenges, the traditional sources and approach to ethics would not suffice.

In short, the deliberation of ethics must be dialectical. It is naïve when one speaks of ethics in terms of certain ideal traits that must be possessed and practiced by individuals. Indeed, ethics is best understood if it is deliberated in a dialogical manner, based on the contextual considerations. In any case, ethical deliberation must be humanizing. Once it dehumanizes, it sapped the human vitality for change and reform. Moreover, the affirmation of ethical living should not be mistaken for the approach of Islam through its values because such an enjoinder presupposes a fixed set of values to be followed, embraced, and practiced. Instead the ethical approach requires a *dialogic and dialectical frame of mind*, because it is not simply about adhering to precept or values, but always putting it into context (*particular*), engaged the particular nuances in a dialectical way, yet affirming the universality of values as a signpost of valuational (re)consideration. Simply put, deliberation of ethics, devoid of its context, is a naivety.

It is in this regards that we must be conscious in planning the right type of religious attitude/consciousness. This very act of planning is an ethical question that we cannot afford to avoid. Thus it is relevant when Gordon Allport recommends the recognition and cultivation of religious sentiment that is intrinsic, as opposed to the extrinsic ones that ferment prejudices and religious exclusivism. Allport opines:

“The relationship between religion and prejudice hinges on the type of religion that the personal life harbors. When it is extrinsic, the tie with prejudice is close; when intrinsic, prejudice is restrained. Now that religious bodies are becoming self-critical and alert to the issue, they would do well to employ this central fact to guide their policies and plans for the future. Their problem, if I may venture to state it for them, is how to transform the prejudice-linked, extrinsic style of religion held by most of their members-whatever the religious body may be—into intrinsic religion, where the total creed of equimindedness becomes woven into the fabric of personality itself.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Niyazi Berkes, “Ethics and Social Practice in Islam,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol.9, No.1/2, 1959, pp. 60-2

<sup>10</sup> “Religion and Prejudice,” in *Personality and Social Encounter: Selected Essays by Gordon W. Allport* (Beacon Press ,1960), p.266

## **In *Need* of Diagnosis and *Not* Denouncement**

Deliberation on ethics cannot begin nor end with moralistic overtones, nor through *talibanic* coercion. But this does not mean that we refrain of making evaluation on a moral question nor to be relativistic about it. What is important is that, as we evaluate a human condition, we need to understand the very context where the ethical issues are being confronted. If moralistic position often ends with a judgmental overtone, denouncement against the “deviant”, the ethical deliberation is more interested to illustrate why the problem arises, the challenges arise when the problem is being resolved, as well as an evaluation of its effect/impact on the society as whole. This approach is nothing new in our ethical traditions. The humanist and ethicist of classical Islam had impressed upon this ideas centuries ago. To Ibn Miskawayh ( 936-1030 AD) ethics as the basis of religion should provide a mode of thinking and values to infuse proper ethos in man’s life. His idea is well summarized by a writer, as follow:

“He does not seek literal truth in scriptural rhetoric, just as he does not find categorical commandments in religious laws. Rather, he sees religious symbolism as a hortatory exercise and observance of the laws as a means of inuring the character of virtue. He evinces more concern about a young man’s drinking companions than about the fact that young men will violate the religious law by drinking.”

In short, the deliberation on ethics is a commitment to uncover the potentialities and limitations of humanness; it affirms only the diagnosis of the problem, not the denouncement in an inquisitorial fashion and that this refusal of denouncement does not mean an excuse for relativistic position nor an ambivalence to make an evaluation of an act or phenomenon amidst us.

## **To *Recognise* the Past but not a *Recourse* to it**

It is very clear that from the history of our ethical traditions, the issues that were raised and deliberated were based on the situations and challenges they were facing. Thus to speak of an ethical subject in a “transhistorical” or *ahistorical* manner is a naivety that many refused to acknowledge of its persistence. The classical past of Islam had demonstrated a series of thinker who had deliberated on the subject. Among those were Ibn Miskawayh, al-Ghazali, ibn Aqil, the Mu’tazilite groups and the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwanul Safa*). Acknowledging their contributions should never mean a recourse to what they have deliberated and formulated. The best of the latter certainly is worthy of emulation. It is their endeavour and commitment to explore the subject that must be an emulation and encouragement for us today. A blind recourse to the “perfect” past means we further commit towards the underdevelopment of our ethical traditions. The task of deliberation based on our contextual challenges and socio-political environment requires not only an ethico-intellectual commitment but the duty to develop it further, not only for our benefit, but as our contribution to the larger humanity – an endeavour which the thinkers of the classical past had demonstrated very well.

## **Ethics and Revitalization of Religion in Modern Society**

“The revitalization of religion consists precisely in these two tasks: ( 1 ) re-creation of a genuine religious experience ; ( 2 ) realization of ethical norms in the overt behaviour of the believers. A truly religious person, feeling vividly the presence of God, walks humbly and reverently on this earth and loves the other children of God and all living creatures to his utmost capacity. These are the paramount needs of religious transmutation. Believers, especially religious leaders, must concentrate their efforts on these tasks instead of devoting most of their energy to the external shells of religiosity; their cult and ritual, their institutional property and hierarchy, their rational theology and dogmas, their politics and their claims for the superiority of their own brand of religion over the others.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Affirming Ethical living does not only serves the function for individual and social happiness (*saadab*), but through it, ensures a decent moral order which helps in mitigating human excesses. Religious ethics not only serve to affirm the religious life of the believers (with a salvational bliss) but also contribute towards democratic emancipation, as long as that ethics have a strong social dimension and characterized by inclusivity rather than an exclusive ones. And through this functioning of the individual self and a stable moral order, democratic consciousness and emancipation will be promoted. To ensure that this transpires, we should see to the humanization of ethics, and at the same time be vigilant of the possibility of the dehumanization of ethics. (This in turn can only be partly guaranteed through a continuous engagement of discourse of ethics at public and scholarly levels.)

An underdeveloped discourse on ethics exerts serious ramification to our theology and even jurisprudence. The neglect of ethical perspectives into our daily practices and thinking, bears us the burden of embracing religion only with superficiality, where it is the outward manifestation to project a certain desired identities, yet much devoid of its substantive meaning. In sum, to speak of religiosity, divorced of ethics is a misplaced concern. To speak of civicism without ethical consideration is a social blindness *par excellence*. To speak of individual integrity divorced of its ethical inquiry is nonsensical. To speak of intellectual eloquence without its ethical component is an endorsement for corruption. And to speak of artistic sensitivities without ethical sensibilities is aesthetics of dehumanization. The question here is not about emphasizing the superiority of ethics over other religious affiliations (such as mysticism, philosophical and judicial) but to affirm that the neglect of the ethical dimension of Islam is the very act of sapping the vitality of this religion to be the source of

---

<sup>11</sup> Pitrim Sorokin, *The Reconstruction of Humanity*, pp. 157-8



giving meaning to our life and as a normative direction in providing us hope and direction in confronting the challenges of today.

\*\*\*\*\*

*[This paper is presented at Young AMP's Focus Group Discussion Series No. 1,  
27<sup>th</sup> August 2005, National University of Singapore.]*