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Qur'anic Outlook Regarding the "Heart"

Perhaps I need not explain here that in the language of literature and mysticism the term heart does not mean the organ situated in the left side of the human body, which pumps blood into the blood vessels. What is implied is the sublime and distinguishing faculty of the human soul, as can be readily understood from the following examples from the Qur'an and verses of Sa'di:

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَذِكْرَىٰ لِمَنْ كَانَ لَهُ قَلْبٌ

"Surely in that there is a reminder to him who has a heart …" (***50:37***)

My heart was alarmed

[*on sensing the coming danger*],

While I, a thoughtless dervish,

Do not know what

this wandering prey has come across.

These two examples make it obvious that the connoted meaning of the heart is quite different from the bodily organ. Elsewhere, the Qur'an refers to the ailments of the heart:

فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ اللَّهُ مَرَضًا

"In their hearts is a sickness, and God has increased that sickness …" (***2:10***)

To cure this sickness is beyond the powers of any man of medicine, even the heart specialist; only the doctors of the spirit can diagnose such diseases and suggest proper remedies.

Definition of the Heart

What is the definition of this heart then? An answer to this question is to be sought in the reality of human existence. Every human being, although he is a single individual, possesses myriads of existential dimensions. The human “self” encompasses myriads of thoughts, desires, fears, hopes and inclinations. Like the ocean which links all rivers with one another, all these components of the human personality are related to the same center, which unites them with one another.

The “self” itself is the deep and unfathomable ocean, whose depths no one can claim to have charted out and to have discovered all its mysteries. Philosophers mystics, and psychologists ––each of them has tried in his own specific way to explore its depths, and has succeeded only to a certain degree in discovering its secrets.

Perhaps the mystics, a bit more than others, have been successful in this regard. What the Qur'an refers to as the heart, is the reality of that ocean, which includes all that we name as the manifestations of the soul, to which all its rivers and tributaries are connected. Even reason is one of the various rivers associated with this sea.

In places where the Qur'an speaks of revelation, it does not make any mention of reason; rather it is merely concerned with the heart of the Prophet (S). This does not mean an absence of rational and demonstrative reception of the Holy Qur'an on the part of the Prophet, but it was his heart which, in a state that we cannot imagine, obtained the direct experience and awareness of those transcendental realities. The verses of Suurat al–Najm and Suurat al–Takwir describe the state of this union to some extent:

وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ الْقُوَىٰ ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَىٰ ثُمَّ دَنَا فَتَدَلَّىٰ فَكَانَ
قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَىٰ فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ مَا أَوْحَىٰ مَا كَذَبَ الْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَىٰ

Nor speaks he out of caprice. This is naught but a revelation revealed taught him by one terrible in power, very strong; he stood poised, being on the higher horizon, then drew near and approached nearer, two bow's length away, or nearer, then revealed to His servant that He revealed. His heart lies not of what he saw. (***53:3–11***)

The Qur'an mentions all these things to show that these matters are basically beyond the range of rational understanding.

إِنَّهُ لَقَوْلُ رَسُولٍ كَرِيمٍ () ذِي قُوَّةٍ عِنْدَ ذِي الْعَرْشِ مَكِينٍ مُطَاعٍ ثَمَّ أَمِينٍ وَمَا صَاحِبُكُمْ بِمَجْنُونٍ وَلَقَدْ رَآهُ بِالْأُفُقِ الْمُبِينِ

“Truly this is the word of a noble messenger having power, of honoured place with the Lord of

the Throne, obeyed, moreover trusty. Your companion is not possessed; he truly saw him on the clear horizon; he is not niggardly of the Unseen." (***81:19-23***)

Muhammad Iqbal offers a fine interpretation of this subject. He says that the prophet is one who, at first, imbibes the entire truth, and later on, in order to enrich the world and to alter the course of history, communicates everything that has reached him by the way of Revelation.

Wherever the Qur'an speaks of the revelation and the heart, al- though its import transcends the limits of reason and thought, its speech is not irrational or anti-rational. It expounds a vision which surpasses human reason and sensibility, and enters a domain which is, basically, beyond reason and intellect.

Characteristics of the Heart

The Qur'an regards the heart, also, as an instrument of understanding. In fact, the greater part of the Qur'anic message is addressed to the human heart --a message which is audible to the ears of the heart alone, and is inscrutable to other receptive faculties. Accordingly, it attaches great importance to the care, protection, and development of this instrument. In the Qur'an, we recurrently come across such notions as purification of the self, purity and enlightenment of the heart, and purification of the heart:

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا

"Prosperous is he who purifies it [***the self***]***."*** (***91:9***)

كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

"No indeed; but that they were earning has overwhelmed their hearts. "(***83:14***)

And about the salvation and enlightening of the heart, the Qur'an says:

إِنْ تَتَّقُوا اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ فُرْقَانًا

"If you fear God, He will assign you [***the capacity of***] ***distinguishing ..."***(***8:29***)

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا

"But those who struggle in Our [***cause***]***, surely We shall guide them in Our ways... "***(***29:69***)

Contrarily, the Qur'an recurrently reminds that indecencies infect and darken the human soul, and

deprive the human heart of sublime inclinations and virtuous tendencies. At one place, speaking on behalf of the believers, it says:

رَبَّنَا لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوبَنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا

"Our Lord, make not our hearts to swerve after Thou hast guided us ..." (***3:8***)

Describing the qualities of the evildoers, the Qur'an says:

كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

"No indeed; but that they were earning has overwhelmed their hearts. "(***83:14***)

The darkness of sin and injustice has engulfed their hearts:

فَلَمَّا زَاغُوا أَزَاغَ اللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ

"When they swerved, God caused their hearts to swerve ... "(***61:5***)

About the sealing and hardening of the hearts, it says:

خَتَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِمْ وَعَلَىٰ أَبْصَارِهِمْ غِشَاوَةٌ

"God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a covering ... "(***2:7***)

And also:

وَجَعَلْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ أَكِنَّةً أَنْ يَفْقَهُوهُ

"We lay veils upon their hearts lest they understand it ..". (***6:25***)

كَذَٰلِكَ يَطْبَعُ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِ الْكَافِرِينَ

"So does God seal the hearts of the unbelievers." (***7:101***)

فَقَسَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَكَثِيرٌ مِنْهُمْ فَاسِقُونَ

"So that their hearts have become hard, and many of them are ungodly." (***57: 16***)

All these verses point to the fact that the Qur'an recommends a sublime, spiritual atmosphere for mankind, and deems it necessary for every individual to strive to keep it clean and unpolluted. In addition, since an unsound social atmosphere renders fruitless the efforts of most individuals to keep pure and wholesome, the Qur'an recommends that the people should employ all their endeavour in the direction of purification of their social atmosphere.

The Qur'an unequivocally propounds the view that the continued existence of all those sublime values, beliefs and ideas, and continued social receptivity to all its moral advice and counsels, depend upon individual and collective struggle to eradicate all types of meanness, sensuality, and lewdness.

Human history itself is a witness to the fact that whenever despotic regimes have wanted to bring other societies under their autocratic rule, they have tried to corrupt their social spirit and pollute their social atmosphere. They provided enormous facilities for the people to indulge in licentiousness, and gave them every kind of freedom in this regard. A heart-rending account of this unholy treatment meted out to Muslims of Spain --a region which is regarded to have played an effective role in initiating the Renaissance, and had the most advanced culture in Europe-- throws enough light on this phenomenon.

In order to divest Spain out of Muslims' hands, the Christians resorted to defilement of the morals of Muslim youth, by providing ample facilities for their debaucheries. They even went to the extent of alluring and enticing the army generals and government officials in topmost ranks. They thus succeeded in diverting Muslims from the path of determination and purpose, and in divesting them of their power, their strength of faith, and purity of soul, converting them into profligate weaklings addicted to drinking and licentiousness.

It is obvious that it is not very difficult to subdue such individuals. Christians took revenge on nearly eight hundred years of Muslim rule in such a way that history is ashamed at recounting those deeds. The same Christians who, according to the teachings of Jesus Christ ("offer your left cheek if your right cheek is slapped"), were supposed to behave in a different way, surpassed the bloodthirsty tradition of Genghiz Khan by the massacre of Muslims in Spain. Nevertheless, the ruin that Muslims suffered was the result of their own spiritual degeneration and decay; it was their punishment for abandoning the Qur'anic commands.

In our times, also, wherever the evil of colonialism exists, the same practices are vigorously adopted --a danger against which the Qur'an so emphatically warns us. The colonialists try to corrupt the hearts; when the heart is thus debilitated, reason, too, is not only lost and fails to function properly, but is itself turned into a terrible bondage.

The colonialists and the exploitive powers are not afraid of establishing schools and universities: they even advocate popular education; but, on the other hand, they take good care to make arrangements to corrupt and destroy the spirit of students, and of the teachers as well. They are fully aware of the fact

that an unhealthy mind and a sickly soul cannot make any decisive move, and readily yield to every type of exploitation and degradation.

That is why the Qur'an gives ample importance to the idea of exaltation, edification, and purity of the soul of society. In one of its verses, it says:

وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ

***"And help one another to piety and God-fearing, do not help each other to sin and enmity… "*(*5:2*)**

Men are, firstly, enjoined to pursue piety and are warned against sinning; secondly, they are asked to perform righteous deeds collectively, not individually.

Here I shall mention two or three sayings of the Prophet (S) and the Imams (A) in order to elucidate this point. There is a tradition that once a person came in the presence of the Prophet (S) and told him that he wished to ask certain questions. The Prophet asked him whether he wanted to listen to the answers, or if he wished to ask questions first. He asked the Prophet (S) to give the answers. The Prophet (S) told him that his question was concerned with the meaning of virtue and goodness. The man affirmed that he intended to ask exactly the same question.

The Prophet gently knocked the man's chest with his three fingers, saying: "Put this question to your own heart;" then he added: "This heart is so made that it is harmonious with virtue; it is put at ease by virtue and piety, but disturbed by vice and villainy. In the same way, as presence of an alien disharmonious object in the human body causes uneasiness and discomfort, and disturbs its order, the human soul is thrown off its balance and ease on account of faulty behaviour." What is commonly called the pain and torment of the conscience, is the same state of inconformity and alienation of the soul:

[*For an honest insight*] *ask your own heart, though the masters may have their own* (*different*) *opinion.*

The Prophet (S) points out the fact that if a person endeavours to seek reality and truth with an open and impartial mind, his heart can never deceive him in this regard; it will always guide him towards the straight path. Basically, as long as man is in search of truth and reality, and treads the path of truth, whatever he encounters in this course is nothing but truth. This is, of course, a very delicate point which is often misunderstood.

When someone falls into misguidance and loses his path, it is because he was following a certain direction which was not determined by sincere search of truth. Answering someone who had asked the Prophet, "What is virtue?," he said, "If you really want to know what is virtue, then understand that when your heart is serene and your conscience at rest, whatever has caused them to be such, is virtue. But when you are attracted towards something, and that does not bring peace and serenity to your heart, then you should know that it is vice and sin."

Elsewhere, when the Prophet (S) was asked about the meaning of faith (iman), he said, “When one performs an ugly deed, and is overwhelmed with the feeling of reproach and displeasure, and when one performs virtuous deeds and feels happy and joyous, it means that he is endowed with faith.”

It has been quoted from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (A) that when a believer liberates himself from all worldly bondages, he feels the delight of nearness to God within his heart; in this state, the whole world appears to him very small and insignificant; he strives with all power to liberate himself from the bondages of the material world. This is a reality attested by the lives of the men of God.

In the biographies of the Prophet (S), it is written that once after his morning prayers the Prophet (S) went to visit the Ashab al-Suffah. They were a group of poor men who did not possess any worldly belongings, and used to live by the side of Prophet's Mosque in al-Madinah. When the Prophet (S) happened to see one of them, Harith ibn Zayd, who looked rather pale and emaciated, his eyes sunk deep inside his skull, he inquired, “How are you.” He answered, “I have woken up a man of certain faith.” The Prophet asked him what proved his claim.

He answered, “I am bereft of sleep at nights and engage in fasting during the days.” The Prophet told him that this was insufficient. “Tell me more about it,” he said. Harith said, “O Messenger of God, my condition is such that I can clearly see and hear the people of heaven and those of hell. If you permit me, I will inform you about the secret thoughts and inner states of every one of your companions.” The Prophet bade him hold his tongue, and say no more; but asked him, “What is your desire?” He said, “To fight in the way of God.”

According to the Qur'an, furbishing of the human heart exalts a human being to such a point that, in the words of Ali (A), even if the veils that conceal the Unseen be removed from in front of him, there is nothing that can enhance his faith. The teachings of the Qur'an are meant to educate man to become a being equipped with the power of knowledge and reason on the one hand, and possessed of a pure heart and sound feeling on the other. They aim to train a human being who is able to employ his reason and heart in the most proper and exalted fashion. The Imams (S) and their true pupils were examples of such human beings.

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