

Indicators of Piety, Part 2

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This paper is the second part of a series of seven lessons by the author in London, at the Islamic Centre of England in July 2011. This course was an attempt to explore the essence of faith and piety, and moral values on which faith and piety are based.

Abstract

What are the indicators of piety? And how can we guarantee that we are heading in the right direction in our spiritual journey? This series elucidates the merits and consequences of piety as seen in the Qur'an, hadith, and the lives of the Ahlul Bayt, and introduces indicators by which one can examine one's own piety or, if needed, others' piety. Indeed, piety is one of the most important concepts in the Qur'an by which people are ranked before God as it goes beyond the actions of the body, and is related to the intention behind all actions. In the previous part, the merits of piety (taqwa) according to the Qur'an were studied. In this part, the definition of piety will be explored along with the factors that contribute to its formation.

Piety in Hadiths

According to the teachings of the Prophet and Ahlul Bayt which echo the teachings of the Qur'an, piety is required for happiness in this world and the hereafter.

Here we refer to some hadiths about the significance of piety. Imam Ali said:

ألتقى رئيس الأخلاق

Piety is the master of all traits of character. [1](#)

إن التقوى أفضل كنز وأحرز حرز وأعز عز

Taqwa is the best treasure, the most protective protection, and the most dignified dignity.[2](#)

Some only seek worldly treasures, although we should seek taqwa which brings richness, protection, and honour.

Imam Ali also said:

إن تقوى الله منتهى رضى الله من عباده وحاجته من خلقه

Truly piety is the ultimate and most pleasing thing that God wants from His servants.[3](#)

God does not expect us to be like angels or among those who are near to Him (muqarrabun). He expects from us that which is manageable according to our capacity and situation and can put us in the right position with Him and His creation. He expects from us to be pious, a great quality through which we can ascend to higher levels of perfection and become one of muqarrabun.

Imam Ali also said:

أوصيكم عباد الله بتقوى الله

O servants of God! I advise you to have piety.[4](#)

Let your heart experience piety. It is not something that you can say with words or even show in your actions. Piety is not just performing prayers, giving alms, or any other act of worship though they are all important. However, just by seeing one performing prayer we cannot talk about one's piety. Piety goes beyond the actions of the body. It has to do with the heart, with the intention behind actions. This makes it difficult to evaluate it. We do not even know exactly what is in our heart let alone the heart of others. This is why we are not able and not supposed to judge people's level of piety.

After the above phrase, Imam Ali talks about piety and then he says:

أوصيكم عباد الله بتقوى الله

Let it (piety) reach your heart.[5](#)

The Arabic verb used here is ash'iruha from the same root as sha'r (hair). This literally means let it touch your skin like your hair so that there would be no distance. Now this phrase becomes even more

meaningful that one should let piety reach one's heart. It's not an outfit; rather it is something that must touch your heart.

It is due to this close relation between piety and the heart that it can have healing effects on the heart. Imam Ali said:

إن تقوى الله دواء داء قلوبكم، وبصر عمى أفئدتكم، وشفاء مرض أجسادكم، وصلاح فساد صدوركم، وطهور دنس أنفسكم

Truly piety is the medicine for the illness of your heart, the sight of your blind hearts, the cure of your ill bodies, the fix for your spoiled chests and the purity for the dirt of your souls.[6](#)

Piety can even cure physical illnesses. There are many illnesses nowadays whose causes are unknown, such as different anxieties or panic disorders. A person who has equipped himself with piety and has put his trust in God will not be influenced greatly by the ups and downs of this world, the fluctuating rate of currencies. Therefore, they are less harmed by such anxiety disorders. One of the good qualities of the children that is even mentioned in the hadiths is that they can detach themselves easily. For example, they can spend hours to make a sand castle only to ruin it in few minutes. A pious believer should see the world with the same mind-set, that it is only a game, a game not worth worrying for.

Piety in the Quran

It can be said that piety is one of the most important concept in the Qur'an and the criterion by which people are ranked before God. In the Quran chapter Hujurat, verse number 13 we read:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most pious among you. (49: 13)

In this verse, God explains how our differences are there so that we get to know one another and become interested in the lives of others. They are by no means values based on which we can evaluate others. At this point, God introduces piety as the only valuable thing that can elevate one's position, the only thing that affects our place before God.

Chapter Baqarah, verse number 2 we read:

ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ ۚ فِيهِ ۚ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

This is the Book (Quran), there is no doubt in it, a guidance to the pious. (2:2)

Of course, some people would want to gain piety by following the Quran, yet it says that it will give guidance to people who are already pious. How can this work? If one already has piety then there would be no need to be guided by the Quran and if one doesn't have piety then the Quran say it will not guide him. The answer is that piety has different levels and only the minimum level of it is enough for a person to be able to benefit from the Quran and add to his piety.

We can understand this better by looking at the first Muslims in Mecca who accepted the mission of the Prophet. When the Prophet started his mission some people believed in him and the Quran while others did not. What quality was in some people that made them accept the message of the Prophet? People like Abu Dharr, Salman, and Ammar must have had some good qualities even before accepting Islam, some level of piety. They were not arrogant and were open to the truth. Piety is not just saying prayer, fasting, or going to Hajj although these acts are very important. However, being interested in the truth is also a level of piety. We will explain this more in future.

Tirmidhi narrates from the Prophet that the clouds have not cast shadow on any one more honest than Abu Dharr. When the Prophet wanted to migrate from Mecca to Medina, Abu Dharr was responsible for accompanying the Prophet. Since the Prophet was not to be seen, Abu Dharr covered him. However, a pagan saw Abu Dharr and asked him what was under the cover. Abu Dharr said he was carrying the Prophet. The pagan who could not even think a person would be honest to this extent thought this must be a joke and did not investigate further. It was this level of honesty and submission to the truth that had helped him accept Islam in the first place.

Another example is Hurr who managed to repent and join the truthful army of Imam Husayn. He was not like the other people in the army of Umar ibn Sa'd and it was just by chance that he accepted Islam. Hurr was a polite and honest person who acknowledged the merits of Imam Husayn. He was there to stop the Imam from proceeding yet at the time of prayer he stood with his army behind the Imam and prayed with him. The same is true about people who accept Islam today. It is not by chance that they convert. They are humble and honestly seeking the truth. These are the people who have some light in their hearts and will sooner or later believe, since this light of piety will guide them.

The following verses of Chapter Baqarah, verses 3–5, describe the pious:

الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا أُنزِلَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ وَبِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ

أُولَئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدًى مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

Those who believe in the Unseen, and maintain the prayer, and spend out of what We have provided them with and who believe in what has been sent down to you and what was sent down before you, and are certain of the Hereafter. Those follow their Lord's guidance, and it is they who are the felicitous. (2: 3-5)

The pious believe in the unseen. But what is the unseen (ghayb)? It is God and the angels. And the reason they are unseen is not that they are hidden; rather, it is us who are unable to see them because of the veils in front of our sight. If the lights are turned off we would suddenly stop seeing everything we could see a second ago. They are still there though we are no longer able to see them. With a little light, we can see them again. The same is true about God; for us He is unseen, yet what is more obvious than God? In his supplication of Dua Arafa, Imam Husayn says:

متى غبت حتى تحتاج إلى دليل يدل عليك

When did you become hidden that I would a guide to find you?

For Imam Husayn God was never unseen and had never disappeared. For us, it is not the same – God is not as obvious to us though still we believe in Him, and this is one of the qualities of pious people. They are mature enough to realize that in this world where the eyes are limited to seeing only a specific range of lights, all realities do not necessarily need to be seen.

The rest of the verses then mention another quality of the pious. If we believe in something, we must act upon it. For example, if we believe a certain medicine is needed for our healing, it would be unreasonable to refuse to take it. The same is true regarding our religious beliefs. Believing in religion as a code of life and not a mere theory requires practice, otherwise you will not benefit. One important act as mentioned in verse is to establish prayer. There is no believer who does not pray. This is the second quality mentioned for the pious people in this verse, to establish prayers.

Interestingly, verse 2:3 does not say those who perform prayers; rather, it says those who establish prayer (“yuqimoon as-salaat”). Prayer should have the position it deserves in society since it is the pillar of Islam.⁷ Everything in life should be built around prayer.

The third quality is that the pious spend from what God has given them for charitable purposes. This is not limited to many and it includes all the blessings we get from God; it can be money, knowledge, or even time:

لَن تَنَالُوا الْبِرَّ حَتَّى تُنْفِقُوا مِمَّا تُحِبُّونَ ۚ وَمَا تُنْفِقُوا مِنْ شَيْءٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ بِهِ عَلِيمٌ

You will never attain piety until you spend out of what you hold dear, and whatever you may spend of anything, God indeed knows it. (Quran, 3:92)

It is a matter of giving what you love. In other words, if you give something that you do not need or like dearly, though it might solve a person's problems, it is not enough to make a better person of you.

The next verse then mentions yet some other points about the pious: they believe in that which is sent down to the Prophet and that which was sent to the previous prophets.[8](#)

Finally, the pious are certain of the Hereafter. The three principles of the religion include faith in God, prophethood, and the hereafter. However, the previous verse mentions them as those who believe in God and in what has been sent to the Prophet; thus, it refers to belief and faith. Yet, when it mentions the Hereafter, the verse says they are certain of resurrection. Certainty (yaqin) is a very strong level of faith (imaan). There are many Muslims who have not achieved certainty about the hereafter as this certainty must reach to a point where he would act as if he could see heaven and hell.

A person who can see hell would never commit an act that would get him there. If sometimes we commit sins it is because we have not achieved this level of certainty:

كَأَلَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عِلْمَ الْيَقِينِ

لَتَرَوُنَّ الْجَحِيمَ

تُمْ لَتَرَوُنَّهَا عَيْنَ الْيَقِينِ

No indeed! Were you to know with certain knowledge, you would surely see hell. Again, you will surely see it with the eye of certainty. (Al-Takathur, 102: 5-7)

There are three types of certainty: 'Ilm ul-yaqin (knowledge of certainty), Haqq ul-yaqin (true or total reality of certainty), and 'Ayn ul- yaqin (eye of certainty). To explain this, we will use an example:

There are three ways of knowing that there is a fire somewhere.

First level: You might see smoke and conclude that there must be a fire that has caused the smoke. You haven't seen the fire but you are sure it's there.

Second level: You might also see the fire with your eyes. Now, you have seen the fire itself.

Third level: A part of your body touches the fire: this is the strongest level of knowledge.

Thus, with regards to the hereafter, the same levels can be achieved; to be pious, we are required to at least have the lowest level. Imam Ali describes the pious at the highest level:

فَهُمْ وَالْجَنَّةُ كَمَنْ قَدْ رَأَاهَا، فَهُمْ فِيهَا مُنْعَمُونَ، وَهُمْ وَالنَّارُ كَمَنْ قَدْ رَأَاهَا، فَهُمْ فِيهَا مُعَذَّبُونَ

With respect to the Heaven, the pious are like those who have been there and have actually seen the Heaven and are enjoying its blessings; and with respect to the Hell they are like those who have been there and have actually seen and are suffering there. [9](#)

In the same sermon, Imam Ali says that when the pious read verses of the Quran regarding heaven they reflect so much so that they feel as if these verses relate their own situation. Or when they read the verses that warn about hell they read it so wholeheartedly and feel as if they are seeing the blaze.

Having mentioned the qualities of the pious, the next verse of the chapter al-Baqarah mentions the position of the pious: they are guided by their Lord and are felicitous. And what a great achievement this is!

[1.](#) Nahj ul-Balagha, Hikmat 410, p. 520

[2.](#) Shaykh Tusi, Al-Amali, session 38, p. 685, hadith no. 1456 (9)

[3.](#) Ghurar ul-Hikam wa Durar ul-Kalim, Chapter on Fazilatuhuma wat-taghibi fihima, p. 269

[4.](#) Nahj ul-Balaghah, Sermon 233. This phrase can be found in many sermons and even nowadays lecturer often starts their sermons by this phrase.

[5.](#) Ibid

[6.](#) Nahj ul-Balaghah, Sermon 189

[7.](#) Shaykh Tusi, Amali, session 19, p. 529: الصلاة عمود الدين

[8.](#) On a side note, this verse is one of the verses that show Islam to have the best potential for dialogue as it is the only religion in the world accepts all the previous revelations. Muslims are in easiest ground because to be Muslim means we must believe in Jesus, Moses, and all the prophets before Abraham.

[9.](#) Nahj ul-Balaghah, Sermon 184 (Sermon of the Pious)

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