

Islamic Faith and Human Perfection

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What is that faith which is spoken of in Islam and referred to throughout the Qur'an, as an axis around which all questions revolve? It refers to faith in God in the first place. In the second place, it connotes faith in angels, holy books, prophets, Resurrection, etc. In Islam, is faith a goal for mankind or a means for other goals?

All these are goals for man, for no divine goals or means are involved. These goals are meant as human accomplishments towards perfection.

Is faith itself a human perfection which has been recommended to him? Or has man been called upon to have faith because of its good effects? Philosophers put this question like this: "Is faith a blessing for man, or something useful?" There is a difference between a blessing and being useful. A blessing is in itself a perfection desired for itself, not for something else. But anything useful is good because of its beneficial effect. It is a prologue to a blessing, but not a blessing in itself.

In discussing Islam as a school of thought, it must be clarified whether faith is a goal and a blessing, irrespective of its effect. We speak of effects of faith and say it gives tranquility and fortitude against calamities, and in a society the people can trust one another, and show benevolence and avoid malevolence.

But is faith good because of its effects, or because it seeks perfection in itself? Here comes the question: What does human perfection consist of? This is more difficult to answer than the perfection of other matters. In the world we can often distinguish perfection of things. We can say how a perfect apple should be; it refers to its flavor, color, delicacy and shape, and if an apple has these qualities we call it perfect.

A perfect house can easily be defined, so can a horse. But it is most difficult to define a perfect human being. Therefore various views concerning him must be studied to see which is right, or if we cannot do so scientifically, at least we should see how and to what extent such views are confirmed by the Qur'an.

Can it be said that a perfect being is he who gets maximum benefit from nature which is external to him? But this is wrong for two reasons: Firstly we do not define other things in this way. We do not say a horse is perfect merely because it gets the highest benefit. We should consider its own particular qualities and assets. We do not think a horse perfect because of eating a large quantity of fodder. Nor do we call an

apple perfect because of its getting more air, water and light. Secondly, it is hard to conscientiously agree that the most perfect man is one who benefits most from nature For it implies that a defective man is he who benefits less or least!

Let us compare two human beings: Muawiyah enjoyed maximum benefits in his eighty years of life. He was ruler of Syria for forty years (Twenty years as a powerful governor, and another twenty as a powerful Caliph).

Then there was Ali (a) who lived an ascetic life, with a philosophy for it, whether this philosophy was to be free, or generous or humane, or not to be taken in by the world, but to give his heart to spiritual things, Whatever it was, his share of this world's gifts was a few loaves of bread,

Should we then call him imperfect on account of his benefiting least from the world? If we say this, we are making out man to be less than an animal, for, we do not evaluate any animal by the standard of its benefiting from the world, even though some people have no other thought but this in evaluating human beings. But there is no one who believes this to the extent of negating every spirituality.

Here another point comes up, that is, if such benefiting is not human perfection in this world, what about the next one? This would mean the perfection of man is to deserve and benefit from God's gifts. However, this is not possible in its utmost measure in this world, so people pray for securing maximum benefit in the next world. In speaking of such worship, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) says; "For such men worship is like working for which a wage is expected so that, without that wage, there would be no willingness to work."

From the viewpoint of Islamic logic, such a belief would mean a deficient kind of worship, to show devotion and worship only in order to be rewarded in heaven, There are many references to this by the Imams (t) such as this:

"Those who worship for fear, act like slaves fearing their master." Similar are the words of Ali [The Nahj ul Balaghah, Wisdom 229: "Some worship God for the sake of their desires, and that is merchants' worship; some worship for fear, and that is slaves' worship; and some worship out of gratitude and that is the worship of the noble,"]

Again, in another saying, Ali (a) is even more explicit: "O God, I do not worship you for fear of your Fire or for cupidity in desiring heaven; I worship you because you are worthy of it."

Therefore, it is not right to think of human perfection as the ability to secure maximum material benefits, even by negating every virtue in this world, or to postpone such benefits to future life. There are various materialistic views all of which end with the idea of benefit, Spiritual views are of the following types:

1) The first and perhaps the most important is the view of the gnostics concerning "Perfect

Man ." Their view is derived from various religions They are inspired by ideas, such as 'Adam', 'Prophets', 'Saints' and the 'Perfect Man' like the "awaited Mahdi" . Mackinion has written a book entitled "Perfect Man in Islam" which has been translated into Arabic by Abdur Rahman Badawi, In it he says: "The theory of perfect man is not a Hellenic bequest, for, Greek philosophy has said nothing of it ."

In the Islamic world this topic has been presented by the Sufis, and especially by Mohuyuddin Arabi. There are similar books by Abdo-Karim Deylami, Aziz-el-Din Nasafi, and a Sufi poet called Sayed Muhammad Borgheti. The gnostics have a clear view about man's perfection and a perfect man, which may not be wholly acceptable to others, but they offer it with a decisive finality.

They believe that there is one truth and that is God. They consider other things shadows of the truth. In their opinion everything is an attribute of God. If we die without recognizing the truth we would have died in infidelity, ignorance, darkness and absolute unawareness.

A man is perfect when he understands the truth and attains it They think it impossible for God to appear in man or be allied to him, For them incarnation is dualism, so attaining the truth or God means losing one's identity in Him, and that is when man understands the whole truth, and then he will know himself. God is the only truth and everything else is its manifestation, This is some- what similar to the phrase of 'approaching God, except that they believe in phases of proximity, subject to a definite order. So, there are stages of gnosticism before truth is attained, One who does not attain it is imperfect, and man's humanity consists of knowing and attaining truth.

What helps this advance towards God and truth are love, affection and familiarity. The way to Him is through the heart, not the mind or philosophy Every other perfection is derived from this perfection, and for that reason alone it may be considered perfection. Is asceticism perfection? They will say, yes, because it is a condition for following this path. So are humility and other qualities like assistance, and guidance which are moral goodness.

2) Divine philosophers have a view different from that of the gnostics. They think human perfection depends on two things: (1) recognition of facts, or wisdom. Gnostics emphasize truth, but the philosophers attach importance to wisdom, which for them is understanding the reality of things and existence as they are, generally but not to wisdom. For example, the properties of an apple are related to science, not to wisdom. Similarly knowing a city or a house as a whole unit, is different from knowing parts of it.

A sage considers human perfection is the general context of proper and scientific recognition of the universe, His subjective world is a scientific and intellectual one which corresponds with

the objective world. For example in an objective world there is God, and His Universal Order, material, and immaterial, In the scientific and intellectual world, too, these things must exist. For them, then, a perfect human being must recognize wisdom. We may discuss the proof and evidence of wisdom, but we cannot discuss its origin and principle, The Qur'an, too; says (1:269): "The blessing of wisdom may be granted to anyone who He wishes, and he who received it, found much goodness."

Beside wisdom, as a requisite of perfection, a sage also considers justice as a requisite, that is, moral justice on which social justice depends. This means that there should be an equilibrium between human powers and instincts ruled over by his intellectual power. In other words, the intellect must dominate all appetites, passions and imagination, so that each of these powers should be given the moderate share it deserves. In the terminology of a sage what is related to wisdom is called speculative intellect, and what is related to justice is a named practical intellect.

The question that was about 'faith' may be repeated in connection with wisdom, Does wisdom represent to a man an end or means? And is knowledge an end in itself or means, or both? Is knowledge human perfection? If it is, then it involves benefits, and without benefits it is useless, and the more it benefits, the better it is.

3) A third view is that human perfection lies in sentiments, that is, love. This is an ethical viewpoint that claims that a man who has more affection for others is perfect, and if he shows little affection to others he is imperfect, The basis of moral depravity is selfishness; the more one abandons selfishness and shows love for others, the more perfect he is. This is a point emphasised also by Hindus. Gandhi insists thoroughly on this point in his book "This is my Faith . " Hindus emphasize both truth and love, and criticize western civilization which has negated these two things.

4) Another view is that human perfection is beauty. This, of course, does not refer only to physical beauty, but mainly to spiritual beauty. Artistic things show an artistic spirit which creates beautiful things.

5) Another view which may be called a prevalent western one is materialistic, and holds that human perfection lies in power. The more powerful a man is and the more dominating over his environment and other beings, the more perfect he is. Darwin's Theory of Evolution reflects this idea. According to Darwin's criteria, a more perfect being must be powerful enough to preserve himself and remove his rival in the struggle for survival. Darwin is criticized for having annihilated morality by his survival principle.

Some Westerners claim to have discovered that knowledge is what benefits mankind, makes

him more powerful, and prevails over nature. Thus they promoted empirical science, to be used
as an instrument of developing civilization and technology.
This idea had its uses, but they went to such excess that it caused more damage than benefit.
They ignored the sacredness of wisdom, truth, love and faith in which men had believed before.
To them, everything became subordinate to power, and so they tried to change the course of
human advancement. Since then, mankind tends to be devoid of faith in any spirituality, and if
they claim spirituality they act in a contrary manner.
Nietsche' s philosophy, has been criticized for being too extravagant . In any case he has been
frank and outspoken. The logical conclusion of his (and of the intellectual path Bacon and
others have followed) is to place science in the service of power, and to recognize human
.perfection only in power