

The Spiritual System of Islam

What is the spiritual system of Islam and what is its relation with the system of life as a whole?

To understand this, it is necessary to carefully study the difference between the Islamic concept of spirituality and that of other religions and ideologies. In the absence of a clear understanding of this difference, it often happens that when talking about the spiritual system of Islam, many of the vague notions associated with the word “spiritual” unconsciously come to one’s mind, and in this state of confusion, it becomes difficult for one to comprehend the spiritual system of Islam which is not only transcends the duality of spirit and matter but is the nucleus of the integrated and unified concept of life presented by Islam.

Body – Soul Conflict

The idea which has been most influential in making the climate of thought in philosophy and religion is that body and soul are mutually antagonistic and conflicting and hence, they cannot go together in life, and one can develop only at the cost of the other. For the soul, the confines of body and matter are a prison-house; the mundane activities of worldly life are the shackles with which the soul is kept in bondage and its growth is arrested. Man has inevitably led to the well-known concept of classifying the universe into the spiritual and the secular. Those who chose the secular path were convinced, at the very outset, that the demands of spirituality could not be complied with, and thus, went headlong into a sensate outlook in life culminating in stark materialism and hedonism.

Consequently, all spheres of worldly activities may they be social, political, economic or cultural were deprived of the light of spirituality and the world was smitten with injustice and tyranny. On the other hand, those who wanted to tread the path of spiritual excellence innovated such ways and devices for the development and elevation of the spirit, as to make them “noble outcasts” in this world.

They believed that it was not possible to find any process for spiritual growth which might be compatible with a normal life in this world. In their view, physical self-denial and mortification’s of the flesh were necessary for developing and perfecting the spirit. They invented spiritual exercises and their ascetic practices which would kill one’s physical desires and render the body senseless and even useless.

They regarded forests, mountains and other solitary places, as ideal places for spiritual development because in those hideouts the hustle and bustle of civilization would not interfere in their spiritual practices and nose-gazing meditations. They could not conceive of the feasibility of any means of spiritual development except by withdrawing themselves from the world and its affairs and severing all contacts with society and civilization.

This conflict of body and soul resulted in the evolution of two different ideals for the perfection of man. One of the ideals was of material perfection, which meant that a man should be surrounded by all the material comforts and bounties of the world and regard himself as nothing but an animal, the ideal being the seek dizzy heights in this realm. The result was that he could exceed as an animal but the man in him could not seek its flowering. Men learned to fly like birds, swim like crocodile, and run like horses and even terrorize and destroy like wolves – but to live like noble human beings they learned not.

The other ideal was of the perfection of spiritual life to an extent that the senses are not only subdued and conquered but supra sensory powers are awakened and the limitations of the sensory world are done away with. With these new conquests men could distant voices like powerful wireless sets, see remote objects as one does with the telescope and develop powers through which the mere touch of their hand or focus of their sight may heal the un-healable. This supra sensory field has been the other avenue of human advancement, but how throbbing human this really is not difficult to visualize!

The Islamic viewpoint differs radically from that of all the prevailing religious and philosophical systems in this regard. According to Islam, God has appointed man as his "Khalifah" (trustee) in the universe. He has invested him with certain authority and laid upon him certain responsibilities and obligations for the fulfillment of which He has endowed him with the best and most suitable physical frame. The body has been created with the sole object that the soul should make use of it in the exercise of its authority and the fulfillment of its duties and responsibilities.

Hence, the body is not a prison house for the soul but its workshop or factory, and if there is any possibility for the growth and development of the soul, it is only through the use of the power machines and instruments provided by this workshop.

Consequently, this world is not a place of punishment in which the human soul has been confined somehow but is a field in which God has sent him to work and do his duty toward Him. Innumerable things in this universe have been placed at the disposal of the human soul and many more human beings endowed with it have been created in this world to fulfill the duties of this very vicegerent. The natural urges of man have given birth to civilization, culture, and social systems. The spiritual development which is possible in this world should not take the form of man turning his face from the workshop and retiring in some uninhabited corner.

Rather, the only form it should take is that man should live and work in it and give the best account of himself. It is in the nature of an examination center for him; every aspect and sphere of life is, as it were,

like a question paper in this test; the home, the family, the neighborhood, the society, the Market place, the office, the factory, the school, the law courts, the police station, the parliament, the peace conference and the battlefield, all represent 'question papers' on different subjects which man has been called upon to answer.

If he does not take any question paper, or leaves most of the answer books blank, he is bound to fail in the examination. The only possibility of such and development would lie in man's spending his whole time and giving his whole attention to this examination and to attempt as far as possible to answer all the question papers handed over to him.

Islam rejects and condemns the asceticism of life, and proposes a set of methods and processes for the spiritual development of man not outside this world but inside it, one that passes through the rough and tumble of life. According to it the real place for the growth, uplift and elevation of the spirit lies right in the midstream of the activity of life and not in solitary places of spiritual hibernation.

Criterion for Moral Development

After this exposition of the basic approach of Islam let us try to discuss the criterion given by Islam to judge the development of decay of the soul. The answer to this question lies in the concept of Khilafat which has just been mentioned. In capacity as the Khalifah (Servant) of God, man is answerable to Him for all his activities. It is his duty to use the powers with which he is invested and all the means placed at his disposal in this world, in accordance with the Divine Will. He should utilize to the fullest extent all the faculties and potentialities bestowed upon him for seeking the approbation of God. In his dealings with other human beings he should adopt an attitude which is approved by God. In brief, all his efforts and energies should be directed towards regulating the affairs of this world in the manner in which God wants them to be regulated. The more admirably a man performs this function, with a sense of responsibility, obedience and humility, and with the object of seeking the pleasure of God, the nearer he will be to God. In Islam, spiritual development is synonymous with nearness to God.

Likewise, he will remain away from God if he is lazy, slothful, transgressor, rebellious and disobedient. And being away from God signifies, in Islam, the spiritual fall and decay of man. This explanation should make it clear that from the Islamic point of view the sphere of activity of a religious-minded man and of a secular-minded man is the same. Both will work in the same field of action; rather a man of religion will work with greater enthusiasm than a secular minded person.

The man of religion will be as active as the seeker after the world or indeed much more active, in the domestic and social functions of life which extend from the confines of the household to the market square or the venue of international conferences. Of course, what will distinguish their course of action will be the nature of their relations with God and the objective which they pursue.

Whatever a religious man does, will be with the feeling that he is answerable to God, with the object of

securing Divine Pleasure, and in accordance with the Law which God has ordained for him. As against this, a worldly person will be irresponsible, indifferent towards God and will be guided only by his personal motives in his actions. This difference makes the whole of the material life of a man of religion a thoroughly spiritual venture and the whole of the life of a worldly person devoid of the spark of spirituality.

Road to Spirituality

Now, we are in a position to briefly understand the road which Islam chalks out for the pursuit of spiritual development of man in the context of the mundane life in this world.

The first step in this direction is Iman (faith). It means that the idea which should hold supreme in the mind and heart of a man is that God alone is his Master, Sovereign and Deity; seeking His Pleasure is the aim of all his endeavors; and His Commands alone constitute the law of his life. This should be his firm conviction, not merely cognition of the intellect, but also of the will. The stronger and deeper this conviction, the more profound the faith will be, and it will enable man to tread the path of spiritual development with patience and steadfastness and face all the vicissitudes firmly and squarely.

The second stage is of Ita'at (obedience) meaning that a man divests himself of his independence altogether, and accepts subservience to God in practice after having proclaimed faith in Him as his creed. The subservience is called Islam (obedience) in the language of the Qur'an. Thus, it means that man should not only acknowledge God as his Lord and Sovereign but should actually submit before Him and fashion his entire life in obedience to the Lord.

The third stage is that of Taqwa (piety) which consists in the practical manifestation of the faith in God in the mode of daily life.

Taqwa (piety) also consists in desisting from everything which God has forbidden or even that which he disapproves even slightly, in a readiness to undertake all that God has commanded and in observing the distinction between lawful and unlawful, right and wrong, and good and bad in life.

The last and the highest stage is that of Ihsan, (benediction) which signifies that man has identified his will with the Will of God. And has brought it, at least as far as he is concerned, completely in tune with the Divine Will, with the result that he has begun to like what is liked by the Lord and to abhor what is disapproved by Him. Man should then, not only himself avoid the evils which God does not like to spread on His earth, but should use all his power and energy to wipe them off the face of earth; and he should not merely rest content with adorning himself with the virtues which God desires to flourish, but should also strive to establish and propagate them in the world even at the cost of his life. A man who reaches this state attains the highest pinnacle of spirituality and is nearest to God.

This path of spiritual development is not meant for individuals only but for the communities and nations

as well. Like individuals, community also, after passing through the various stages of spiritual elevation, may reach the ultimate stage of Ihsan (benediction), and also a state with all its administrative machinery may become Mu'min (faithful), Muslim (obedient), Muttaqi (pious) and Muhsin (beneficent). In fact, the ideals aimed by Islam are achieved in a perfect manner only when the whole community moves on this path and a Muttaqi and Muhsin (pious and beneficent) state comes into existence in this world.

That is the acme of civilization where virtue reigns in society and vice is subdued.

Let us now cast a glance at the mechanism of spiritual training which Islam has laid down for preparing individuals and society for this purpose.

The spiritual system of Islam rests on four fundamentals. The first is prayer (Salat) which brings man into communion with God five times a day, reviving His remembrance, reiterating His fear, developing His love, reminding man of the Divine Commands again and again, and thus, preparing him for obedience to God. These prayers are not to be offered individually but it is obligatory to offer them in congregation so that the whole community and the society may be prepared for this process of spiritual development. It is a tool of individual as well as social training in the path of spiritual elevation in Islam.

The second is Zakat which develops the sense of monetary sacrifice, sympathy and cooperation among Muslims. There are people who wrongly interpret Zakat as a mere tax, although the spirit underlying Zakat is entirely different from that which lies at the root of a tax. The real meaning of Zakat is sublimity and purification. By using this word, Islam desires to impress on man the real value of Zakat which is inspired by a true love of God, that the monetary help he renders to his brethren will in fact, purify and benefit his soul.

The third is fasting (Saum) which for a full month every year, trains a man individually and the Muslim community as a whole, in piety and self-restraint. Enables the society, the rich and the poor alike, to experience the pangs of hunger, and prepares the people to undergo any hardship to seek the pleasure of God.

The fourth is Hajj (Pilgrimage) which aims at fostering universal brotherhood of the faithful as the basis of worship of God, and has culminated in a movement which has been answering the call of truth throughout the centuries and will, God willing, go on answering this call till eternity.

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