

## The Moral System of Islam

Moral sense is inborn in man and through the ages it has served as the common man's standard of moral behavior, approving certain qualities and disapproving others. While this instinctive faculty may vary from person to person, human conscience has given a more or less uniform verdict in favor of certain moral qualities as being good and declared certain others as bad. On the side of moral virtues, justice, courage, bravery and truthfulness have always elicited praise. History does not record any period worth the name in which falsehood, injustice, dishonesty, and breach of trust may have been upheld.

Fellow-feeling, compassion, fidelity, and magnanimity have always been valued while selfishness, cruelty, miserliness and bigotry have never received the approval of the human society; men have always appreciated perseverance, determination and courage and have never approved of impatience, fickle-mindedness, cowardice and imbecility. Dignity, restraint, politeness, and amiability have throughout the ages been counted among virtues, whereas snobbery, misbehavior and rudeness have never found recognition as good moral qualities.

Persons having a sense of responsibility and devotion to duty have always won the highest regard of men; never have people who are incompetent, slothful and lacking in sense of duty been looked upon with approval. Similarly, in respect of the standard of good and bad in the collective behavior of society as a whole, the verdict has always been almost unanimous. Only that society has been looked upon as worthy or honor and respect which possesses the virtues of organization, discipline, mutual affection and fellow feeling and has established a social order based on justice, freedom and equality of men.

As opposed to this, disorganization, no-discipline, anarchy, disunity, injustice and social imbalance have always been considered as manifestations of decay and disintegration in a society. Robbery, murder, larceny, adultery, fraud and graft have always been condemned. Slandering, scandal mongering and blackmailing has never been considered as wholesome social activities.

Contrary to this service and care of the aged, help of one's kith and kin, regard for neighbors, loyalty to friends, assistance of the weak, the destitute and the orphans, and nursing the sick are qualities which have always been highly valued ever since the dawn of civilization. Virtuous, polite, mild and sincere persons have always been welcomed. Individual who are upright, honest, sincere, outspoken and

dependable, whose needs conform to their words, who are content with their own rightful possession, who are prompt in the discharge of their obligations to others, who live in peace and let others live in peace and from whom nothing but good can be expected, have always formed the core of any healthy human society.

This shows that human moral standards are in fact universal and have been well-known to mankind throughout the ages. Good and evil are not myths to be hunted out. They are well-known realities and are equally well-understood by all. The sense of good and evil is inherent in the very nature of man. Hence, in the terminology of the Qur'an virtue is called "Ma'roof" (something to be announced) and evil is designated as "Munkar" (something to be denounced); that is to say virtue is known to be desirable for everyone and evil is not known to commend itself in any way. This fact is mentioned by the Qur'an when it says:

***"And (Allah gave to the Soul) its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right..." (Quran, 91:8)***

## Why Differences?

The questions that arise are: if the basic values of good and evil have been so well-known and there has virtually been a universal agreement thereon, then why do varying patterns of moral behavior exist in this world? Why are there so many and do conflicting moral philosophies? Why do certain moral standards contradict each other? What lies at the root of their difference? What is the unique position of Islam in the context of the prevailing ethical systems? On what grounds can we claim that Islam has a perfect moral system? And what exactly is the distinctive contribution of Islam in the realm of ethics? These questions are important and must be squarely faced; but justice cannot be done to them on the brief span of this talk.

To cut a long story short, I shall briefly sum up some of those important points which strike us at the very outset when we undertake a critical examination of the contemporary ethical systems and the conflicting patterns of moral behavior.

- a) The present moral system fails to integrate various moral virtues and norms by prescribing their specific limits and utility and assigning to them their proper place. That is why they fail to provide a balanced and coherent plan of social conduct.
- b) The real cause of their differences seems to lie in the moral systems offering different standards for good and bad actions and enunciating different means of distinguishing good from evil. Differences also exist in respect of the sanction behind the moral law and in regard to the motives which impel a person to follow it.
- c) On deeper reflection, we find that the grounds for these differences emerge from different peoples conflicting views and concepts about the universe, the place of man in the universe, and the purpose of

man on the earth. Various theories of ethics, philosophy and religion are but a record of the vast divergence of views of mankind on these most vital questions, viz. Is there a God and a Sovereign of the universe and if there is, is He One or are there many gods? What are Divine Attributes? What is the nature of the relationship between God and the human beings? Has God made any arrangements for guiding humanity through the rough and tumble of life or not? Is man answerable to God or not? If he is, then what are the matters for which he is to be answerable? What is the ultimate aim of man's creation which he should keep in view throughout his life? Answers to these questions will determine the way of life, the ethical philosophy and the pattern of moral behavior of the individual and the society.

It is difficult for me in this brief talk to take stock of the various ethical systems prevalent in the world, indicate what solutions each one of them has proposed to these questions and what has been the impact of these answers on the moral evolution of the society believing in these concepts. Here I can confine myself to the Islamic concept only and this I shall try to propound.

## **Islamic Concept of Life and Morality**

The viewpoint of Islam, however, is that this universe is the creation of God Who is One. He created it and He alone is its unrivaled Master, Sovereign and Sustainer. The whole universe is functioning under His Divine Command. He is All-Wise, All-Powerful and Omniscient. He is Subbooh and Quddoos that is, free from all defects, mistakes, weaknesses and faults and pure in every respect). His God-hood is free from partiality and injustice. Man is His creature, subject and servant and is born to serve and obey Him.

The correct way of life for man is to live in complete obedience to Him. It is not for man to determine the mode of worship and obedience; it is for God to decide this. God, being the master, has raised from time to time prophets for the guidance of humanity and has revealed His books through them. It is the duty of man to take the code of his life from these sources of divine guidance. Man is answerable to God for all his actions in life. The time for rendering an account will be in the life-hereafter and not in this world.

The short span of worldly life is really an opportunity to prepare for that great test. In this life all efforts of man should be centered on the object of soliciting the Pleasure and Blessings of God in the Hereafter. During this test every person is responsible for all his beliefs and actions. He, with all his faculties and potentialities, is on trial. There will be an impartial assessment of his conduct in life. By a Being Who keeps a complete and correct record not merely of his movements and actions and their influence on all that is in the world from the tiniest speck of dust to the loftiest mountains but also a full record of his innermost ideas and feelings and intentions.

## **Goal of Moral Striving**

This is Islam's fundamental attitude towards life. This concept of the universe and of man's place therein determines the real and ultimate goal which should be the object of all the endeavors of mankind and

which may be termed briefly as “seeking the pleasure of God”. This is the standard by which a particular mode of conduct is judged and classified as good or bad. This standard of judgment provides the nucleus around which the whole moral conduct should revolve. Man is not left like a ship without moorings, being tossed about by the blows of wind and tides.

This dispensation places a central object before mankind and lays down values and norms for all moral actions. It provides us with a stable and flawless set of values which remains unaltered under all circumstances. Moreover, with making the “pleasure of God” as the object of man’s life, a highest and noblest objective is set before humanity, and thus, unlimited possibilities are opened for man’s moral evolution, unstained at any stage by any shadow of narrow selfishness or bigoted race or nation worship.

While providing a normal standard Islam also furnishes us with means of determining good and evil conduct. It does not base our knowledge of vice and virtue on mere intellect, desire, intuition, or experience derived through the sense-organs, which constantly undergo shifts, modifications and alterations and do not provide definite, categorical and unchanging standards of morality. It provides us with a definite source, the Divine Revelation, as embodied in the Book of God and the Sunnah way of life of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him).

This source prescribes a standard or moral conduct that is permanent and universal and holds good in every age and under all circumstances. The moral code of Islam covers the smallest details of domestic life as well as the broad aspects of national and international behavior. It guides us in every stage of life. These regulations imply the widest application of moral principles in the affairs of our life and make us free from exclusive dependence on any other source of knowledge, except as an aid to this primary source.

## **Sanction Behind Morality**

This concept of the universe and of man’s place therein also furnishes the sanction that must lie at the back of every moral law. Viz., the love and fear of God, the sense of accountability on the Day of Judgment and the promise of eternal bliss and reward in the life hereafter. Although Islam wants to cultivate a powerful and strong mass opinion, which may induce individuals and groups to abide by the principles of morality laid by it and also aims at the evolution of a political system which would enforce the moral law, as far as possible, through its legislative and executive power. Islam’s moral law does not really depend on these external pressures alone. It relies upon the inherent urge for good in every man which is derived from belief in God and a Day of Judgment.

Before laying down any moral injunction, Islam seeks to firmly implant in man’s heart the conviction that his dealings are with God Who sees him at all times and in all places. That he may hide himself from the whole world but not from Him. That he may deceive everyone but cannot deceive God. That he can flee from the clutches of anyone else but not from God’s. That while the world can see man’s

onward life, only God probes into his innermost intentions and desires, that while he may, in his short sojourn on this earth, do whatever he likes but in any event he has to die one day and present himself before the Divine court of justice where no advocacy, favor, recommendation, misrepresentation, deception or fraud will be of any avail and where his future will be decided with complete impartiality and justice.

There may or may not be any police, law court or jail in the world to enforce the observance of these moral injunctions and regulations but this belief firmly rooted in the heart, is the real force at the back of the moral law of Islam which helps in getting it enforced. If popular opinion and the coercive powers of the state exist to give it support so much the better; otherwise, this faith alone can keep a Muslim individual and a Muslim community on the straight path of virtue, provided, the spark of genuine faith dwells in their hearts.

## **Motives and Incentives**

This concept of Islam about man and his place in the universe also provides those motivating forces which can inspire a person to act in conformity with the moral law. The fact, that a man voluntarily and willingly accepts God as his own Creator, and the obedience to God as the mode of his life and strives to seek His Pleasure in his every action, provides a sufficient incentive to enable him to obey the commandments which he believes to be from God. Along with this, the belief in the Day of Judgment and the belief that whosoever obeys Divine Commands is sure to have a good life in the Hereafter, the Eternal Life, whatever difficulties and handicaps he may have to face in this transitory phase of life, provides a strong incentive for virtuous life.

On the other hand, the belief that whoever violates the Commandments of God in this world and dies in a state of Kufr (unbelief) shall have to bear eternal punishment however superficially nice a life he may have led in this temporary abode is an effective deterrent against violation of moral law. If this hope and fear are firmly ingrained, and deeply rooted in one's heart, they will provide a strong motive-force to inspire one to virtuous deeds even on occasions when worldly consequences may appear to be very damaging and harmful, and it will keep one away from evil even on occasions when it looks extremely attractive and profitable.

This clearly indicates that Islam possesses a distinctive criterion of good and evil, its own source of moral law, and its own sanction and motive force, and by them its virtues in all spheres of life after knitting them into a balanced and comprehensive plan. Thus, it can be justifiably claimed that Islam possesses a perfect moral system of its own. This system has many distinguishing features and I shall refer to the three most significant ones which, in my opinion, can be termed its special contributions to ethics.

## Distinctive Features of Islamic Moral Order

By setting Divine pleasure as the objective of man's life, it has furnished the highest possible standard of morality. This is bound to provide limitless avenues for the moral revolution of humanity. By making Divine Revelation the primary source of knowledge, it gives permanence and stability to the moral standards which afford reasonable scope for genuine adjustment, adaptations and innovations though not for perversions, wild variations, atomistic relativism or moral fluidity. It provides a sanction to morality in the love the fear of God which will impel man to obey the moral law even without any external pressure. Through belief in God and the Day of Judgment, it furnishes a motive force which enables a person to adopt the moral conduct with earnestness and sincerity, with all the devotion of heart and soul.

It does not, through a false sense of originality and innovation, provide any novel moral virtues nor does it seek to minimize the importance of the well-known moral norms nor give exaggerated importance to some and neglect others without cause. It takes up all the commonly known moral virtues and with a sense of balance and proportion it assigns a suitable place and function to each one of them in the total plan of life. It widens the scope of their application to cover every aspect of man's individual and collective life his domestic associations, his civic conduct, and his activities in the political, economic, legal educational and social realms. It covers his life from home to society, from the dining table to the battlefield and peace conferences, literally from the cradle to the grave. In short, no sphere of life is exempt from the universal and comprehensive application of the moral principles of Islam. It makes morality reign supreme and ensures that the affairs of life, instead of being dominated by selfish desires and petty interests, should be regulated by the norms of morality.

It stipulates for man a system of life which is based on all good and is free from all evil. It invokes the people, not only to practice virtue, but also to establish virtue and eradicate vice, to bid good and to forbid wrong. It wants that the verdict of conscience should prevail and virtue must not be subdued to play second fiddle to evil. Those who have responded to this call and gathered together into a community (Ummah) are given the name "Muslim" and the singular object underlying the formation of this community (Ummah) is that it should make an organized effort to establish and enforce goodness and suppress and eradicate evil. The Qur'an is quite explicit on this fact as can be seen from the following verse:

***"Ye are the best for Peoples, evolved for mankind, En-joining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, And believing in God. If only the People of the Book had faith, it were best for them: among them Are some who have faith, But most of them Are perverted transgressors." (Qur'an, 3:1 10)***

And also in the following verse:

***"(They are) those who, If we establish them In the land, establish Regular prayer and give regular charity, enjoin the right and forbid wrong: With God rests the end (And decision) of (all) affairs."***

**(Qur'an, 22:41)**

It will be a day of mourning for the community and a bad day for the entire world if the efforts of this very community were at any time directed towards establishing evil and suppressing good.

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