

Fiqh, Islamic jurisprudence; Akhlaq, Ethics

The obligatory rules of Fiqh are concerned with the minimally necessary conditions of human perfection. For humans aspiring to new heights, higher levels of perfection, Divine guidance is provided in the second set of rules, Akhlaq which governs both the world and the soul and provides us with all the Prescriptions we need to reach the highest levels of perfection. Thus, the two sets of rules governing Muslims' lives, are each meant for a different purpose. For instance, while idle chatter is not prohibited it is considered a waste of precious time and not helpful to the spiritual development of the person, and thus prohibited.

Another example which helps to illuminate the difference better is the night prayers, which is highly recommended to all Muslims; and while not mandatory in fiqh, it is compulsory in akhlaq. The reason being that those aspiring to new heights, and striving for perfection, are expected to prepare and develop spiritually by performing certain tasks, such as rising in the majestic dark of the night to offer prayers to the Lord of the universe.

So Fiqh mainly comprises basic and necessary laws whose obedience IS required from all Muslims, and is considered the first step towards development To commit oneself to the laws of Fiqh is not a difficult undertaking, as Islam itself is not a difficult religion.

However, there always are individuals who observe the mandatory laws of fiqh, yet upon getting a glimpse of the Light, want nothing more than to fly to the Flame. For these enraptured souls, Islam has provided akhlaq. They then make mandatory upon themselves deeds which are highly recommended, or mustahab . In addition to performing these recommended tasks, they obey other laws of Akhlaq, and make. unlawful upon themselves that which is not forbidden in Fiqh, yet somehow might be an obstacle on the way to the Light, to perfection.

Therefore there might be thoughts or spiritual qualities which are not directly forbidden in Fiqh, but prohibited in Akhlaq. One destructive thought or quality which is not forbidden in itself in Fiqh is jealousy, which is not a punishable offence in Islamic jurisprudence, nor are we taken to task for such thoughts in the Hereafter. Yet actions issuing from jealousy might be forbidden.

The Noble Prophet said: 'if you are pessimistic then do not let that keep you from continuing, and if you are suspicious about someone, do not judge on that basis, and if you are envious of someone, do not persecute him “

Jealousy has been called the prison of the soul, and such an impediment to one's spiritual development that there is no place for it in akhlaq. We also can find examples of thoughts being the subject of the both sets of rules governing the life of Muslims. One of these, considered one of the greatest sins which mostly manifests itself in one's thoughts, is despair of God's help. There are many Hadiths regarding this subject and it is so grievous a sin that it is considered a form of or disbelief in God.

There are several reasons for this; and just from a psychological point of view, such a person, so lost in sin and so despondent of ever being forgiven by the Lord, has no practical incentive either to save himself, or to save the society from his future misdeeds. This feeling of despair, we are taught in Islam, is worse than the sins themselves.

Even in mandatory, practical laws, fiqh, Muslims are explicitly forbidden from ever losing hope in God's forgiveness. We are told that such despondent thoughts are one of the most effective weapons of Satan, who will rejoice at the spectre of a lost soul, despondent of his Lord's mercy and forgiveness. Such people are told to truly and sincerely repent, amend for past deeds to the extent possible, and have faith that the Almighty God will forgive them.

Another great sin, which also has to do mostly with one's thought, is to think oneself free of the possibility that God will not exact punishment for one's misdeeds. To consider oneself the master schemer somehow able to get away with sin. In the Glorious Qur'an we find:

“They planned and Allah planned, and He is the best of Planners. “ (3:54)

So we are told not to think ourselves beyond God's justice, and not to scheme and deceive, for it is all in vain. One of the words used in this verse is (makr) which when used for man, means deception; but when used in connection with Almighty God connotes planning in an innocent, yet capable manner. An example of this is found in the account of the Quart's attempt on the Noble Prophet's life. They thought their plan carefully through, and in order to spread the blame and avoid the consequences, sent one man from each tribe to carry out the assassination. They were certain that this scheme would prevent the kin and followers of Muhammad (S) from declaring war on all tribes should the culprits be found. But by God's Grace, the Archangel Gabriel revealed their plans to the Prophet and 'Ali (a.s.) decided to occupy his bed, and the Prophet left town that night.

To conclude our discussion of this topic, the third major benefit Of self-knowledge taught in Islam is to know that the spiritual aspect of our being is the most important one, and our spirits are influenced not only by our deeds but also by our ideas. So we must be on guard with respect to our thoughts, and use our knowledge of ourselves to avoid the many pitfalls of the soul. The fourth benefit of self-knowledge is to understand that we were not created by chance. if we deeply contemplate our own selves, our being,

we come to the inevitable conclusion that it is God who created all, and we could not have come into existence by ourselves or simply as a result of our parents' union, had it not been part of His Plan. Naturally man is always in search of a reason for his existence, his being, but through contemplating creation and the goals of creation, one realises that we are each unique, with a mission in life. We were not created by chance and in vain.

Armed with this knowledge, one is well equipped to strive and to realise the purpose of one's creation, to incessantly seek to return to Him through deeds which are dear to him, Godly acts which are the cornerstone of religion and give life meaning. The fifth benefit is the tremendous help one receives in truly appreciating the element of consciousness, which is critical to the process of spiritual development and purification. Through self-knowledge, we are able to cultivate and develop our self-awareness, our consciousness; otherwise external factors may come to influence us in ways we cannot control.

One of the characteristics of man is that with respect to changing matters and constant ones, he is not always aware of the latter. This is so that our attention is not fixed and held on constants and we are therefore able to take measure of new things. Allah has made us in this way to enable us to attend to new matters; otherwise our attention would be fixed on only one thing. (Of course, it is possible for us to strengthen our spirit to pay close attention to more than one thing at the same time.) For example when we first put on a watch we are aware of it, but after ,while we lose consciousness of it until we want to know the time; or we feel the weight of our clothes at first and then we neglect it. We feel hungry or not hungry through the changes of the size of our stomach.

We should utilise this psychological point in our spiritual lives. There are times when major catastrophes can befall one's soul, without the person being aware of it. There are instances of people who are totally lost in life and not even aware of the fact. This can progress to the extent of total disbelief in God, without the person being aware of the change in himself, in his consciousness. This is because humans are created in such a way that they are much more aware of sudden changes than subtle ones. One could undergo drastic changes in beliefs and yet these changes not be readily obvious to the person. A good example is lying. Most humans, specially in the early stages of childhood, cannot tell a lie, especially if it is the very first time they have engaged in such behaviour, without feeling uneasy, uncomfortable, and later, remorseful. As one repeats this behaviour though, the soul becomes inured to the effects, and one can lie, cheat, and deceive with little effort or discomfort. Even worse, one may not at all be conscious of the change one has gone through. Self-knowledge lets one see these changes coming, giving the person the opportunity to correct such character defects, and once again tread the path of God.

With most people however, only cataclysmic events in their personal lives can cause them to become aware of these character defects. With those armed with it will not come to that. By paying attention to one's consciousness and caring for it, one can gain awareness of the subtle changes that occur in the inner life and take corrective steps when needed.

The Almighty God tells us in the Glorious Qur'an:

“Then it was the fate (end) of those who did evil, to reject Divine signs, and become accustomed to mocking them. “ (30: 10)

So it is with human beings, given consciousness and free will, we can destroy ourselves or we can attain happiness and peace if we are aware of ourselves, our actions, and most importantly aware of the Almighty God at all times.

The sixth benefit of self-knowledge is that it serves as a gateway to the non-material or spiritual world. Once we pass through the gates we find many things which from a strictly materialistic point of view do not make sense. An example of this is the conscience, which can not be justified or explained by merely materialistic laws. How wonderful it is that all human beings from time immemorial, regardless of upbringing, culture, and religion hear the same call from within. People seem to instinctively realise what is right and what constitutes a wrong. Every person considers oppression and injustice as bad, and justice as good and desirable. Even oppressors themselves wish to be treated justly. It is said that even thieves, when dividing the loot, pick the one among them they deem trustworthy to do the job.

Through self-knowledge we come to understand that all things except human beings have an inherent nature which cannot be changed. For instance, a stone is forever stone, no matter how many changes it goes through when different things are made of it. With human beings it is the exact opposite. Although we all inhabit more or less the same kind of a physical body, we have different natures. We are told that on the Day of Judgement, when the veil is finally lifted from before our eyes, we will see ourselves and others as they really are. Their true natures will appear. In the Glorious Qur'an we read:

“On the day when hidden things will be made manifest. “ (86:9)

And there is another verse:

“The day on which the trumpet shall be sounded so you shall come forth in hosts” (78: 18)

According to Hadith, hosts means groups of people and other beings, grouped according to their true natures. Some might appear as dogs or monkeys. Some human beings could have fallen lower than a bug, while others could have ascended higher than angels. We learned that in Islam, human beings are not valued the same. One can, through despicable deeds rank below the lowliest of species and conversely, rise higher than angels, in the eyes of God.

According to other worldviews, all human beings are considered as one and the same. Zionists and their victims, or Serbs and their victims are considered as humans with the same rights and both have to be respected. But in Islam, there are two distinct levels of humanity, therefore two distinct levels of laws, relationships, etc.

First, there are basic laws applied to all human beings, arising from their basic rights, their birth right for

having been created human. The second level of laws are exclusively applied to real human beings, who through countless Godly deeds have risen to a level inaccessible to others who have not conducted themselves in a similar fashion. The underlying reason for this is that the relationship between the Creator and man is a very special one, with the Lord granting certain rights exclusively to those who tread His path.

One aspect of this relationship, aside from the laws, is the insight that the Almighty God grants the faithful, enabling them to understand people's true natures and characters in this life. There are also some awesome privileges granted to the righteous which have not even been granted to angels. Again, the reason seems to be that man, given free will, when exceedingly righteous and pious, is also accorded certain privileges denied to angels. For instance, when the Noble Prophet ascended to the Heavens in the majestic night of Miraj (Ascension), he was at times accompanied by the Archangel Gabriel; but there were places and dimensions of the universe which were denied the archangel, for, in his words, quoted by the Noble Prophet: "If I had gone even a fingertip further I would have been burnt. "

In the Glorious Qur'an we read that when the Noble Prophet (S) ascended to the Heavens he got as close as any created being could ever hope to the Lord of the universe:

"Then he drew near, then he hewed, so he was the measure of two bows or closer still. And He revealed to His servant what He revealed. " (53: 8–10)

Here we should not forget that in the Glorious Qur'an at times the Lord speaks to us in allegory, especially when matters are well over our heads. So the distance mentioned here should also be taken in the same vein, meaning that the Noble Prophet was only two stages beyond seeing the Lord of the universe in all His Majesty.

These and matters like them are learned through It is, as mentioned earlier, the gateway to the non-material, metaphysical world. Thus, we reviewed some Islamic teachings regarding the widely divergent values of different human beings to their Creator and to each other. We also saw how self-knowledge helps open the Gates of the spiritual world, presenting a breathtaking vista to those who step inside.

As for those who choose a different life, sinking deep, and drowning in the vortex of sin, the Glorious Qur'an says:

"And certainly we have created for Hell many of the Jinn(I) and the men; they have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not hear; they are as cattle, nay, they are in worse error, they are the heedless ones. " (7:179)

These, who remain totally oblivious of their Lord and the spiritual aspects of themselves, are called "dead," by the Glorious Qur'an Since we are taught that of the two aspects of our live, the physical, material life and the spiritual life, the latter is much, much superior, and is centred on faith and deed. To

be truly alive and aware in this world, we are taught in the Glorious Qur'an to believe in the Almighty God, His words, and His last Prophet: ***“O' believers! Accept the words of Allah and the Prophet when he calls you to that which gives you life. “*** (8:24)

Some people only have the physical life, and therefore can comprehend only material, physical things; others have both the physical and spiritual lives, thus can understand both. Given the immensely constructive role religion as a framework for conduct in this life can play in people's lives, and the overall world view which it presents to the faithful to guide their lives, it is astounding that today a great number of people forsake their faiths. To some this is because they feel they will lose their “freedom” to do as they wish, that religion somehow takes away their freedom, and one would be a slave, so to speak. Well, we are all slaves, in a way. Some of God, some of money, power, desires, etc. The way then to be truly free is to obey God and His Commandments, and release oneself from other “gods”. It is not an easy task satisfying many gods, but to please one, especially when the belief itself strengthens the person, and releases one from limitations, is not a difficult undertaking.

The person who chooses God, is no longer a slave of others, but has reached a level of lordship. We see in Hadiths that: “The servanthship is a substance whose essence is the lordship. “

The Prophet of Islam was a slave of the Almighty God by choice. We also express this sentiment several times a day during our ritual prayers: “I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger. “

Yet this seemingly bonded man changed the history of the world. He successfully fought powers which opposed God, yet was honoured to prostrate himself before Allah. Anything but freedom is one's reward when one selects a life without religion, without a relationship with the Creator.

“Have you seen him who takes his low desires for a god? Will you then be a protector over him? Or do you think that most of them do hear or understand? They are nothing, but cattle, nay, they are straying further of the Path. “ (25:43–44)

“Allah sets forth an example: There is a slave in whom are (several) partners differing with one another, and there is another slave wholly owned by one man. Are the two alike in condition? (All) praise is due to Allah. Nay most of them do not know. “ (39:29)

There are three couplets attributed to Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) with which we will end our discussion. It only seems fitting, since the Imam's words eloquently show the importance of self-knowledge: “The cure is with you, but you do not see, And the illness is from you, bur you are unaware. You are the clear book whose letters make manifest the hidden. Do you think you are some small mass while within you there dwells a great world?”

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