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ISLAMIC MORAL LIFE AND THREATS TO IT

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ABSTRAK

Islam memahami konsep kehidupan bermoral dalam rangka olah jiwa demi memenuhi syarat menjadi dekat dengan Tuhan, yang transenden. Untuk itu, alih-alih memahami realisasi-diri seseorang sebagai alasan untuk mewujudkan atau selaras dengan hasrat dirinya, sebagaimana telah umum diterima di dunia modern, Islam memandang realisasi diri sebagai hasil dari upaya kontrol diri, dengan mengatasi hasrat aktual dan meningkatkan kehendaknya dalam mewujudkan keselarasan antara aspek psikis (jiwa) --mencakup aktivitas emosional (hati) dan teoritis (nalar)— dan aspek fisik (raga) -- berupa tindakan praktis (aksi). Kondisi yang diperlukan bagi kedua aspek tersebut terumuskan dalam istilah “iman” dan “amal saleh.”

Kata-kata Kunci: ibadah, moralitas (akhlāq) Islam, iman, amal saleh, olah jiwa, subjektifisme, relativisme cultural, keraguan, sektarianisme, ketidakadilan.

ABSTRACT

Islam comprehends the concept of moral life in the term of cultivate of soul to be eligible for drawing near to the transcendent reality, Allah. For that aim, instead of understanding self-realization as permission to submit to one's appetites, as commonly accepted in modern world, Islam considers self-realization as fruit of self-control by transcending his actual desires and improving his will to make a harmony between psychial aspect (soul) --that covers emotional (heart) and theoretical (reason) activity— and physical aspect (body) --i.e. practical activity (action). The required state of both aspect are formulated in the term “faith” (*īmān*) and “righteous deeds” (*‘amal ṣālih*).

Keywords: worship of God (ibādah), Islamic morality (akhlāq), faith (īmān), righteous deeds (‘amal ṣālih), cultivation of soul, subjectivism, cultural relativism, doubt, sectarianism, injustice.

Introduction

One of the main ontological teachings of all Abrahamic religions is that God created the world for a true purpose. He was not simply idling, as He says: "We did not create heaven and the earth and whatever is between them for play. We did not create them except with the truth; but most of them do not know" (Qur'an, 44: 38-9). Surely human kind as part of this world is also created for a true purpose, as God puts it in the Holy Qur'an: "I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me" (51:56).

Indeed, according to the Noble Qur'an the common content of all prophetic messages was the invitation of mankind to this real end of creation: to worship only God. In this point we can refer to some Qur'anic verses, such as: "And we sent Noah to his people; and he said: 'O my people, worship God' " (7:59); "and to 'Ad their brother Hud; he said: 'O my people, worship God! You have no other God besides Him; will you not then be wary of Him?' " (7:65); "and to Thamud their brother Salih; he said: 'O my people, worship God' " (7:73); "and Abraham, when he said to his people: 'Worship God and be wary of Him. That is better for you should you know' " (29:16); "and the Messiah had said: 'O, children of Israel! Worship God my Lord and your Lord' " (5:72). In general God says: "Certainly we raised an apostle in every nation to preach 'worship God and keep away from the rebel' " (16:36). Thus, we can conclude that the purpose of life is to worship God and serve Him.

Usually people take this word to mean the performance of rituals, but it must have a more inclusive meaning. Certainly the end of the creation of mankind is not just the performance of rituals, although they are important elements of that worship.

Mutahari (2014) says:

'Ibādah, or service of the One God and negation of everything else as an object of service and worship, is one of the essential teachings of God-sent apostles—a feature never absent from the teachings of any prophet. As we know, in the sacred religion of Islam, too, worship occupies a preeminent position, with the only difference that worship in Islam is not regarded as a series of devotional rituals separate from everyday life and as pertaining solely to another world. Worship in Islam is located in the context of life and is an unalienable part of the Islamic philosophy of life.

Aside from the fact that some of the Islamic acts of worship are performed collectively, Islam has structured them in such a fashion that their performance automatically ensures the performance of other duties of life. For instance, *ṣalāt* is a complete expression of man's servitude and surrender to God. It has been specified in such a manner that even a man who desires to pray in a lonely corner is forced to observe certain things of moral and social relevance, such as cleanliness, respect for rights of others, observance of punctuality, possession of a sense of direction, control over one's emotions, and expression of good-will and benevolence towards other righteous servants of God.

From the point of view of Islam, every good and beneficial action if performed with a pure, God-seeking intention is viewed as worship. Therefore, learning, acquisition of knowledge and livelihood and social service, if performed for God's sake, are acts of worship. Nevertheless, Islam also specifies a system of rituals and formal acts of worship such as *salat* (prayer), *sawm* (fasting) etc., which have a specific philosophy for performing them.

To discuss the issue correctly we need to understand different levels of human activity or life. All of human activity can be the activity of worship or to the contrary it can be a demonic activity.

Different Levels of Human Activity

The main levels of human activity are three: theoretical, emotional and practical. Each dimension of these levels has its special worship and servitude. The worship of reason or the theoretical dimension is to know the existence of God and contemplate about Him and His glorious signs. The Prophet Muhammad addressing Imam Ali says: “

‘In the competition of worship, if you concentrate on thinking, you will win those who concentrate on performing different forms of good actions such as prayer and fasting” (Ibn Sina 1996, 94). The worship of the heart or the emotive side of the human being is to love God and all of His creatures especially other persons. The worship of the body in general is to do righteous deeds and according to Islamic narrations indeed each part of the body has its special worship. The purpose of the creation to which all the prophets invited us; has an comprehensive content including the acceptance of God, loving Him and doing righteous deeds.

Although I mentioned three levels of worship, reason, emotion and action, in Islamic terms the first two are combined under the concept of faith, so that we find emphasis in numerous verses of the Qur’an on faith and righteous deeds (*īmān wa ‘amal ṣālih*): “By time! Indeed man is at a loss, except those who have faith and do righteous deeds” (103:1-4).

Faith (*īmān*) and Righteous Deeds (*‘Amal Ṣālih*)

There were and still is a controversy about the concept of faith so that some take it as only the theoretical acceptance of God but others include emotional aspect of the heart in it. Even some went further and included bodily

action in it. Faith, even in its broadest sense, including knowledge and love of God, cannot guarantee our salvation and indeed it cannot be alive without doing righteous deeds.

On the other hand some people thought that righteous deeds as an important element of salvation can be performed only by the body and have no relation to the heart. This misconception has been intensified by the manner in which Aristotle’s classification of goods has been understood, for Aristotle puts moral virtues among the goods of the soul but not the body. But in Islamic usage the worship of the body is not merely the corporeal act pertaining to what Aristotle considers a good of the body; rather, righteous deed must be motivated by good intentions and rooted in the good characters of the soul.

The heart has a twofold function in Islamic traditions, regarding both faith and good deeds. The heart raises theoretical acceptance of God to the level of faith, and it makes the bodily performance of certain acts reach the level of righteous deeds. Vicious conduct not only prevents us from reaching happiness but also destroys our faith, So the two dimensions of faith and action are related in this manner, as well. Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam says: “Verily, evil character destroys one’s faith in the same way as vinegar destroys honey (on being mixed with it).”

Thus, there is cooperation between faith and righteous deeds. Faith calls us to the virtues of the soul and to do righteous deeds and in turn virtues of the soul and righteous deeds cultivate our faith and keep it alive. In other words, virtues and righteous deeds are faith’s crust without which its existence is suspended. On the other hand virtues and righteous deeds without faith will have benefits for society, but they will not benefit the donor himself in his

eternal life because without a foundation in faith, righteous deeds will only occasionally be performed and will soon pass without the appropriate justification, so that these deeds will be like flowers that quickly die, they will lose their beauty and perfume.

The best form of life which the Noble Qur'an takes to be the following of Abraham's religion is the combination of faith and righteous deeds. God says: "And who has a better religion than him who submits his will to Allah and at the same time is a virtues person and followed the creeds of Abraham, a real believer *'hanīf*'" (4:125). Indeed Abraham has been taken as God's friend because of his virtuous character and doing righteous deeds with wholehearted faith and submission to God.

It is interesting that the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said: "God did not befriend Abraham except for his feeding people and offering prayers by night while the people were fast asleep." Feeding the poor people is the symbol of righteous deeds in the field of the society and the prayers in the silence of the night is the symbol of the love and remembrance of God, which taken together can save humanity from wretchedness.

So, we can conclude that Islamic moral life is not mere doing good deeds but it needs a good heart and correct reasoning. This is why when a person praised his friend by referring to his prayers and good actions, Imam Sadiq asked about his reason, indicating that the actions would only have worth if they were performed with reason.

Threats to Islamic Moral Life

Although there are voices that can be heard from the depths of the human soul calling

us to faith and righteous deeds, unfortunately demonic voices at the surface levels of human being. His faculties of appetite and irascibility, are more active and call us to the contrary.

It seems that each person has two egos: a false one and a real sublime one; and his soul is the battlefield of a struggle between demonic and sacred tendencies. His will is finally responsible in this struggle. Indeed the real struggle which deserves the name of holy war is a struggle against the lying self. As Mutahhari (2011, 198) says:

Man has a dual "self" in the sense that he has the real and true self and an artificial "self" which is other than the self. And we say "struggle against the self" we mean struggle against the other –than – the –self. We have a "self" which poses as a personal or individual "self". This is the "self" when I say "I"; when I posed myself in relation to other "I's" which I actually negate. It is "I" and not "you". It is to desire something for this "self"; that is for this "self" instead of, and sometimes, against, other "selves". As this "self" of man acquires a personal, individual dimension and is separated from other "selves," it follows that it is related to his other than the "self; that is related to physical and corporeal dimension. But in his innermost being, man has a reality which is the quintessence of his primordial self. The other thing which is felt to be the "self" is actually other than true self. This true "self" is the same thing which is mentioned by the Qur'an (15:28) in this manner:

فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ
سَاجِدِينَ

*"So when I have proportioned
him and breathed into him of My
spirit."*

It is narrated that the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, on seeing the returning armies from the battlefield said: "Blessed are those who have performed the minor Jihad, and

have yet to perform the major one." When he was asked, "what is the major jihad?" The prophet replied: "the jihad of the self (struggle against self)" (Khomaini 2003, 36-57). Imam Ali says that the most courageous person is one who conquers his desires. Hence, the real victory for a person is to win in this sophisticated struggle.

Reference to this victory is found in the Qur'an under the description of the purification of the soul. The Noble Qur'an says: "By the soul and Him who fashioned it, and inspired it with (decrement between) its virtues and vices: one who purifies it is certainly felicitous and one who betrays it certainly fails" (91:7-10).

Misconception of Ethics in Contrast to *Akhlāq*

Akhlāq is the Arabic and Persian word for 'ethics' and 'morality'. It is a plural form of an Arabic word *khuluq* or *khulq*, 'disposition'. The word refers to a human unobservable and inward form, which is also termed *ṣirāt* 'character', in contrast to *ṣūrat* (face, outward form). Technically, *khulq* is a psychical quality (*malakah*), which causes an act to take place in accord with it, without thinking and easily. The forces of these dispositions are such that they are called a second nature, '*fiṭrat thāniyah*'.

Due to the technical meaning of *khulq* in the definitions formulated in the works of Muslim moral philosophers, the principal attention has centered on *khulqiyāt* 'dispositions', *malikāt* 'psychical qualities', and distinguishing good from evil, regardless of the act per se (Tusi 1964, 74). The moral status of an act is to be determined derivatively and by reference to its origin in the soul. For example, if an action is done because of courage, it will be a good act; and if it is done out of fear, it will be a bad act. This conception of *akhlāq*, which

takes its final end as the purification of the soul, is comparable to the science of medicine, which takes its final end as the purification of the body and its health. So, we have a tradition of spiritual medicine alongside physical medicine. Some of the ethical books in Islamic literature have been given titles that make allusion to this pairing of ethics and medicine. Thus, the task of ethics is to know the health and illness of the soul, and also to find the cure and finally to offer prescriptions for the sick (Javadi 2008, 215-27). The assumption is that if a person's soul becomes healthy, then all of its fruits, namely the actions for which this soul is the agent will be good, and finally, the agent's worldly life will be appropriate and his afterlife hopefully will be felicitous. The late Shahīd Mutahharī (n.d.) says: "*Akhlāq* is related to the individual himself; it is about the way a person manages his natural impulses and instincts. In other words, ethics is how a person makes himself" (185).

Although there have always been people who denied the necessity of self-control, and emphasized the pursuit of their desires, they have been criticized as immoral. However, in the modern world we find those who seek to justify and approve of the pursuit of desires to give them a moral standing on the basis of ethical theories, such as some forms of subjectivism and cultural relativism. Under the influence of these developments, instead of showing the importance of self-control and the training of rational discipline, ethics has misinterpreted self-realization as permission to submit to one's appetites.

Unfortunately, we are living in an age in which it is difficult even to speak of controlling our desires in accord with reason and revelation. Indeed, it is commonly accepted that we not only have no duty to restrict our desires in accord with reason or religion, but,

to the contrary, many believe that our duties are established through the coordination of our desires. Contrary to a long tradition of perennial wisdom, our modern culture teaches us that reason is only the slave of our desires; we must take our desires as a guide in the life; we must not think about the goodness or badness of desires, but only think about how we can satisfy them (Macintyre 2007, chap. 2 and 3).

This conception of ethics is not only in contradiction with Islamic conceptions of morality or *akhlāq*, as well as other forms of religious ethics, but it is also contrary to the ethics of classical philosophical traditions as found in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and many others. The abandonment of self-discipline to desire is also contrary to many modern theories of ethics, such as those of Kant and Hegel, and others. According to Islamic teachings goodness and badness of an action or character cannot be related to the desires of the individuals or society, as claimed by proponents of subjectivism and cultural relativism in the West. God says in the Qur'an: "Yet it may be that you dislike something while it is good for you, and it may be that you love something while it is bad for you, and Allah knows and you do not know" (2:216).

Morality cannot be based on the human will and cannot be limited to the realm of human desires and will, no matter what they happen to be. Instead, it aims at transcending his actual desires and improving his will. Sometimes human desires are not in accordance with real happiness and perfection. God says in the Qur'an: "Is someone the evil of whose conduct is presented as decorous to him, so he regards it as good, like one who is truly virtuous? Indeed Allah leads astray whomever He wishes, and guide whomever He wishes" (35:8).

We can conclude that the cornerstone of

Islamic ethics is to purify the soul and cultivate its desires and needs to be eligible for drawing near to Allah. This begins from faith and goes through the heart to the action. Although faith is discussed in theology and action is discussed in *fiqh* and the heart is discussed in mysticism, Islamic conceptions of *akhlāq* cover all three stages. Faith, action, and the states of the heart must all be coordinated in an ethical life as described in the treatises on *akhlāq*.

For each of these three stages, the key feature will be discussed below, for if we are to revive the idea of *akhlāq* in its Islamic form and present this as an alternative to the ethics or lack thereof that dominates modern societies, we must show how an Islamic ethics can provide guidance for the development of faith, the direction of our actions, and the cultivation of the states of the heart.

The Loss of Certainty

Faith cannot be alive without certainty and as soon as doubt begins to grow faith will go away. To grow the tree of faith in the soil of the heart we need to water it with certainty. Imam Ali provides a good analogy to explain the role of certainty in relation to faith. He takes faith as a city and certainty as its walls. The city is safe as long as its walls are in good shape. As soon as the walls of a city are damaged, the city itself will be subject to damage. Describing the barbarism of pre-Islamic times, he mentions that the walls of certainty in that society were disturbed and their religious life undermined. He explicitly asserts, "Doubt foils the faith" (Khonsari 1994, note 773). Doubt fights against faith so we must keep our faith at a distance from doubt. According to Imam Ali, certainty is not only the root of faith but also is its guard against dangers. No doubt the enemy to

certainty directly challenges faith and the life of servitude. Unfortunately, the spread and depth of skepticism concerning religious matters today is not comparable to any other times.

Before discussing this matter I must mention that doubt per se is not a threat to faith, but to the contrary it sometimes improves our understanding of religion. Imam Ali himself was engaged in a religious battle when suddenly one of his enemies raised a doubt about the existence of God. His people became angry, but Imam began to prove God's existence and told his people that we are fighting only to provide good conditions for keeping the faith.

What is dangerous is to live in doubt, not to make doubt a means to arrive at certainty, because doubt can be a way of improving certainty. We can say that doubt is a good road, not a good house to rest in. In explaining the danger of doubt, Imam 'Ali says: "Who doubts much, his faith will be corrupted" (Khonsari 1994, note 7997) and "Continuing to doubt will result in the denial of faith" (note 4272). The problem in our modern world is that we are living in doubt and sometimes we are told that certainty is the sign of simple mindedness, while doubt is a sign of sophistication.

Spread of Hate and Sectarianism

People of faith, drunk with their love for Allah, look at all creatures of Allah through the eyes of mercy and love. From among all creatures, man has a distinguished status, for he is made by Allah in the best form (Qur'an, 4:96), and he is made His vicegerent on the earth (30:2) so as to undertake the divine trust (72:33). A faithful man who loves Allah will definitely love and respect man who is His vicegerent. The love of the faithful for man is not merely dependent on social needs, as Aristotle said, but rather it

depends on love for Allah. How can a man whose heart is replete with love for Allah hate or hold a grudge against a man? Accordingly, Islamic traditions, particularly the Shi'ite hadiths, have repeatedly suggested that living in a religious manner is nothing but loving for the sake of Allah. "Religion is naught but love."

Many traditions have talked of the significance of good humor and treatment, and even holy Prophet Muhammad introduced the completion of ethical virtues as the only aim of his prophetic mission: "I was merely sent down to complete ethical virtues." Evidently, the origin and context of the ethical virtues are naught but the love for human beings.

There is no doubt, nonetheless, that a real faith in Allah necessitates a love for men, rather all creatures of Allah. Therefore, wherever there is vengeance against or hatred for somebody or there is murder or violation of people's rights, whether of property or of honor, the light of faith is dead there and the germs of atheism have grown up instead.

Injustice and Indifference

Poverty, injustice, and racial discrimination always were and still are among the most important elements that pave the way to the denial of the messages of Allah. This is the reason for the hard work and ongoing struggles of the prophets against poverty, injustice and all kinds of discrimination throughout history. The revival of religious life in a secular modern world must follow the same way, and not be limited to verbal declaration and academic theological and philosophical discussions among scholars. Our revival will only be successful if we join the struggle of the oppressed against injustice, poverty and inequality. The Bible says, "Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord

delivers them in the day of trouble" (41:1). Imam 'Ali says, "I would not have become engaged in politics and would have abandoned the reins of the caliphate if it had not been for the fact that Allah requires the scholars not to accept the satisfaction of the oppressors with the hunger of the oppressed" (*Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon 3).

Conclusion

Islam considers moral life as demanding on co-relation between faith (*īmān*) which combines the state of heart and reason, and righteous deed (*'amal ṣālih*) as two complementary aspects, in which the second originated from the first and the first is more fundamental than the second as it's manifestation. Hence, one's voluntary actions would not be seen as having good moral value without considering his or her situation of heart and the correctness in his or her reasoning concerning that action. But, on the other hand, the moral status of a person could not be acquired merely according to the condition of his or her faith (good situation of his or her heart and reason) without considering his or her effort to execute it in a real action in the form of righteous deeds. The harmony and cooperation of these things in a person will determine the his or her moral level. The moral status of a faithful person who has virtue in his or her heart and attempts to make it real in through an action but being accompanied by a false reasoning or confused understanding will be different to the moral status of another person who is good in heart, real in action with a correct reasoning or good understanding concerning virtue. Sectarianism, violence on behalf of the Truth or religion, being injustice or indifferent to other human being who has

difference religion can be of the examples of the first mentioned person, while being kind, lovely, tolerant or compassionate to the other can be of the consequences of the last mentioned kind of person. Due to the difference in just one of the two fundamental aspects, i.e., their reason, so even though even though if both person are trying hard to bring what they see as virtue in real actions, but their moral state and level are different, likewise, the real consequences of their action will also be different. Therefore, Islam considers the heart, reason and action as indivisible part of one's moral life.

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