

Seeking Values within the Islamic Traditions

By

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Islamic Values – Between Truth and Reality

A prominent contemporary Muslim scholar, Fazlur Rahman [d. 1988], once posed a challenge to Muslims to rebuilt society on an ethical foundation. This challenge is still yet to be taken seriously by many Muslim thinkers. Instead, we find an abundance in writings by Muslim scholars extolling and expounding the plethora of values to be found within the Qur'an. Concepts like justice, truth and charity are often invoked as the hallmark of Qur'anic values. These transcendental values are usually juxtaposed with "man-made" values that are decadent and self-serving in nature and as such, will lead to the destruction of human civilization. Thus, unless one returns to these values as enumerated in the Qur'an, humanity is doomed for destruction.

Yet one can find a considerable gulf between Qur'anic values and reality. Any conceptual analysis of values will remain a concept if it is not translated into actions and manifested in society. To say we only want transcendental values as given by God in the Qur'an is in itself ambiguous unless one specify what these values are and how it can be manifested in society. To many Muslims caught between the reality of today's world and the supremacy of their religion, it is puzzling that Islam teaches justice and yet killings of innocent civilians in acts of terror was justifiable; that Islam teaches charity and yet majority of the poor in this world are residing in Third World Muslim countries; and that Islam teaches the value of knowledge and yet Muslims are lagging technologically and scientifically – including the fact that many of our Muslim women in Muslim countries are illiterate.

Any studies on values must not be detached from contextual societal conditions and evolution. Values itself is derived and interpreted within specific sociohistorical context. Thus, we may claim that the Qur'an teaches "truth" but what "truth" actually means to the community is shaped by sociohistorical factors. For example, Al-Kindi [d. 866], the 'First Philosopher', wrote: "We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and acquiring it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us."¹ This attitude towards truth itself is the impetus towards the flourishing of the sciences under the Abbasid rule in the 8th/9th Century CE. Yet, we seem to have lost this universal outlook by the growing antagonism between "Islamic sciences" and "Western sciences" or otherwise seen as the tension between worldly knowledge and knowledge of the hereafter.

Thus, while we derived transcendental values within the Qur'an, the actual "effective orientation" and the "ethical engineering" of values within society are, according to Fazlur Rahman, "the work of the ethicist".² This does not mean that Islamic history is depleting of any instances of a value-oriented community or individuals. One just has to rediscover and sift through the various discourses to find the strand of history that suits our present purpose. We first turn our attention to the community of philosophers.

Values Within the Philosophical Traditions

The *falsafah* school, or simply the philosophical movement within Islam, developed in the early 8th Century CE. Philosophical traditions in the Muslim world is very diverse – from the rationalistic school of Mu'tazilism in the 8th Century CE, the Neoplatonists in the 10th and 11th Century CE, to the Peripatetic Philosophers in Spain and the Illuminationists in Persia, both of whom flourished in the 12th Century CE. Within these diverse philosophical traditions, one can see two major orientations – *speculative philosophy* and *practical philosophy*. It is in the realm of speculative philosophy that 'philosophy' as a whole was severely denounced. Imam al-Ghazali [d. 1111], for instance, authoritatively condemned the philosophers on the account of their engagements in metaphysical issues, of which the Qur'an alone should settle the issue.³ Yet, one can find great values within the latter orientation – that of practical philosophy. Within this, we can single out two aspects – *ethics* (or *adab*) and *social philosophy*.

One of the most widely acknowledged Muslim ethical philosopher was Ibn Miskawayh [d. 1030]. He wrote a very influential work, *Tabdib al-Akhlāq* (Refinement of Character), which expounded various ethical conceptions like justice, love and friendship. According to C. K. Zurayk, *Tabdib* exerted considerable influence on later Muslim ethicists like Nasr al-Din al-Tusi [d. 1274] and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.⁴ For Miskawayh himself, the purpose of writing *Tabdib* is “to acquire for ourselves such a character that all our actions issuing therefrom may be good and, at the same time, may be performed by us easily, without any constrain or difficulty.”⁵ This objective is of course borne out of the need to ponder upon the Qur'anic verse:

“By the soul, and the proportion and order given to it; And its enlightenment as to its wrong and right; - Truly he succeeds that purifies it, and he fails that corrupts it!”⁶

One of the most significant views promoted by Miskawayh in his book is that virtue, which is the precondition of a healthy soul, cannot be attained alone. “He must have recourse to the help of a great number of people in order to achieve a good life and follow the right path” – for how can one exercise virtues alone? For “he who does not mingle with other people and who does not live with them in cities cannot show temperance, intrepidity, liberality, or justice”.⁷ This insight provided by Miskawayh is still useful in reassessing our position within a global, pluralistic society.

There are many more insights we can learn from Miskawayh. For example, he believed that the man should strive to achieve happiness (*sa'adab*) and happiness can be achieved in this earth. This, of course, requires him to live a “divine life”, for “man, though small in bulk, is great in wisdom and noble in intellect”.⁸

Within the realm of practical philosophy, Abu Nasr al-Farabi [d. 950] deserved a mention. Al-Farabi's conception of the Good State (*madina al-fadila*) is particularly useful in formulating an ethical political philosophy. According to al-Farabi, the Good City is where men come together and co-operate with the aim of becoming virtuous, performing noble activities and attaining happiness.⁹ It is important to see also how al-Farabi implicated the Good City with the rule of one who must possess certain traits like great intelligence, excellent memory, eloquence, firmness, without weakness, firmness in the achievement of good, love for justice, love for study, love for truth, aversion to falsehood, temperance in food, drink and enjoyment, and contempt for wealth.¹⁰ Indeed, according to al-Farabi, it is the moral responsibility of the ruler to ensure the welfare of his people in this world and the bliss in the hereafter. The values promoted by al-Farabi

in his work should not be ignored by Muslims today who struggled to seek a viable conception of a nation according to Islamic principles – beyond the usual rhetoric of implementation of the *Shari'ah* [Islamic Law].

Value Within the Sufistic Traditions

Sufism (or mysticism) constitutes a major part of the Islamic traditions. According to Majid Fakhry, Sufism first emerged as an ascetic movement as early as the 7th Century CE. It soon developed into a several mystical orders and was adopted into orthodoxy mainly due to the influence of the celebrated Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.

Although many will identify Sufism with exclusive religiosity, extreme otherworldliness and elaborate rituals, this only represents one aspect of the various Sufi orientations. It is clear that there is a type of Sufism that is both life-affirming and social-oriented. For instance, a leading Sufi authority in the Malay world, Syed Muhammad Naquib Alattas, mentioned that

“Unlike the Hindu and Christian ascetics, the Muslim ascetics did not practice celibacy or lead a monastic life. They took a major part in public affairs, and many – even the very old – served in numerous battles and military expeditions under the leadership of ‘Ali, the Fourth *Khalifah*. One of the most famous of these was Salman al-Farisi who, it was reported, arranged for the digging of the ditch in which the Muslims defended themselves against the Makkans during the siege of Madinah.”¹¹

Another scholar asserted that the social importance of (affirmative) Sufism lies in its remedial value of “healing the sickness of the heart” of individuals residing in society. Thus, “our only means of making sure that the Islamic mystics, by their efforts attained their goal, is to examine the social consequences; the value and effectiveness of their rule of life as a cure for the ills of society.”¹² This strand of affirmative Sufism contains virtues that are yet to be fully realized within the Sufi world.

One of the most popular and successful Sufi order in the Indian subcontinent is the *Chisti* or *Chistiyya* order. Between 1200 to 1356 CE, the Sheikhs of this order successfully established influential centralized network of monasteries in the Indian subcontinent. However, I will point out to one important teaching of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, the famous Sufi sheikh of the Chistiyya order. According to him,

“A sin committed does not harm an individual as much as looking down upon with contempt upon one’s own fellow beings. Of all the worships, the worship that pleases the Almighty God most is the grant of relief to the humble and the oppressed. The best way of evading the fire of hell lies in feeding the hungry, providing water to the thirsty, removing the wants of the needy and befriending the miserable.”¹³

Thus, affirmative Sufism is not just an inward search for spiritual bliss. Sufism is a way of pious life that embodies virtues like love of mankind, achieving spiritual fellowship with others, tolerance and harmony and humanitarianism. To quote Fatemi,

“Isn’t the purpose of religion to unite, to comfort, to improve, and to bring all races and peoples of the world together in love and brotherhood, or is it to divide, to tyrannize, to shed blood of the innocent in futile wars, to commit all kinds of crime in the name of Allah and to exploit our fellowmen?”¹⁴

Within such virtues promoted by affirmative Sufis, we find a common thread of achieving peace and harmony between the Creator and the creations. This is an important lesson that we can incorporate in the present antagonistic and volatile world conditions. As mentioned by a celebrated Sufi, Hakim Sana'i, the Sufis' search is for

“the ocean of love, and they did not bother with rivers and canals of conflict and prejudice. Their mission was to bring unity, brotherhood, hope and happiness to the family of man. Their purpose was to help a generation which was suffering from the ills of mistrust, materialism, prejudice and conflict.”¹⁵

Values Within the *Kalam* Traditions

Kalam (systematic theology) is a development that occurred within the Muslim community as a result of theological tensions in the late 7th Century CE.¹⁶ These tensions had led to the development of various theological schools. Amongst the widely accepted ones by orthodox Muslims today are Ash'arism, Maturidism and Tahtawism. Others, like Mu'tazilism, were outlawed and deemed as heretical. However, we shall only deal with one important value as enumerated by the great theologian deemed as *Hujat al-Islam* (Proof of Islam), Imam al-Ghazali. This value is of great relevance yet remains largely ignored today.

The value I am referring to is that of tolerance. Many Muslim scholars today would point out to the oft-quoted verse on tolerance: “Let there be no compulsion in religion”¹⁷. Yet one can find as many voices brandishing charges of *takfir* (infidelity) and heresy on those who do not subscribe to the specific details of their Islamic interpretations. Orthodoxy, according to many, is simply adherence to an established school of thought. Any deviation, no matter how slight, is considered heretical and ‘out of Islam’.

Imam al-Ghazali had denounced such parochialism. In his work, *Faysal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa* (On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam), he criticized those who defined unbelief according to adherence to any school of thoughts:

“If he claims that the definition of ‘Unbelief’ is that which contradicts the Ash'arite school, or the Mu'tazilite school, or the Hanbalite school, or any other school, then know that he is a gullible, dim-witted fellow who is stifled by his enslavement to blind following.”¹⁸

The objective of this important work of al-Ghazali, according to Sherman A. Jackson, is

“to define the boundaries within which competing theologies can coexist in mutual recognition of each other, i.e., as ‘orthodox’...Al-Ghazali's aim, in other words, is not to establish who among the theological schools is ‘right’, but rather to demonstrate the folly and unfairness of the practice of condemning a doctrine as heresy simply because it goes against one's own theology. Furthermore, he insists, even where a doctrine can be justifiably deemed ‘wrong’ or heretical, this does not necessarily constitute Unbelief.”¹⁹

Al-Ghazali gave us an important virtue to be learnt with regards to the practice of condemning others with the charge of *kufr* (Unbelief):

“As for the Advice, it is that you restrain your tongue, to the best of your ability, from indicting the people who face Mecca (on charges of Unbelief) as long as they say, ‘There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God,’ without categorically contradicting this. And for them to contradict this categorically is for them to affirm the possibility that the Prophet, with

or without an excuse, delivered lies. Indeed, branding people Unbelievers is a serious matter. Remaining silent, on the other hand, entails no liability at all.”²⁰

Thus, al-Ghazali formulated a maxim that even those who indulge on speculative matters should not be deemed Unbelievers, as long as it is not connected with fundamental principles of creed – which are (1) acknowledging the existence of God, (2) the prophethood of his Prophet, and (3) the reality of the Last Day. All other matters, according to al-Ghazali, are secondary and “there should be no branding (of) any person an Unbeliever over any secondary issue whatsoever”.²¹ Amongst these secondary issues is on the notion of the Caliphate:

“Know, however, that error regarding the status of the Caliphate, whether or not establishing this office is a (communal) obligation, who qualifies for it, and related matters, cannot serve as grounds for condemning people as Unbelievers.”²²

Conclusion

What we had observed are some of the values upheld and preached by some of our great thinkers within the classical traditions. There were many more. The challenge before us then, is to rediscover and reincorporate these values within our present discourse on Islam and values in society. As much as it is important to say that we need a virtuous society, it is even more important to ask what are the values that we want within ourselves and within society. The reason for this is obvious. There are two types of values – *antagonistic values* and *humanistic values*. While humanistic values aimed for the flowering of man’s self-worth and potential as God’s vicegerent on earth, antagonistic values are those that inhibits growth and destructive in nature. Antagonistic values can never be universal and at peace with everyone because its very nature is in pitting one against another. This is in contrast to humanistic values which seek the common good and mutual cooperation towards realizing a universal and harmonious ethical community. Humanistic values are inclusive whereas antagonistic values are primarily exclusive.

The present tendency towards antagonistic values can be seen in the development of a ‘political Islam’ – the primacy of political interests and power struggles over ethical and humanistic concerns. According to Khaled Abou el-Fadl, “political interests have come to dominate the public discourse, and to a large extent, moral discourses have become marginalized in modern Islam.”²³ Thus, Muslims’ attempts to remedy the effects of colonialism and feeling of powerlessness and political defeat are largely by “engaging in highly sensationalistic acts of power symbolism.” This, according to el-Fadl, means that our classical moral traditions are rendered “subservient to political expedience and symbolic displays of power.” This is also how some Muslims would claim justice in inflicting innocent deaths through terrorism, even though Qur’an condemns such unethical acts.²⁴

To conclude, it is expedient to reiterate that Islamic values are not just conceptions to be affirmed but also a life to be led and organized within society. This is what Fazlur Rahman termed as rebuilding society “on a God-conscious, ethical sociopolitical order.”²⁵ According to an early Muslim reformer, Syed Ameer Ali [d. 1928]:

“[Islam] is not a mere creed; it is a life to be lived in the present – a religion of right-doing, right-thinking, and right-speaking, founded on divine love; universal charity, and the equality of man in the sight of the Lord.... The present life is the seed-ground of the future. To work in

all humility of spirit for the human good, to strive with all energy to approach the perfection of the All-Perfect, is the essential of Islam.”²⁶

Syed Ameer Ali was one of the few differing voice within modern Islam that seeks reconciliation with universal humanistic values instead of antagonism between Western and Muslim civilizations.²⁷ After all, is it not a Qur’anic injunction for nations and tribes to know each other and not to despise one another?²⁸

One need not therefore look far or start from a missing tradition. Classical traditions within Islam are abundantly full of moral discourses and ethical conceptions that are both universal and humanistic. The only task ahead is to sieve relevant discourses and reintroduce it within society. This can only be achieved if we realize that Islamic values are never antagonistic and at war with everything around it that are not labelled as properly belonged to the exclusive domain of “Islam”.²⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ See Alfred L. Ivry (tr.), *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics: A Translation of Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi's Treatise "On First Philosophy" (fi al-Falsafah al-Ula)*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974.

² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982. p. 15.

³ See Imam al-Ghazali's *Tabafut al-falasifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)*.

⁴ Constantine K. Zurayk (tr.), *The Refinement of Character: A Translation from the Arabic of Ahmad ibn-Mubammad Miskawayh's Tahdib al-Akhlaq*. Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1968. p.xvii.

⁵ Ibid, p.1

⁶ Ibid; Surah Al-Shams 91:7-10

⁷ Ibid, pp. 25-26

⁸ Cited in Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 1994. p. 123.

⁹ Richard Walzer (tr.), *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State: Abu Nasr al-Farabi's Mabadi' ara' abl al-Madina al-Fadila*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. pp. 231ff.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 247-249

¹¹ Syed Naguib al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism As Understood and Practiced Among the Malays*. Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963. p. 5.

¹² Louis Massignon, cited. *ibid.*, p. 97.

¹³ Cited by Syed Alam Khundmiri, “Distinctive Features of Indian Sufism” in M.T. Ansari (ed.) *Secularism, Islam and Modernity: Selected Essays of Alam Khundmiri*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001.

¹⁴ Nasrollah S. Fatemi, *et al.*, *Love, Beauty, and Harmony in Sufism*. New Jersey: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1978. p. 29.

¹⁵ Cited, *ibid.* p. 30

¹⁶ These tensions were primarily on the nature of *iman* [faith] and the problem of freewill versus predeterminism. See Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997.

¹⁷ Surah Al-Baqarah 2:256.

¹⁸ Sherman A. Jackson (tr.), *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Faysal al-Tafriqa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. pp. 88-89.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 5

²⁰ Ibid, p. 112

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, p. 113

²³ Khaled Abou el-Fadl, “Peaceful Jihad” in Michael Wolfe *et al.* (eds.), *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith*. USA: Rodale Inc. and Beliefnet Inc., 2002. p. 36.

²⁴ Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:32: "Whoever kills a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth (meaning, an innocent man), it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whosoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of mankind."

²⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1999.

²⁶ Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2000. p. 145.

²⁷ In contrast, one can find substantial antagonistic values within the writings of Maududi, Syed Qutb, Maryam Jameelah and Muhammad Asad, to name a few. In one of his popular writings, Muhammad Asad made no excuses of his intention: "It [i.e. his book] does not pretend to be a dispassionate survey of affairs; it is the statement of a case, as I see it: *the case of Islam versus Western civilization*." (*Islam at the Crossroads*. Lahore: SH. Muhammad Ashraf, 1934. p. 6)

²⁸ Surah al-Hujurat 49:13

²⁹ For a comprehensive study of *inclusive* Islam, in oppose to exclusivist interpretation of the religion, see Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.