

Islamic Concept of Life

The chief characteristic of the Islamic Concept of Life is that it does not admit a conflict, nay, not even a significant separation between life–spiritual and life–mundane. It does not confine itself merely in purifying the spiritual and the moral life of man in the limited sense of the word. Its domain extends to the entire gamut of life. It wants to mould individual life as well as the social order in healthy patterns, so that the Kingdom of God may really be established on the earth and so that peace, contentment and well–being may fill the world as waters fill the oceans. The Islamic Way of Life is based on this unique approach to life and a peculiar concept of man’s place in the Universe. That is why it is necessary that before we proceed to discuss the moral, social, political and economic systems of Islam, we should have a clear idea of the Islamic Concept of Life.

There are certain basic postulates which should be understood and appreciated at the very outset. These postulates are as follows:

Basic Postulate

Allah Who is the Creator, the Ruler and the Lord of the entire Universe has created man and provided him with temporary station in that part of His vast kingdom (cosmos) which is known as the earth. He has endowed man with the faculties of thinking and understanding, and has given him the power to distinguish right from wrong. Man has also been invested with freedom of will and choice and the power to use the resources of the world in any manner he likes. In short, man has been given a sort of autonomy while being appointed by God on earth as a successor to the beings that had previously populated it.

Before assigning to man the inheritance of the earth, God made it explicitly clear to him that He alone is the Lord, the Ruler and the Deity. As such, the entire Universe and all the creatures in it (including man) must submit to Him alone. Man must not think himself totally free and should know that this earth is not his permanent abode. He has been made to live upon it only during the period of his probation, and in due course, he will return to his Lord, to be judged according to the way he has utilized the period of probation. The only right course for man is to acknowledge Allah as the only Lord, the Sustainer and the

Deity and to follow His Guidance and His Commands in all walks of life.

Man must live this life with the realization that he is to be judged and his sole objective should be to merit the pleasure of Allah so as to emerge successful in the final test. Conduct which is contrary to this would lead man astray. If man follows the course of piety and Godliness (which he is free to choose and follow) he will succeed in this world and in the next, in this world he will live a life of peace and contentment, and in the Hereafter he will qualify himself for the heaven of eternal bliss, al-Jannah. And if he chooses to follow the other course, i.e., that of Godlessness and evil (which he is equally free to choose and follow) his life will be one of corruption, disruption and frustration in this world and he will meet colossal misfortune in the life to come – that abode of pain and misery which is called Jahannam (Hell).

After administering the warning, God set man upon the earth and provided the very first human beings (Adam and Eve) with His Guidance in accordance with which men were to live on the earth. Thus, man's life on this earth did not begin in utter darkness. The very first man was provided with a burning torch of light and guidance so that humanity might attain its glorious destiny. The very first man received revealed knowledge from God Himself. He had knowledge of the reality and was given the code of life by following which he could live a life of bliss and success. This code of life was Islam, the attitude of complete submission to Allah, the Creator of man and of the whole universe. It was this religion which Adam, the first man, passed down to posterity.

But later generations gradually drifted away from the right path and adopted different erroneous paths. Because of negligence, they lost the original teachings, or due to folly or mischief they adulterated and perverted them. They associated with God innumerable human beings, non-human objects and imaginary entities as deities and indulged in Shirk (polytheism) of the worst type. They mixed up the pure teachings of God with strange myths, ideas and philosophies and thus produced a jungle of religions and cults. They discarded the God-given principles of social ethics and collective morality, the Shari'ah, and deprived the human life of peace and tranquility.

Although men departed from the path of truth, disregarded and distorted the Shari'ah and some of them even revolted against the code of Divine Guidance, yet God did not destroy them or force them to the right course. Forced conversion to the right path was not in keeping with the autonomy He had given to man. Instead, God appointed certain virtuous persons from amongst the people themselves, to discharge the responsibility of recalling and guiding men to the right path during their sojourn on the earth. These men believed in God, and lived a life of obedience to Him. He honored them by His revelations and gave them the knowledge of reality. These men, known as prophets (peace be upon all of them), were assigned the task of presenting the message of truth to humanity and of asking the people to come to the path of the Lord.

These prophets were raised in all epochs, in all lands and in all nations. Out of numerous prophets sent by God, the Qur'an explicitly mentions twenty-five. All of them brought the same message, all of them

advocated the same way of life (Deen) i.e., the way which was revealed to man on the first day of his existence. All of them followed the same guidance: the guidance which was prescribed by the Lord for man at the outset of his career on the earth.

All of them stood for the same mission: they called men to the religion of Islam, asked those who accepted the Divine Guidance to live in accordance with it: and organized them into a movement for the establishment of the Divine Law, and for putting an end to all deviations from the Right Path. Every prophet tried to fulfill this mission in the best possible way. But quite a number of people never accepted this guidance and many of those who accepted it gradually drifted astray and, a lapse of time lost the guidance or distorted it through innovations and perversions.

At last, God raised Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) in the land of Arabia and assigned to him the completion of the mission for which earlier prophets were ordained. The message of Mohammed (peace be upon him) was for the whole of mankind. He presented anew the teachings of Islam in their pristine form and provided mankind once again, with the Divine Guidance which they had lost in its original form. He organized all those who accepted his message into one Ummah (Nation) which was charged with reconstructing its own life in accordance with the teachings of Islam, by calling mankind to the path of righteousness and with establishing the supremacy of the word of God on the earth. This guidance is enshrined in the Holy Qur'an which constitutes the only right code of conduct for mankind.

Iman (Faith): Its Nature and Character

We have discussed above those basic postulates of Islam which, on the one hand, revealed God's plan for providing guidance to man in this world and, on the other, defined the nature, position and status of man in it. Now, let us study the foundations on which the Qur'an wants to develop man's relationship with Allah and the concept of life which naturally follows from that relationship.

The Qur'an deals with this problem on many occasions but the entire concept of life envisaged as epitomized in the following verse:

“God hath purchased of the Believers. Their persons and their goods; For their (in return) Is the Garden (of Paradise) They fight in His Cause, And slay and are slain: A promise binding on Him In Truth, through the Law, The Gospel, and the Qur'an: And who is more faithful To his Covenant than God? Then rejoice in bargain Which ye have concluded: That is the achievement supreme. ”
(Al- Qur'an, 9:111)

In the above verse the nature of the relationship which comes into existence between man and God because of Iman (the act of reposing faith in Allah) has been called a “bargain”. This means that Iman in Allah is not a mere metaphysical concept; it is in the nature of a contract by which man barter his life and his belongings with Allah in exchange for Paradise in the life hereafter. God so to say, purchases a believer's life and property and promises, by way of price, the award of Paradise in the life after death.

The concept of bargain has important implications and we should, therefore, first of all clearly understand its nature and meanings.

The fact of the matter is that each and every thing in this world belongs to Allah. He is the real owner of them all. As such, man's life and riches, which are part of this world, also belong to Him, because it is He Who created them and it is He Who has assigned them to each man for his use. Looking at the problem from this angle; the question of His purchasing what is already His: Man is not their real owner; he has no title to sell them. But there is one thing which has been conferred on man, and which now belongs fully to him, and that is his free will, the freedom of choice of following or not following the path of Allah.

As man has been endowed with free will in this respect, he is free to acknowledge or not to acknowledge the reality of things. Although this freedom of will and choice that man possesses does not automatically make him the real owner of all the energies and resources on which he has command. Nor does he acquire the title to utilize them in any way he likes. Nor does his acknowledgment of reality or refusal to do so in any way affects reality as such.

Yet it does mean that he is free to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and His over lordship on his own life and belongings or refuse to acknowledge it and to arrogate to himself the position of total independence. He may, if he so likes, regard himself free from all obligations to the Lord and may think that he enjoys full rights and powers over all that he has, and thus, may use them according to his own wishes unfettered by any higher command.

It is here that the question of bargain comes in. This bargain does not mean that God is purchasing something which belongs to man. Its real nature is this: All creation belongs to God but He has bestowed certain things on man to be used by him as a trust from God. And man has been given freedom to honestly fulfill the trust or if he so likes, to betray it or misuse it. Now, God demands that man should willingly and voluntarily (and not under duress or compulsion) acknowledge those things as His which really belongs to Him and man should use them as a trust from God and not as something his own to be used as he pleases.

Thus, a man who voluntarily renounces the freedom even to refuse God's supremacy and instead acknowledges His sovereignty. So to say, "sells" his "autonomy" (which too is a gift from God and not something which man has acquired of his own) to God, and gets in return God's promise of eternal bliss that is Paradise.

A man who makes such a bargain is a "Mu'min" (Believer). And Iman (Belief) is the Islamic name for this contract; while the one who chooses not to enter into this contract, or after making such a contract amounting to its gross breach, is one who has followed the course of the devil. Thus Allah says:

"Say if it be that your fathers, Your sons, your brothers, Your mates, or your kindred; The wealth that you have gained; The commerce in which you fear a decline: or the dwellings in which you

delight Are dearer to you than God, Or His apostle, of the striving In His cause; then wait until Allah brings about His Decision. And God Guides not the rebellious.” (Al-Qur’an, 09:24)

The attempt to avoid or abrogate this contract can lead to Kufr (total disbelief). Such is the nature and the contract. Now let us briefly study its various aspects and stipulations.

God has put us to serious trial on two counts:

He has left man free. But even after giving him that freedom He wishes to see whether or not man realizes his true position. Whether he remains honest and steadfast and maintains loyalty and allegiance to the Lord, or loses his head and revolts against his own Creator; whether he behaves like a noble soul, or tramples under foot all values of decency and starts playing fantastic tricks.

He wants to see whether man is prepared to have such confidence in God as to offer his life and wealth in return for what is a promise. That is to materialize in the next world and whether he is prepared to surrender his autonomy and all the charms that go with it, in exchange for a promise about the future.

It is an accepted principle of Islamic law that Iman consists of adherence to a certain set of doctrines and whosoever ever reposes faith in those doctrines becomes a Mu'min. No one has a right to denounce such a man as non-believer or drive him out of the fold of the Ummah (Islamic Community), save when there is explicit proof of falsity or of renunciation of the belief. This is the legal aspect of the problem. But in the eyes of the Lord, only that Iman is valuable which consists in complete surrender of one's will and choice to the Will of Allah. It is a state of thought and action wherein man submits himself fully to Allah, renouncing all claim to his own supremacy. It is something that comes from the heart. It is an attitude of the mind and prepares man for a certain course of action.

If a man recites the Kalima, enters into the contract, and even offers his prayers and performs other acts of worship, but in his heart he regards himself as the owner and the sovereign dispenser of his physical and mental powers and of his moral and material resources, uses them to his own liking and upholds his freedom of will, then, however much of the people may look upon him as Mu'min (believer), in the eyes of God he will be a non-believer, for he has, in fact, not really entered into the bargain which according to the Qur'an is the essence of Iman (belief). If a man does not use his powers and resources in the way God has prescribed for him, and instead uses them in pursuits which God has prohibited, it clearly shows that either he has not pledged his life and property to Allah, or even after pledging them to Him, he falsifies the pledge by his conduct.

This nature of Iman makes the Islamic way of life distinct from, nay, the very opposite of, the non-Islamic way of life. A Muslim, who has real faith in Allah, makes every aspect of his subservience to the Will of Allah. His entire life is one of obedience and surrender and he never behaves in an arrogant or an autonomous way, except in a moment of forgetfulness. And after such a lapse as soon as he becomes conscious of it, he again re-addresses himself to his Lord and repents his error. Similarly, a group of people or a society which consist of true Muslims can never break away from the Law of their Lord.

Its political, its social organization, its culture, its economic policy, its legal system and its international strategy must all be in tuned with the Code of Guidance revealed by Allah and must, in no way, contravene it. And if ever, through error or omission, any contravention it committed, they must, on realizing this, correct this immediately and return forthwith to the state of subservience to the Law of God. It is the way of the non-believers to feel free from God's Guidance and to behave as one's own master. Whoever adopts such a policy, even though he may bear a name similar to that of a Muslim, is treading the satanic path and is following the way of the non-believers.

The Will of God, which is obligatory upon man to follow, is the one which God Himself has revealed for man's guidance. The Will of God is not to be determined by man himself. God has Himself enunciated it clearly and there is no ambiguity about it. There, if a person or society is honest and steadfast in its contract with Allah, it must scrupulously fashion its entire life in accordance with the Book of God and the Sunnah (practical example) of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

A little reflection will show that these aspects and stipulations are logically implicit in the bargain and it is also clear from the above discussion why the payment of the "price" has been postponed to the life after death. Paradise is not the reward for the mere profession of the bargain; it is the reward for the faithful execution of the contract. Unless the contract is fully executed and the actual life-behavior of the "vendor" complies with the terms of the contract he does not become entitled to the reward. Thus, the final act of the "sale" is concluded only at the last moment of the vendor's life, and as such, it is natural that the reward should be given to him in the Life Hereafter.

There is another significant point which emerges from the study of the verse quoted above (Al-Qur'an, IX: 24) when it is read with reference to its context. In the verses preceding it, reference has been made to the people who professed Iman and promised a life of obedience, but when the hour of trial came they proved unequal to the task. Some neglected the call of the hour and betrayed the cause. Others, played tricks of hypocrisy and refused to sacrifice their lives and riches in the cause of Allah. The Qur'an, after exposing these people and criticizing their insincerity makes it clear that Iman is a contract, a form of pledge between man and God. It does not consist of a mere profession of belief in Allah. It is an acknowledgment of the fact that Allah alone is our Sovereign Lord and Ruler and that everything that man has, including his life, belongs to Him and must be used in accordance with His directives. If a Muslim adopts a contrary course he is insincere in his profession of faith. True believers are only those who have really sold their lives and all that they possessed to God and who followed His dictates in all fields of activity. They stake their all in obedience to the Commands of the Lord, and do not deviate even an inch from the path of loyalty to God. Such only are the true believers.

The Plan of Life

This discussion makes it clear that Islam begins with laying down the proper lines on which man's relationship with the Lord is to be reared; his entire individual and social life is an exercise in developing

and strengthening this relationship. Iman, the starting point of our religion, consists in the acceptance of this relationship by man's intellect and will. Thus, Islam is actual submission, the way of surrender to the Will of God in all aspects of life and behavior. Now, we are in a position to cast a glance over the plan of life which Islam envisages. This plan – the code of conduct – is known as the Shari'ah. Its sources are the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The Final Book of God and the Final Messenger stands today as a repository of this truth, and they invite the whole of humanity to accept the truth. God Almighty has endowed men with free will in the moral domain, and it is to this free will that this acceptance bears reference. Consequently, it is always a voluntary act and not of compulsion. Whosoever agrees that the concept of Reality stated by the Holy Prophet and the Holy Book is true, it is for him to step forward and surrender his will to the Will of God. It is this submission which is called "Islam", the fructification of faith (Iman) in actual life. And those who do so, i.e., those who of their own free will, accept God as their Sovereign, and surrender to His Divine Will and undertake to regulate their lives in accordance with His Commandments, are called "Muslims".

All those persons who thus surrender themselves to the persons who thus surrender themselves to the Will of God are welded into a community and that is how the "Muslim society" comes into being. Thus, is a principled society – a society radically different from those which are founded on the basis of race, color or territory. This society is the result of a deliberate choice and effort; it is the outcome of a "contract" which takes place between human beings and the Creator.

Those who enter into this contract, undertake to recognize God as their sovereign, His Guidance as Supreme, and His injunctions as absolute Law. They also undertake to accept, without question or doubt His classifications of good and Evil, Right and Wrong, Permissible and Prohibited. In short, the Islamic society agrees to limit its volition to the extent prescribed by the All-Knowing God. In other words, it is God and not man whose will is the primary Source of Law in a Muslim society.

When such a society comes into existence, the Book and the Messenger prescribe for it a code of life called the Shari'ah, and this Society is bound to conform to it by virtue of the contract it has entered into. It is, therefore, inconceivable that any Muslim society worth the name can deliberately adopt a system of life other than the Shari'ah. If it does so, its contract is ipso facto broken and the whole society becomes "un-Islamic".

But we must clearly distinguish between the everyday sins or violations of the individuals and a deliberate revolt against the Shari'ah. The former may not imply breaking up of the contract, while the latter would mean nothing short of that. The point that should be clearly understood here is that, if an Islamic society consciously resolves not to accept the Shari'ah, and decides to enact its own constitution and laws or borrows them from any other source, (in utter disregard of the Shari'ah) such a society breaks its contract with God and forfeits its right to be called "Islamic".

The Objectives and Characteristics of the Plan

Let us now proceed to understand the plan of life envisaged by the Shari'ah. To understand that, it is essential that we start with a clear conception of the objectives and the fundamentals of Shari'ah.

The main objective of the Shari'ah is to construct human life on the basis of Ma'rufat (virtues) and to cleanse it of the Munkarat (vices). The term Ma'rufat proclaims as good and right everything declared by Allah and by His messenger to be so. Taking this definition as the norm, the term Ma'rufat should denote all the virtues and good qualities that have always been accepted as "good" by the pure and unadulterated human conscience. Conversely, the word Munkarat refers to everything that Allah and His Apostle (peace be upon him) have denounced as evil. In the light of this understanding, it denotes all the sins and evils that have always been condemned by pure human nature as "evil". In short, the Ma'rufat are in harmony with human nature and its requirements in general, whilst the Munkarat are just the opposite. The Shari'ah gives a clear view of these Ma'rufat and Munkarat and states them as the norms to which the individual and social behavior should conform.

The Shari'ah does not, however, limit its function to providing us with an inventory of virtues and vices only; it lays down the entire plan of life in such a manner that virtues may flourish and vices may not pollute and destroy human life.

To achieve this end, the Shari'ah has embraced in its plan all the factors that encourage the growth of good and has recommended steps for the removal of impediments that might prevent its growth and development. The process gives rise to subsidiary series of Ma'rufat consisting of the causes and means initiating and nurturing the good, and yet another set of Ma'rufat consisting of prohibitory commands in relation to those things which act as preventives or impediments to good. Similarly, there is a subsidiary list of Munkarat which might initiate or allow growth of evil.

The Shari'ah shapes the Islamic society in a way conducive to the unfettered growth of good, virtue and truth in every sphere of human activity, and gives full play to the forces of going all directions. And at the same time it removes all impediments in the path of virtue. Along this, it attempts to eradicate evils from its social plan by prohibiting vice, by obviating the causes of its appearance and growth, by closing the inlets through which it creeps into a society and by adopting deterrent measures to check its occurrence.

Ma'rufat (Ma'roof)

The Shari'ah classifies Ma'rufat into three categories: the Mandatory (Fardh and Wajib), the Recommendatory (Matlub) and the Permissible (Mubah).

The observance of the mandatory (Ma'rufat) is obligatory on a Muslim society and the Shari'ah has given clear and binding directions about them. The recommendatory Ma'rufat are those which the Shari'ah wants a Muslim society to observe and practice. Some of them have been very clearly demanded of us,

while others have been recommended by implication and inference from the sayings of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). Besides this, special arrangements have been made for the growth and encouragement of some of them in the plan of life enunciated by the Shari'ah. Others still have simply been recommended by the Shari'ah leaving it to the society or to its more virtuous elements to look to their promotion.

This leaves us with the permissible Ma'rufat. Strictly speaking, according to the Shari'ah everything which has not been expressly prohibited by it is a Permissible Ma'ruf (i.e., Mubah). It is not at all necessary that an express permission should exist about it or that it should have been expressly left to our choice. Consequently, the sphere of permissible Ma'rufat is very wide so much so that except for the things specifically prohibited by the Shari'ah, everything is permissible for a Muslim. And this is exactly the sphere where we have been given freedom and where we can legislate according to our own discretion to suit the requirements of our age and conditions, of course in keeping with the general spirit of the Shari'ah.

Munkarat (Munkar)

The Munkarat (or the things prohibited in Islam) have been grouped into two categories: Haram, i.e., those things which have been prohibited absolutely and Makruh, i.e., those things which have been disliked and discouraged. It has been enjoined on Muslims by clear mandatory injunctions to refrain totally from everything that has been declared Haram. As for the Makruhat the Shari'ah signifies its dislike in some way or another, i.e., either expressly or by implication, giving an indication also as to the degree of such dislike.

For example, there are some Makruhat bordering on Haram, while others bear affinity with the acts which are permissible. Of course, their number is very large ranging between the two extremes of prohibitory and permissible actions. Moreover, in some cases, explicit measures have been prescribed by the Shari'ah for the prevention of Makruhat, while in others such arrangements have been left to the discretion of the society or of the individual.

Some other Characteristics

The Shari'ah, thus, prescribes directives for the regulation of our individual as well as collective life. These directives touch such varied subjects as religious rituals, personal character, morals, habits, family relationships, social and economic affairs, administration, rights and duties of citizens, judicial system, laws of war and peace and international relations. In short, it embraces all the various departments of human life. These directives reveal what is good and bad, what is beneficial and useful and what is injurious and harmful. What are the virtues which are the evils for which we have to suppress and guard against? What is the sphere of our voluntary, untrammelled, personal and social action and what are its limits. And finally, what ways and means we can adopt in establishing such a

dynamic order of society and what methods we should avoid.

The Shari'ah is a complete plan of life and an all embracing social order—nothing superfluous, nothing lacking. Another remarkable feature of the Shari'ah is that it is an organic whole. The entire plan of life propounded by Islam is animated by the same spirit. Hence, any arbitrary division of its plan is bound to harm the spirit as well as the structure of the Islamic order. In this respect, it might be compared to the human body which is an organic whole. A leg pulled out of the body cannot be called one-eighth or one-sixth man, because after its separation from the living body, the leg can no longer perform its human function. Nor can it be placed in the body of some other animal with any hope of making it human to the extent of that limb. Likewise, we cannot form a correct opinion about the utility, efficiency and beauty of the hand, the eyes or the nose of a human being separately, without judging its place and function within the living body.

The same can be said in regard to the scheme of life envisaged by the Shari'ah. Islam signifies the entire scheme of life and not any isolated part or parts thereof. Consequently neither can it be appropriate to view the different part of the Shari'ah in isolation from one another and without regard to the whole, nor will it be of any use to take any part and bracket it with any other “ism”. The Shari'ah can function smoothly and can demonstrate its efficacy only if the entire system of life is practiced in accordance with it and not otherwise.

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