

Moral System of Islam



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In this paper, we will try to develop an acquaintance with aspects of the Islamic moral system while taking a glance at the fruits and outcomes of living a life of faith and embarking on the spiritual journey. Moral teachings of Islam can be classified as follows:

- Instructions about one's relationship with God;
- Instructions about one's relationship with oneself;
- Instructions about one's relationship with other people including family, relatives, friends, neighbours, strangers, clients, teachers, students, fellow-human beings, and so on;
- Instructions about one's relationship with the environment including, animals, plants, air, water and other living and non-living beings.

There is very rich literature pertaining to each category. Some examples from each category will be discussed in this paper.

1. Relationship with God

Remembrance of God

Many verses the Holy Qur'an command the believers to remember God. For example, the Holy Qur'an says:

“Remember your Lord much and glorify Him in the evening and the morning.” (3:41)

“And remember the name of your Lord and devote yourself to Him with exclusive devotion.” (73:8)

Remembrance of God has a lot of advantages and benefits such as the serenity and tranquility that can be attained in the heart:

“Those who believe and whose hearts find serenity by the remembrance of God; now surely by God's remembrance hearts find serenity and tranquility.” (13:28)

The other benefit of remembering God is that the heart becomes luminous. In this regard, Imam Ali has said,

“Certainly God, the Glorified, has made His remembrance the luminosity and shine of the hearts.”¹

Worship

God, in various verses of the Qur’an, commands us to worship Him sincerely and faithfully,

“Surely We have revealed to you the Book with the truth, therefore worship God being sincere to Him in obedience.” (39:2)

Addressing Abraham, God says,

“Say: surely my prayer and my sacrifice and my life and my death are all for God, the Lord of the worlds.” (6: 162)

Trust in God

There are many verses in which God commands the believers to trust Him:

“And on God should you rely and trust if you are believers.” (5:23)

Repentance

In numerous verses God asks the believers to repent to Him and ask His forgiveness,

“O you who believe! Repent towards God a sincere repentance.” (66:8)

“And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then repent towards Him surely my Lord is Merciful, loving-kind.” (11:90)

2. Relationship with Oneself

Purification of the soul: God puts emphasis on the purification and purity of the human soul by swearing eleven times in the following verse,

“I swear by the sun and its brilliance, and the moon when it follows the sun, and the day when it makes manifest the sun (and her beauty), and the night when it covers the sun, and the heaven and Him who made it, and the earth and Him who extended it, and the soul and Him who made it perfect, then He inspired it to understand what is right and wrong for it. He will indeed be successful who purifies it and he will indeed fail whoever pollutes and corrupts it.” (91: 1–10)

Purification of the soul is a prerequisite for proximity to God. Indeed, the whole point of morality and

spirituality is to purify one's soul. It is only when this is achieved that the soul starts shining, receiving and reflecting the radiation and light from God.

A major task of all the Prophets and one of the aims behind all their endeavors in teaching the divine message was to help people to purify their souls.

The Qur'an says,

“He is the one who has sent amongst illiterate people an apostle from among themselves who recites to them His verses and purifies them and teaches them the Book and the wisdom.” (62:2)

“Certainly God conferred a great favour upon the believers when He raised among them a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His communications and purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the wisdom, although before that they were surely in manifest error.” (3: 164)

The verse below was an answer to the prayer of Abraham and Ishmael after they raised the foundations of the Holy House (Ka'bah):

“Our Lord! Accept from us; surely You are the Hearing, the Knowing... Our Lord! And raise up in them a Messenger from among them who shall recite to them Thy communications and teach them the Book and the wisdom, and purify them; surely Thou art the Mighty, the Wise.” (2: 127-129)

The above-mentioned verses clearly show the great significance of purification of the soul. The reason for such an emphasis is that God is the most Pure and the most Perfect and it is only by the purification of the soul that we can hope to attain closeness to Him.

Self-control

In this regard, the Qur'an says,

“And as for him who fears to stand in the presence of his Lord and forbids his own soul from its whims and caprices then surely the Paradise is the abode.” (79:41 & 42)

“O David! ...do not follow the whims of your own soul for they will lead you astray from God's path.” (38:26)

“O you who believe.... Do not follow your low desires (the whim of your soul).” (4: 135)

In Nahj al-Balaghah, Imam Ali has been quoted saying,

“In the past I had a brother-in-faith, and he was prestigious in my view because the world was humble in his eyes... if two things confronted him he would see which was more akin to his whims and he would oppose it.”²

Truthfulness

There is a great emphasis on truthfulness in both, the Holy Qur'an and traditions. Some examples are cited below:

“O you who believe! fear the wrath of God, and say only that which is true.” (33:70)

“O you who believe! Fear the wrath of God and be with those who are truthful.” (9:119)

In addition to these verses, after appointing Ma'adh b. Jabal as the governor of Yemen, the Holy Prophet told him,

“I command you to fear God, tell the truth and keep your promises...”³

Humility

In Islam arrogance is considered a fatal deficiency of the human soul and a major source of many sins and mistakes. According to the Qur'an, the reason that Satan refused to obey God and prostrate before Adam was his arrogance. On the other hand, humility is a very great virtue. The Qur'an says:

“And the servants of the Beneficent God are those who go (walk) on the earth with humility and when the ignorant address them they reply peaceably and with great courtesy.” (25:63)

“And do not treat people with arrogance, nor go about in the land exulting over much, surely God does not love any self-conceited boaster.” (31:18)

Being moderate and balanced

As mentioned earlier, God created the world with justice and in turn, He expects human beings to act justly. A requirement of justice is to give everything its due right and to strike a balance. Dealing in extremes leads to injustice to oneself or to others. Below, a verse about balance in general is mentioned first and it is then followed by two verses about specific cases in which balance is required,

“And the heaven, He raised it high, and He made the balance, that you may not be inordinate in respect of the measure, and keep up the balance with equity and do not make the measure deficient.” (55:7-9)

“They are the ones who, when spending of their sustenance for the sake of God, are neither extravagant nor miserly: as with everything else they practise moderation and strike a correct balance between the extremes.” (25:97)

“Neither speak your prayer aloud, nor speak it in a low tone, but seek a middle course between.” (17:110)

Patience

“O you who believe! Seek assistance through patience and prayer, surely God is with the patient.” (2: 152)

“O you who believe! Be patient and excel in patience and remain steadfast, and be careful of (your duty to) God, that you may be successful.” (3:200)

Suppression of anger

“It (Paradise) has been prepared for those who suppress their anger.” (3: 137)

Avoidance of suspicion

“O, you who believe! Avoid most of suspicion, for surely suspicion in some cases is a sin.” (49: 12)

Imam Ali said,

“Do not regard an expression uttered by any person as evil if you can find it capable of bearing some good.”⁴

Protection of tongue

The Prophet has said,

“The salvation of the believer is in the protection of his tongue.”⁵

“The belief of a person cannot be firm unless his heart is firm, and his heart cannot be firm unless his tongue is firm.”⁶

Luqman said to his son,

“O my son! If you think that the speech is silver, surely the silence is gold.”⁷

Pursuit of knowledge

Islam regards ignorance as a deficiency and the acquisition of knowledge as a virtue. The Qur’an says,

“One who has knowledge can never be equal to the one who is ignorant.” (39:9)

The Prophet has said,

“It is the duty of every Muslim male and every Muslim female to seek knowledge.”⁸

“Seek knowledge even if you have to travel as far as China.”⁹

“If one leaves one's house with the intention of gaining knowledge, for every step that he takes, God shall bestow upon him the reward reserved for a Prophet.”¹⁰

Reasoning and reflection

The Qur'an asks mankind to use reason (47 times), to think (18 times) and to reflect (4 times). For example, it says:

“In the creation of heavens and earth and in the difference between night and day are tokens for men of understanding. These are those who remember Allah, standing, sitting, and reclining, and consider the creation of the heavens and the earth, (and then cry out): Our Lord! Thou hast not created this in vain. Glory be to Thee!” (3: 190–191).

Imam Kazim says:

“Nothing more precious than reason has been given to people. The slumber of a man of reason is better than the worship of the ignorant throughout the night.”¹¹

Imam Askari says:

“Worship does not lie in engaging oneself in saying prayers endlessly or in fasting copiously, but in engaging oneself in the reflection on the divine affairs.”¹²

Focus on One's own Moral Problems

Every Muslim needs to be an active member of society, be aware of what is going wrong in society, and try to promote moral values. However, a person should not forget his own problems and deficiencies.

Imam Ali has said:

“He who sees his own shortcomings (defects) keeps away from looking into other's shortcomings.”¹³

Freedom from Envy

“Or do they envy the people for what God has given them of His grace?” (4:54)

The Prophet has said:

“Surely envy destroys the faith as fire destroys the firewood.”¹⁴

3. Relationship with Other People

There are many instructions that govern relationships with others. Here are some examples:

Fulfilling one's Promise

“And fulfil the promise surely (every) promise shall be questioned about.” (17:34)

“And those who are faithful to their trusts and their covenant.” (70:32)

Delivery of Trust

“Surely God commands you to make over trusts to their owners.” (4:58)

“If one of you trusts another then he who is trusted should deliver his trust.” (2:283)

Pardon

“And those who restrain (their) anger and pardon people.” (3:135)

“They should pardon and turn away. Do you not love that God should forgive you? And God is Forgiving Merciful.” (24:22)

The Holy Prophet has said,

“May I lead you to the best moralities of this world and the life to come? These moralities are to regard him who disregard you, give him who deprived you (of his bestowals) and pardon him who wronged you.”¹⁵

Imam Ali has said,

“When you gain power over your adversary, pardon him by way of thanks for being able to overpower him.”¹⁶

Of course, if someone insists on his wrong actions or there is a systematic violation of others' rights the proper action is to speak to that person and ask him to stop his wrong actions. It is also recommended to cancel any debt that someone owes you and that he is unable to repay.

Serving people

In Islam it is very important to render a service to fellow human beings. For example, the Qur'an reports that Jesus Christ has said:

“And He has made me blessed wherever I may be.” (19:31)

Commenting on this verse, Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam has said: “This means that God has made me very useful (for the people).”¹⁷

The Holy Prophet has said:

“To believe in God and to benefit His servants are the two highest characters.”¹⁸

“God loves most the servants who benefit other servants most.”¹⁹

“There are some servants (of God) to whom people resort in needs. They will be safe from the punishment on the Day of Resurrection.”²⁰

Safeguarding family

In addition to general instructions on how to treat other people, there are specific instructions about certain groups of people. For example, due to their very high status in Islam there are many moral and legal guidelines for safeguarding and promoting family life. On the philosophy of marriage for example, the Qur'an says:

“Among His sign is that He has created mates for you from among yourselves so that you find peace and tranquillity with them and He has established love and mercy between you. Surely there are signs in this for those who reflect.” (30:21)

The Qur'an also urges members of the family that is a husband and wife, or children and parents, to display love and mercy for each other. For example, in the verse:

“And treat them (women) kindly.” (4:19)

On the necessity of religiously training members of the family, the Qur'an asks the believers to save themselves and their family members from going astray and doing wrong (66:6).

According to Islam, the family is a sacred institution and everything must be geared towards the protection and promotion of family life. Divorce is permitted in Islam, but is considered to be the worst permitted act.

Respect for Parents

Respect for and obedience and kindness towards parents are enjoined upon Muslims. Unless the parents ask for an unjust act or a sin to be committed, a person needs to obey his/her parents. The Qur'an says,

“And your Lord has commanded that you shall not worship none but Him and has commanded you to treat your parents with good will and respect. If one or both of them should live to old age, do not reproach them in the slightest or send them away in anger, but address them in terms of honour.” (17:23 & 24)

“And He has enjoined on me to be dutiful to my mother.” (19:31)

The Prophet has said,

“It is an act of worship to look at either parent with affection and kindness.” 21

“God is pleased when one has pleased his parents, and God gets angry when one has angered either parent.”22

“Paradise lies under the feet of mothers.”23

Hospitality

In Islam hospitality is considered a very important virtue and is indeed a test of belief in God and the Last Day according to the following mass-transmitted (mutawatir) hadith of the Prophet Muhammad:

“Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, must treat his guest with respect and generosity.”24

Guests are treated with courtesy and given what they need: sustenance, shelter and most importantly, a very warm welcome. The best treatment is to provide the guest with what the host has. Though the host is encouraged to give preference to his guest in using what is available, there is no need to go to great lengths, say, by borrowing money in order to buy new things or better food. The unexpected guests should not expect more than what is available. Those who fail to observe the obligation of hospitality should expect similar treatment when they meet their Lord in the Hereafter. On the other hand those who practice hospitality will be treated in an even better way when they arrive before the judgment of God, the eternal Host.

Respect for the Elders

The Prophet Mohammad has said,

“It is not one of us the one who does not show love and compassion to our kids or does not respect our elders.”25

Visiting the Sick

There are many traditions about the importance of visiting the sick and its etiquette, such as shortening the visit (unless the sick himself wishes them to remain more), praying for the sick person, talking to the sick person about the blessings of God for the sick and taking gifts for him. For example, we read in a hadith:

“The one who visits a sick will be encompassed by the mercy of God.”26

Similar to what is mentioned in the New Testament (Matt. 25:31- 46), we find in a tradition that on the Day of Judgement God will ask certain people why they did not visit Him when He was sick, why they did not feed Him when He was hungry and why they did not have given Him water when He was thirsty. The people will ask how they could have done this while He is the Lord of the entire world. Then God will

reply that someone they knew was sick and they did not visit him, someone was hungry and they did not feed him and someone was thirsty and they did not give him water. Did they not know that if they had done so they would found God with him?

Treatment of the Sick

Life is one of the greatest gifts and blessings of God and therefore, must be appreciated and protected. The guiding principle in Islamic medical ethics is mentioned in the Qur'an,

“If anyone has saved a life, it would be as if he has saved the life of the whole of mankind.” (5:32)

One way of saving lives of people is to treat them when they become sick. It is the mutual responsibility of the sick and the physicians (or society in general). In other words, seeking the treatment is a duty for the sick himself and everybody in the society is obliged to do the needful. The Holy Prophet has said:

“O servants of Allah, seek treatment, for Allah has not sent down any illness without sending down its treatment.”²⁷

This is an example of a set of narrations that makes treatment mandatory when it is available and also prohibits delaying the treatment if doing so is harmful. On the other hand, healing people is considered a sacred job. Indeed, the real healer is God Himself:

“And when I am sick, He restores me to health.” (26: 80)

Respect for Teachers and Scholars

The Fourth Imam has said, “Your teacher has the following rights. Firstly, total respect from you. Secondly that you listen attentively when he speaks. Thirdly, that you never raise your voice in his presence...”²⁸

Resisting Oppression: As was seen earlier, Muslims are required to act with justice in all their dealings with others and in all circumstances. For example, the Qur'an says,

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be the rich or poor...” (4: 135)

According to Islam, to suffer oppression passively is as bad as to commit oppression. He who makes no effort to alleviate the suffering of an oppressed one is an oppressor. In his advice to his sons, Imam Ali says:

“Be an enemy of oppressors and be a friend and helper of those who are oppressed.”²⁹

Charity

The Qur'an enjoins spending one's wealth in the way of God for the poor, the needy, to free slaves, to cure the sick and for other good causes.³⁰

Charity is a precondition to the attainment of piety. In this regard the Qur'an says,

“Those who spend their substance for the sake of God, and follow not up their gifts with reminders of their generosity or with injury, –for them their reward is with their Lord: on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. Kind words and the covering of faults are better than charity followed by injury. God is free of all wants, and He is Most- Forbearing...And the likeness of those who spend their substance, seeking to please God and to strengthen their souls, is as a garden, high and fertile: heavy rain falls on it but makes it yield a double increase of harvest, and if it receives not Heavy rain, light moisture suffices it. God sees well whatever you do.”

(2:262–265)

There are innumerable traditions of the Prophet and the Imams on the merits of charity. It has also been mentioned that “if you have nothing to give, offer at least a kind word or even just an affectionate smile.”

4. Relationship with the Environment

Both in His creation and legislation God has made human beings able to benefit from nature. The Qur'an says,

“And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: Behold, in that are Signs indeed for those who reflect.” (45: 13)

“It is He Who hath created for you all things that are on earth...” (2:29)

However, human beings must make use of nature, and indeed every other gift and blessing, in a responsible way,

“Then on that day you shall most certainly be questioned about the blessings.” (102:8)

Therefore, everything in the world that is at the disposal of human beings is both a gift and a trust. If they were only trusts, humans would not have permission to use them. Since they are gifts of God, they can be used but cannot be wasted or used extravagantly as it is the case with any trust.

“And He it is Who produces gardens (of vine), trellised and untrellised, and palms and seed-produce of which the fruits are of various sorts, and olives and pomegranates, like and unlike; eat of its fruit when it bears fruit, and pay the due of it on the day of its reaping, and do not act extravagantly; surely He does not love the extravagant.” (6: 141)

“O Children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer: eat and drink: But waste not by excess, for God does not love the extravagant.” (7:31)

In addition to this, the Qur’an makes it clear that it is a human responsibility to make efforts to improve the conditions of the globe as much as possible:

“He brought you forth from the earth and has asked you to improve it, therefore ask forgiveness of Him, then turn to Him; surely my Lord is Nigh, Answering.” (11:61)

Therefore, one must be very careful about the way they treat nature and the environment. As an example, some of the human moral and legal responsibilities with respect to animals can be observed. In Islamic hadiths it can be found that the unjustified killing of animals or negligence towards their lives is very severely treated. For example, Imam Sadiq informed those with him about the divine punishment of a woman who had fastened a cat with a rope so that the cat could not move and died out of thirst.³¹

A predominant scholar, ‘Allamah Mohammad Taqi Ja‘fari concludes his discussion about animals in this way:

“Consideration of whole sources of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) leads to the conclusion that animals must not be killed unless there is a legal permission (by God) like benefiting from them or being safe from their harm. There are adequate reasons for prohibiting hunting animals for fun and one can argue from them for prohibition of killing animals without having a permitting cause.”³²

The above idea is part of a broader Islamic perspective on animal life. According to Islam, there are many rights for animals that must be observed. Consideration of those rights shows that not only should their lives be protected, but the quality of their life must also be observed. For example, animals must not be bothered by forcing them to carry heavy goods or to move faster than they tolerate. Neither should animals be cursed or harassed.

It is reported that Imam Ali said:

“Whoever curses an animal he himself will be cursed by God.”³³

1. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 219.
2. Wise-saying 281.
3. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 74, p. 129.
4. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p. 187.
5. Ibid, vol. 68, p. 286.
6. Ibid, p. 287.
7. Ibid, pp. 297 & 298.
8. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 177; vol. 2, p. 32; vol. 67, pp. 68 & 140; vol. 105, p. 315.
9. Ibid, vol. 1, pp. 177 & 180.
10. Ibid, p. 178.
11. Ibid, p. 154.
12. Ibid, vol. 68, p. 325.

13. Nahj al-Balaghah, wise-saying 349.
14. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 72, p. 252.
15. Ibid, vol. 68, p. 399.
16. Ibid, p. 427.
17. Ibid, vol. 14, p. 210.
18. Ibid, vol. 74, p. 139.
19. Ibid, vol. 74, p. 154; vol. 93, p. 160.
20. Ibid, vol. 74, p. 159.
21. Ibid, vol. 71, pp. 80 & 84.
22. Ibid, vol. 74, p. 151.
23. Nuri, Mustadrak Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 15. p.180; Muttaqi Hindi, Kanz al- 'Ummal, vol. 16, p. 461.
24. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 8, p. 144. This hadith has been also narrated by Al-Bukhari, Muslim, Malik, al-Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud, Ibn Majah, al-Darimi, and Ahmad.
25. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 72, p. 138.
26. Ibid, vol. 78, p. 215.
27. Ibid, vol. 59, p. 76
28. Ibid, vol. 2, p. 42.
29. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 47.
30. For mandatory charity, please refer to the discussion about almsgiving in the Chapter Three.
31. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 76, p. 136.
32. Rasa'il-e Fiqhi, p. 250. Elsewhere he writes: "Hunting animals for amusement and without need is prohibited. Therefore, if someone makes a trip for such kind of hunting his trip is a sinful trip". (Ibid, p. 118)
33. Ibid. cited from Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 8, p. 356.

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