

Introduction

Perhaps no school of thought has emphasized the nobility and value of humanity to the extent that Islam has. In Islam, man has the highest Possibilities for perfection and closeness to Allah. The divine spirit is breathed into him and he is the representative of Allah on earth. Man will be satisfied with nothing short of closeness to Allah and His pleasure. Nothing can calm the spirit of man but the remembrance of Allah. He can find no rest, but in meeting Allah. The value of man is due to his voluntary relationship to the absolute Truth and to the degree of his similarity that Truth.

Both rebellious humanism and despairing pessimism are distorted perspectives on this jewel of creation. The "straight path" of the Glorious Qur'an, which passes between these two extremes, is servitude and worship of Allah. According to Islam, all perfections and values may be traced back to this, for it is only by servitude and worship of Allah that man can realize his true status and move without interruption toward the Source of the Light.

The creation and strengthening of the spirit of servitude to Allah in man withers the roots of all moral vices and adorns him with all beauties. This is the quick route, the profound and miraculous way prescribed by the Glorious Qur'an for the training of man. Could anything less than this be expected of the Glorious Qur'an, the final message of Allah for mankind?

The Noble Prophet, may the Peace and blessing of Allah be with him and with his household, actually shows that a pure servant of Allah can display all conceivable human perfections. On the one hand, he invited people to tawhid saying, "Say there is no god but Allah and you will be felicitous," and on the other hand, he said, "I have been sent to complete noble characters."

How beautifully tawhid is interwoven with virtue, and faith with practice. What a religion this is that ties together doctrine with jurisprudence and morals, individual affairs with social affairs, piety with economic development and mysticism (irfan) with politics! It is so amazing to find these dimensions interrelated that one wonders how is possible for a person with a bit of information about Islam, who has tasted its comprehensiveness, to seek another way of life?

In this small book, considering these points, an attempt has been made to express the intellectual and

doctrinal foundations of the Islamic moral system and to show the relationship between self-knowledge and knowledge of God and between self-improvement and closeness to God. We hope that once one has realized the need for knowledge and improvement of the self, one will feel the need for spirituality in the depths of his soul and will continue his quest for an ever deeper understanding of religion.

Our book begins with a chapter on the importance of self-knowledge. After introducing the subject of self-knowledge, we explain its importance in the Glorious Qur'an and Islamic traditions (anadith).

The second chapter includes discussions of six benefits of self-knowledge. The first is that through knowledge of one's abilities and limitations one may avoid both egocentric arrogance and a despairing underestimation of one's self. The second is that one may come to recognize his own intrinsic worth and the unworthiness of his own base desires. Related to this point there is a discussion of nobility of spirit (karamat al-nafs).

The third benefit is an understanding that one's being is composed of two parts, body and spirit, the latter of which is the most important and most deserving of our care. Therefore, we should take heed of all our thoughts, words and deeds, knowing that they have effects on the spirit. Both ethics and jurisprudence provide guidance in this area, each in its own way.

The fourth benefit is an understanding that one is not a product of mere chance, but that each of us has been created for a purpose, and that consequently, each of us should discover his mission, and orient his life accordingly. The fifth is that self-knowledge leads to a deeper appreciation of the role of consciousness in self-improvement.

After discussing how things enter our awareness, we conclude that special care should be taken to avoid the formation of detrimental habits. The sixth benefit is that self-knowledge is a gateway to the celestial kingdom (malakut). Conscience and the ability to determine one's nature are two examples of phenomena within us that cannot be analyzed or justified according to material laws. In addition to material life, there are other forms of life, even in this world, and all of these non-material phenomena point the way to the celestial kingdom.

On the basis of the centrality of the spirit in discussions of self-knowledge (and in accordance with the third benefit mentioned in Chapter 2), the third chapter of our book examines the immateriality of the spirit and its independence from the body. Visions of the immaterial spirit by some of the great scholars of Islam of the present age are mentioned along with a discussion of the theoretical and practical dimensions of mysticism ('irfan).

The fourth chapter is about the value and nobility of human beings in Islam. The Islamic perspective on this issue is defended from criticisms by some Western intellectuals, and it is shown how the inherent nobility of man can be completed with the acquisition of virtue. Finally, the question of the comparative nobilities of God's creatures, including angels and humans, is studied.

In the fifth and sixth chapters the Qur'anic perspective on the virtues and vices of human beings is presented along with a discussion of which kinds of traits of character may be acquired voluntarily, and a description of the picture of man to be found in the Glorious Qur'an.

One of the greatest possible human attributes is to be the representative of Allah on earth (khalifat Allah). The meaning and scope of this representation, and its two varieties, generative and legislative, are discussed in the seventh chapter with reference to relevant passages from the Glorious Qur'an.

One of the conclusions to be drawn from the discussions in the previous chapters is that man's perfection depends on the appropriate exercise of his free will. In the eighth chapter the topic of free will is investigated and the fallacy of fatalism and its destructive consequences are exposed.

After recognizing human freedom of will, we find that three factors are needed for its appropriate employment: power, desire and knowledge. The ninth chapter contains a discussion of these, with special attention given to the role of knowledge. The most important sorts of knowledge needed in this regard are five: knowledge of our origin, our present, our future, our ultimate goal and the way to reach this goal. These topics are taken up in the subsequent five chapters.

Chapter ten is about knowing God and Our relation to Him. According to the Qur'an, it is not difficult to become certain of His existence. After knowing God, His benevolence and His freedom from all need, on the one hand, and our total dependence on Him, on the other, we come to an understanding that His commands are solely for our own benefit.

In the eleventh chapter some of the features of this world are mentioned. First, that in our present worldly sojourn we are completely dependent on Allah and subsequently on various material conditions. Second, we reflect upon the ephemeral character of the cosmos, and thirdly the true nature of this life is seen to lack significance in itself, except insofar as it is the only opportunity we have to seek the countenance of Allah (wajh Allah).

The topic of the twelfth chapter is the afterlife, and it includes discussions of corporeal resurrection, the period between death and the resurrection (barzakh), heaven and hell, the relation between our deeds and divine rewards and punishments and the eternity of the afterlife.

There are two major questions which are taken up in the thirteenth chapter: What is the purpose of creation? And subsequently, what should we take to be the goal of our life?

Although the ultimate purpose of creation is not to benefit Allah, Who is completely needless, we may say that, at a certain level, the goal of creation is the perfect man or woman (*insan kamil*). From this it follows that we should adopt as our own goal, that of approximating this status to the extent we are able. The nearness to Allah of the perfect human being is elucidated in terms of its results: material blessings, social justice, and freedom from all obstacles in the process of self-improvement, peace and confidence, entrance into the universe of light, guardianship (wilayah), complete knowledge and eternal happiness.

The last chapter is about how to reach our goal. In short, the Islamic program for reaching the ultimate goal is service to Allah, hence, we should strive to adapt our beliefs, our deeds and our characters to that which is pleasing to Him. There follow discussions of the necessity for personal investigation about basic religious doctrines, the ways to understand our duties to Allah and the need for purification of the heart. After personal investigation into the basic doctrines, we should take care that our understanding of Islam is in accordance with the Glorious Qur'an and the tradition (sunnah) of the Prophet and his household, Peace be with them, for which purpose we should refer to the 'ulama.

There is also an appendix in which there is a discussion of philosophy of punishment according to Islam which is based on the view of man found in the Qur'an. Without going into the details of juridical reasoning, it is argued that the Islamic attitude toward punishment is more harmonious with essential human values than humanistic approaches to this topic.

More than half of the contents of this book was first taught to a group of students from Canada, the United States and the United Arab Emirates in a summer course in Jami'at al-Zahra, and the Imam Mahdi Institute, Qom and Mashhad, in 1994.

These materials were first published at the request of the Editor of Tehran Times in forty-nine installments in that newspaper the following winter and spring. In the summer of 1995, these materials with some additional supplements were taught at Zahra Academy, Qom, to a group of students from Britain, France and Kenya. Praise be to Allah, these materials have met with such a favorable response from students that the directors of the above mentioned centers proposed that they be assembled into a book. Some further materials were added, and the present work was prepared for publication.

While this work was written with the intention that it be used as a text, an attempt has been made to avoid the dull dry style typical of many textbooks, without sacrificing logical organization. The book has been prepared for English language readers, but it is recognized that for many of the readers, English may be a second language, and some readers may be teenagers, and for this reason a simple English style and vocabulary have been selected. The book has been revised several times, in order to avoid linguistic errors, and Dr. Muhammad Legenhausen has edited the whole of it, although it is possible that some mistakes remain.

The discussions contained in this book are based on the Glorious Qur'an, ahadith and clear rational arguments. The abundance of verses of the Qur'an and ahadith which are narrated make it possible for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about the topics discussed. The Arabic texts have been included, with vocalizations (i'rab), to serve to strengthen the Arabic of our younger readers and to provide direct access to the original sources.

We have frequently found it necessary to use our own translation of verses from the Glorious Qur'an, although we have tended to rely on M. H. Shakir's translation. An effort has been made to provide sufficient documentation for the conclusions reached that they should be acceptable to all Muslims, and

some of them for non-Muslims, as well.

We have used the expression the Glorious Qur'an because it is more faithful to the Islamic conception expressed in Arabic as al-Qur'an al-Majid than the expression the Holy Qur'an. Likewise, we have used the expression the Noble Prophet which provides the best approximation to the Arabic al-Nabi al-Akram.

Finally, I would like to offer endless gratitude to Allah, the Almighty and Sublime, and thanks for the providence of the Imam of the Age (may Allah hasten his blessed advent). I would also like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for all the scholars of Islam, especially to Ayatullah Shahid Mutahhari and Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi, without whose works this book could not have been written, and to extend my thanks to those who have so graciously given their help and encouragement for the writing of this book, especially to the editor, and to the administrations and students of Jiimi'at al-Zahrii and Zahra Academy.

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6 Safar 1417

23 June 1996

Source URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/self-knowledge-mohammad-ali-shomali/introduction>