

Indicators of Piety, Part 3

Mohammad Ali Shomali

This paper is the third 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, religiosity, and moral values on which they are based.

Abstract

This series explains the merits and consequences of piety (taqwa) as seen in the Qur'an, hadith, and the lives of the Ahlul Bayt. 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 and is required to reach salvation. In Part I, the merits of piety according to the Qur'an were studied. The previous part explored the definition of piety along with the factors that contribute to its formation. This part further illustrates the qualities of the pious according to the Qur'an, that the pious are those who have faith in the unseen, establish prayer, give charity, believe in the hereafter, and have faith in what has been revealed to the Prophet as well as the previous prophets.

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We have already established the significance of piety (taqwa) as per the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith, and have demonstrated that it is the fundamental quality required reach salvation. To understand the true nature of piety, a further look into the Qur'an's description of this trait is needed.

With reference to the verses previously cited (2:2-5), God describes the pious as those who hold certain characteristics and as a result, they achieve piety and guidance, and ultimately attain success and happiness. The pious:

1. Have faith in the unseen; b. establish prayer; c. give charity; d. have faith in what has been revealed to Prophet Muhammad and to the previous prophets, and; e. have faith in the Hereafter.

Faith in the unseen

The quality of faith (iman) is a key factor in obtaining piety, without which piety becomes impossible. As seen in the verses, faith is a part of three of the five key qualities of a pious person.

In the very early stages of Islam, the concept of faith came under great scrutiny and was the subject of much debate. Early theologians held differing opinions on the state of a faithful person who commits a major sin (murtakib al-kabirah), on whether such a person can remain faithful, or enters a different state. Amongst these, the Mu'tazilites¹ believed that such a person enters a state in which he is neither a believer nor a non-believer, whilst the Kharijites² opined that such a person would become a non-believer and may be killed as a result. Thus, the need to accurately define faith became of paramount importance.

Some theologians held that faith is simply stating the declaration of belief (shahadatayn). Others stated that more was required, such as knowledge, action, and submission.

From the Qur'an and hadith it is clear that in order to hold faith, it is not sufficient to merely state one's belief in God and Prophet Muhammad; rather, faith is something that is vested in the heart:

The Bedouins say, 'We have faith.' Say, 'You do not have faith yet; rather say, "We have embraced Islam," for faith has not yet entered into your hearts. Yet if you obey God and His Apostle, He will not stint anything of [the reward of] your works. Indeed God is All-Forgiving, All-Merciful.'
(49: 14)

In this verse, God tells Prophet Muhammad to advise the Bedouins that faith is a stage after the stage of embracing Islam, and therefore a mere declaration of belief is not sufficient to deem someone to be faithful. Therefore, faith is a stage above the initial submission in Islam.

After declaring belief, for faith to enter one's heart, some additional steps are required. Simply adding knowledge to one's declaration is not enough for it to transform into faith. Throughout history, instances can be found where people held knowledge of the truth but were not faithful. For example, Mu'awiyah knew that the rightful leadership of the Muslims was vested with Ali b. Abi Talib but he refused to accept this. Similarly, the pagan Arabs repeatedly denied the credentials of Prophet Muhammad, despite knowing that he was truly the Prophet of God, due to their selfish fear of losing power and control of Mecca. The Qur'an says,

"They impugned them - though they were convinced in their hearts - wrongfully and defiantly.
(27: 14)"

Thus, in addition to knowledge, a person must have the quality of acceptance. Acceptance will manifest itself in the form of submission and humility towards that truth, no matter what the personal cost, difficult implications, and sacrifice it requires. Therefore, faith and submission must accompany one another. It

does not seem credible for one to accept a truth and then not act according to it, or to act according to a truth but then not have confidence to declare it to others^{[3](#)}.

Describing faith and its components, Prophet Muhammad said:

Faith is not an adornment [that is worn], nor is it achieved by merely wishing; rather, it is something that settles in the heart and is confirmed by actions.^{[4](#)}

Faith is confirmation by speech, recognition with the heart, and action with the limbs.^{[5](#)}

Faith and action are like two brothers, joined with one another; God does not accept one of them without its partner.^{[6](#)}

These sayings demonstrate that both faith and action are necessary for any action to be accepted; and when this happens, then according to the Qur'an it is described as piety:

God only accepts from the pious. (5:27)

Therefore, a person's faith requires knowledge and results in action; faith produces verbal declarations, but in a nutshell it is submission and acceptance.

To illustrate this point further, we refer to a number of verses in which the characteristics of the faithful are described:

The faithful are only those whose hearts tremble [with awe] when Allah is mentioned, and when His verses are recited to them, they increase their faith, and who put their trust in their Lord. They maintain the prayer and spend out of what We have provided them. It is they who are truly the faithful. They shall have ranks near their Lord, forgiveness and a noble provision. (8:2-4)

The grammatical construct of these verses shows exclusivity, i.e. it is impossible to be considered a faithful person without the following qualities:

1. Their hearts tremble [with awe] when Allah is mentioned: When a person's beloved is mentioned, it naturally causes the listener's heart to yearn towards him or her and experience a moment of heartfelt love. When the beloved is God, the correct description of this would be feeling a sense of awe. Hence, a fundamental sign of a faithful person is his or her love for God. This love would be complete and perfect, in that it would lead to wilful and pleasurable obedience, not due to any threat or reward. For example, when a child asks his or her parent for something such as a glass of water, the parent obeys.

There is no sense of force or imposition upon the parent, nor is there any threat or reward associated with the act. Rather, the parent obeys the child with joy. Similarly, every now and then a lover may seek ways of performing acts of kindness for their beloved even when not asked to do so. This voluntary obedience and service is what true faithful people display towards God, and it eventually softens the

heart.[7](#)

2. Their faith increases with the recitation of the Qur'an: The level of a person's faith is subject to increase and decrease; it is linked to submission, and submission has different degrees. When life's circumstances become very difficult, it is more difficult to submit. An example of unshakable submission at the most difficult of times is that of Prophet Abraham and Prophet Ishmael. Abraham tells Ishmael that he has been ordered to sacrifice him, and Ishmael calmly responds:

'Father Do whatever you have been commanded. If God wishes, you will find me to be patient.'
(37: 102)

3. They trust their Lord: People often put their trust in other people or institutions, such as family members, teachers, police officers, bankers, or doctors, but the truly faithful person will have put their trust only in God.

4. They establish prayer and give charity: In the Qur'an, faith is often mentioned alongside prayer, and prayer is almost always coupled with charity. Prayers and charity can be thought of as the two wings of a bird, both are required for soaring to greater heights and achieving success.

Faithful people who perform these actions are then described as genuine and true believers who are very close to their Lord. As a result they are granted forgiveness and a noble sustenance. Elsewhere the Qur'an says:

Those who have believed, migrated, and struggled in the way of God, and those who gave them shelter and help, it is they who are truly the faithful. For them shall be forgiveness and a noble provision. (8:74)

In addition to the four actions mentioned in the previous verse, this verse describes the truly faithful as those who invest more effort and struggle in God's way, and are willing to make personal sacrifices.

The Qur'an also says:

But the faithful, men and women, are guardians of one another: they bid what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer, give alms, and obey God and His Apostle. It is they to whom God will soon grant His mercy. Indeed God is Mighty, Wise. (9:71)

This verse describes the important social responsibility that faithful people have as guardians of one another. Guardianship (wilayah) is not merely between humans and the Creator, or between the Infallibles and their followers, but rather it is something that binds all people together, as well as with God and the Infallibles. The faithful have rights over one another and their fates are interdependent.

They therefore use their guardianship to encourage good and forbid evil as they feel responsible for one another, as one family, or as passengers on the same boat, where the actions of one impacts the others.

Thus, for a faithful person, there is no room for selfishness or a carefree attitude with respect to another person's wellbeing. The result is that such faithful people will soon be shown God's special mercy.

Once they attain faith, the truly faithful do not doubt afterwards:

The faithful are only those who have attained faith in God and His Apostle and then have never doubted, and who struggle with their possessions and their persons in the way of God. It is they who are the truthful. (49: 15)

Here, we should distinguish unjustified doubt (rayb) from genuine doubt⁸. Islam wholeheartedly encourages enquiry, but once truth is revealed and manifested, pride and stubbornness should not prevent the acceptance of that truth, otherwise such a person will find themselves living in perpetual denial.

One of the disciples of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) once said to him, "Master, you are such a genius If you claimed to be a prophet people would believe in you " Ibn Sina did not reply at that moment. On another day, he and this same disciple were travelling and as night fell they slept whilst the weather was very cold. Just before the time of the morning prayer, Ibn Sina awoke the student and asked him to go and fetch him some water to drink. The student was comfortable in his warm coverings and did not want to go out into the cold to fetch water and so he started to make excuses as to why cold water would not be good for Ibn Sina. They then both heard the voice of the call to prayer from one of the nearby minarets. Sensing the moment, Ibn Sina said, "You have been my close student for many years and I asked you only once to bring me water and you made excuses. But that man [the caller to prayer] who has not even met the Prophet goes to the cold top of the minaret every night and shouts the testimony of Prophet Muhammad's apostleship. This is the difference between me and a prophet."

Immovable faith and conviction will facilitate for such faithful people to struggle with their wealth and their lives and accept difficulties; such people have been tested by God and have passed the tests, and hence the verse terms them as successful.

¹. The Mu'tazilites emerged during the time of Hasan al-Basri (d. 110 AH), after he was asked whether a believer who had committed a major sin remains a believer. One of his students, Wasil bin Ata, gave his opinion by saying, 'A state between the two states [of belief and disbelief]'. Wasil then stood up and sat in a different area of the mosque. Al-Basri declared, 'He has left us' or 'Leave us' employing an Arabic word from the root i'tizal, from which the name Mu'tazilite has been derived.

². Kharijites Khawarij, literally "those who went out"; singular, Kharijl) is the title for a Muslim sect. Early kharijites, while initially supporting the authority of the final Rashidun Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib, the son-in-law and cousin of Prophet Muhammad, later rejected his leadership. With the passing of time, the Kharijite groups fell greatly in their numbers and their beliefs did not continue to gain any traction in future generations. From their essentially political position, the Kharijites developed extreme doctrines that further set them apart from both mainstream Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The Kharijites were particularly noted for adopting a radical approach to Takfir, whereby they declared other Muslims to be unbelievers and therefore deemed them worthy of death. (extracted with abbreviation from Wikipedia).

³. Of course here we are not referring to when people must tactfully hide their faith in order to safeguard e.g. their lives, an act that the Qur'an fully endorses. For example, refer to the verses 16: 6 and 40:28.

⁴. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 66, p. 72.

[5.](#) Ibid., vol. 10, p. 367.

[6.](#) Mizan al-Hikmah, vol. 1, p. 193.

[7.](#) The Arabic term for heart is qalb, which literally means change, because the heart changes due to one's love, hate, hope, despair, etc. It seems that in all languages the term heart is used to refer to the physical heart as well as the soul.

[8.](#) According to a hadith from Imam Sadiq a person went to Prophet Muhammad while he was very worried that he has lost his faith and therefore is destroyed. Before the man said what the problem was, the Prophet what he was going to ask. The Prophet said: "Satan came to you and asked you: 'If God has created everything who has created God?'" The man said: "By the One who has raised you as a Prophet truthfully, that was the problem. Then the Prophet said: "By God, this is pure faith" (Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 425). This means that the fact that when you had such question you were concerned and wanted to find the right answer to it shows that you are a true believer.

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