

Preamble

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Today, I have completed my fifteenth birthday. When I awoke, I had no idea what was in store for me. A day of surprises, conceit, and apprehension that was, nevertheless, tampered with joy, love, and enjoyment of discovery. A day that heralded the closing of one chapter of my life and the beginning of another.

As usual, I woke up early. No sooner had I finished my morning routine between my waking up and sitting to have my breakfast, I saw a different expression on my father's face. Something made me guess that a matter of a kind that concerns me he needed to address.

His eyes were wide open as if they were gazing in a vacuum. His tight lips indicated that he was about to say something of great importance. His fingers were tapping rhythmically on the dining table. It seemed that his heart was filled with great tidings so much so that it could overflow.

As I sat on the opposite side of the table, he took the initiative, with a glow of joy filling his eyes, and said:

Oh my son! Today, you have rolled up a phase of your life and are on the threshold of a new one. In the eye of Islamic law, you have become a fully-fledged man capable of being obligated to observe the dictates of religion. On this day, Allah, the Exalted, has bestowed upon you the favour of showing to you that which you should obey and that which you should shun.

Until yesterday you were, in the eye of Islamic law, a child. Thus, you were left alone. As of today, everything has changed. You are a man like other men. You are capable of behaving responsibly. That is why Allah has addressed you.

* Sorry, I do not seem to understand what exactly you mean. How can Allah grace me with His bounty by ordering me? Is command a type of grace? How can this be?

– Let me give you an example. You are now a student. Among your class mates, there are those who

are bright, diligent, committed, hard working, the conscientious and others. The head teacher sends for you to come to his office. The moment you walk in, with a smile, he breaks the good tidings to you that you have been chosen for a certain task. This is so because what you have achieved sets you in a different league from your peers.

Do you not feel a sense of achievement and self-confidence for the special treatment accorded to you by your head teacher? Would this not fill you with zeal to carry out the task? This may be the case with a head teacher. How would you react if it was someone occupying a higher position within the hierarchy of the borough, the chief inspector, or the minister for education, and so on?

As my father was giving me examples of people in higher positions of responsibility, what he was aiming at started to sink in. The moment he mentioned Allah's address to me and His obligating me to observe His commands and avoid acts that He forbade, the fact dawned on me.

* God addresses me! And commands me in person!

– Yes, my son. Allah is addressing you. You, the fifteen years old lad. He charges you with the obligations and forbids you from embarking on certain acts.

* Do I deserve all this honour from the Creator of the heavens and the earth. What a sweet day! What a magnificent year! What a splendid manhood!

– Oh my son! You have to obey what your Creator has commanded you to do. It is an honour to do so.

* I shall eagerly do my best to carry out His obligations and commands, but...

– But, what?

* But what are these obligations that He charged me with? And what are His commands that He addressed me with?

– Religious dictates are of five kinds. Wajibat (duties), muharramat (forbidden acts), mustahabbat (voluntary acts of worship), makrouhat (abominable acts), and mubahat (permissible acts).

* What are these wajibat, muharramat, mustahabat, makrouhat, and mubahat?

– Everything that you are obliged to carry out is of the wajibat, such as salah (prayer), sawm (fasting), hajj , zakat, khums, enjoining good and forbidding evil, etc.

Whatever things or acts you are discouraged from doing are of the muharramat, such as drinking alcohol, adultery, theft, spending unwisely, lying, etc.

Any meritorious act that you are encouraged to do to seek closeness to Allah, though not by way of obligation, is of the mustahabat, such as almsgiving, cleanliness, good manners, helping needy people –

not necessarily materially, attending congregational prayer, wearing perfume, etc.

Any act that is good to avoid and shun, though not by way of obligation, with the intention of seeking proximity to Allah is of the makrouhat, such as delaying the time of getting married – for both man and woman, asking for exorbitant dowries, and declining to lend money to a needy person, even though you can afford it, etc.

As for the acts you have free choice in doing or leaving are of mubahat, such as eating, drinking, sleep, travel, and tourism, etc.

* How can I differentiate between wajib and mustahab, and muharram and makrouh? How would I know what is wajib so that I can do it and what is haraam (forbidden act) so that I refrain from doing it? How would I know?

With a smile, my father intervened. He then cast a glance of mercy and compassion over me. He was about to say something, but pondered for a short while.

During that time utter silence prevailed. I could not fathom what was going through the mind of my father. I could, however, witness a sort of cloud over his forehead that was descending to cover the rest of his face, reaching out to his lips that opened up with a somewhat feeble voice full of graciousness and affection.

– You should be able to delineate what is wajib and haraam, what is mustahab and makrouh when you read the books of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). You shall find out that some have core acts, parts, and conditions, some have to be performed with certain movements, some have certain norms you should not depart from, and so on.

You will find what you are looking for in those books. You shall find out that this discipline is a vast one. Hundreds of books and volumes have been written. The ulema (scholars or doctors of religion) did not leave any matter undiscussed or unscrutinized in such depth that you rarely find in other human disciplines.

* But, do I have to know all about such books to know what I should or should not do?

– Oh! No, it suffices to read the most concise and manageable. You shall find out that they are classified into two main topics: Ibadaat (acts of worship) and mu'aamalat (transactions).

* What are ibadaat and mu'aamalat?

– Consult the books of Islamic jurisprudence. You will gradually come to know what you are after.

Full of zeal and interest, I hurried to the library in the hope that I could come across the books of Islamic jurisprudence. As soon as I saw them, a kind of joy overwhelmed me.

* So, those were the books. I, finally, found what I was after. I will read them and am confident that I shall find the answers to my questions in them and have peace of mind.

I could not wait to get home. With a sense of achievement, I hurriedly opened the book and started reading it. A feeling of bewilderment crept into my mind. This was translated into facial expression of astonishment, turning into excruciating pain. I found myself reading a lot but understanding nothing of substance. How could I handle this unfamiliar perplexity?

A kind of pride crept into me. I said to myself, "I am going to try again". Maybe I will understand something. I could imagine that the time was hardly passing. A sort of sluggishness prevailed. My chest was sinking down under some sort of burden, making it unbearable. Yet, I persisted. I read and reread but to no avail. Clouds of disappointment turned into melancholy.

It is time for confession. I read a lot, but did not understand anything worth mentioning. I came across a kind of terminology that was not familiar to me. I could still see floating before my eyes phrases and sentences that seem confined to a certain discipline that I was not aware of. Also, I came across sentences couched in terms I did not know; sentences that discuss matters alien to my everyday life, I do not know why they were mentioned at all. Other linguistic structures appeared so fragmented, deep, and complex that I was left perplexed as to their true meaning.

I wondered if I would ever be able to know what Allah had decreed halal (permissible), so that I could act upon it or what He had decreed haraam, so that I could refrain from doing it!

Thereupon, I lift my head toward the heavens with a twinkle in my eyes, and murmured: O Lord! I know you charged me with a duty. But, I do not know the detail.

O Lord! How am going to know the bounds of what You have ordered me to do, so that I can do it? O Lord! Help me to understand what I read. O Lord! Make the books of jurisprudence spell out what they wanted to state so that I can act upon what they are trying to tell me.

I waited for my father at the dining table in the evening. At the beginning, I looked haggard with tired and rather bewildered eyes. However, this was later turned into silvery shine that combined agony with the determination of forging ahead. No sooner had we sat down, my heart began beating quickly, my cheeks turned pink, and the heat started exuding from the tips of my ears. I succumbed to a feeling of embarrassment, shyness, perplexity, confusion and hesitation. I started saying to myself words that denote inability to understand written material.

However, I plucked my courage determined to admit my weakness and said to my father:

* I read some of the books of jurisprudence, but found them unyielding. I had seldom finished the sentence, my father's eyes went into deep search, as if he was trying to retrieve something from the past. This journey did not last long. His eyes soon turned towards me and in a whisper, he said:

– I went through a similar experience when I was your age. I read the books of jurisprudence but did not understand anything of importance. However, I did not have the courage you have to admit my incapacity to comprehending the subject matter.

My conservative upbringing and shyness stood between me and asking my father critical questions concerning the transitional period from boyhood to adulthood. I did not realize that puberty could be identified not necessarily by age alone, until... and there I intervened:

* And can puberty be known through other phenomena?

– Yes, my son. Puberty in males could be confirmed if one of three signs was present.

First: Completion of fifteen lunar calendar years of age.

Second: Ejaculation through sexual intercourse, or seminal discharge while awake or asleep.

Third: The presence of pubic hair, of the rough type, similar to head hair.

* Pubic hair?

– The spot where pubic hair can be found is the one below the belly and immediately above the penis.

* These are the signs of male puberty. What about the signs of female puberty?

– Puberty in females could come about when they complete nine lunar calendar years.

* Since I was blunt about my shortcomings in finding it rather difficult to comprehend the subject matter of jurisprudence books, dare I suggest we hold sessions so that you can explain to me all that which I should be aware of. In so doing, I can implement religious injunctions in the manner they were decreed by Allah, the Exalted. If I may add. Can this take the form of dialogue?

– As you like.

* However, with what shall we start our first dialogue?

– We will start it with taqleed, for it is the foundation that will determine the contours and milestones of what we try to apply of our jurisprudence.

* It's a deal.

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