

The Role of Religion in Shaping Moral Character: an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Normative ethical theories have taken different approaches regarding moral development. The perspective of religion on moral character and its role in promoting virtues is an important issue. Divine religions, generally, focus more on the inherent character of a person than the specific actions he or she should perform. They try to cultivate pure and moral people, and have presented several factors for the improvement of moral character. Islam's primary focus is also on the moral agent instead of special good deeds and heavily emphasizes on building moral character. To such an extent that it is reported from the Holy Prophet Mohammad (pbuh), the last of all the messengers, "Indeed I have been sent to perfect the excellences of character". This study surveys Islam's viewpoint in elucidating how a divine religion can help us in this regard. It aims to shed a further light upon the most important elements that can improve and develop moral character. This investigation is divided into two parts: the first part discusses the importance of moral character in Islam and explains some of most important factors by which, according to religious texts, one's behavior will be considered as moral. The second part explains the role of Islam in moral development and illustrates what potentiality and methods are used in Islam by which it can designate a consistent moral system which covers all aspects of human life and improve all facets of the soul, hence cultivate a person's thoughts, emotions and behavior morally. Since the cognitive content of virtues and the factors which make for an inner harmony are of vital importance in moral development, they have been concentrated on in this study. As a result, I have emphasized that Islam uses every opportunity to establish a relationship with God which can influence one's whole life, and by virtue of loving Him, as the source of ultimate goodness, can shun vices and behave virtuously. Faith in God is considered as the most important virtue for cultivating a good person.

Keynotes: Ethical system of Islam, Moral Character, Virtue, Moral Development, Muslim Philosophers.

Introduction

Monotheist Religions, like Islam, try to cultivate pure and moral people. Hence in religious ethics the moral agent is of more value than mere moral actions. Thus blind adherence to ethical rules does not carry the value when it has no impact on the agent's moral education. Thereby religions generally focus on moral development, human flourishing and felicity. They seek to help people at shaping their moral character. Due to the necessity of having

virtues for the development of moral character, a variety of virtues are the central issues in religious ethics.

In the religious texts of Islam there are sources of evidence which recommend the development of moral character, to focus on the inner aspect, to act virtuously and to avoid vice, to such an extent that the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the last of the messengers sent to guide mankind said "“Indeed I have been sent to perfect the excellences of character”¹.

In this article I seek to shed a further light upon the Islamic perspective on this matter. The aim of the present study is to investigate what role Islam plays in shaping the moral aspects of character and to illustrate how a divine religion can help man to promote virtues. In other words it seeks to outline those potential methods that are used by Islam to provide the right conditions for moral development. This paper discusses the importance of moral character before explaining the methods.

Section 1: The Importance of Moral Character

There are many sources of evidence which indicate the importance of moral character. In spite of all the moral and ritual commands regarding worship seen in Islamic texts, ethics in Islam is based on moral and religious virtues. The most precedent being Faith in God. The most important factor of being ethical is to have inner purity and a pure heart. This is what makes one's actions worthy.

A variety of books have been written by Muslim scholars in philosophical, mystical and narrative approaches about moral virtues and the efforts made by Muslim philosophers explaining the ethical view of Islam on virtues, indicate the importance of moral character in the ethical system of Islam and amongst Muslims .

Avicenna in *Al-Isharat wa-’l-tanbihat*, and *Al-Najāat*, Ibn Miskaweh in *Al-Tahzib Al-Akhlagh va Al-Tathir Al- a’aragh*, Nasir al-din Tusi in *Akhlagh Naseri*, Sadr al-Motaallehin in *al-Hikmat al-muta’aliyah fi’l-asfar al-aqliyyah al-arba’ah*, known simply as *Asfar* and in *al-Shawahid al-rububiyyah*, Naraghi in *Jami’ Al-Sa’adat*, Farabi in *Al-Madina Al-Fadila* and *Al- Fosul Al-Montaze* and many other philosophers in their books have endeavored to explain virtues and the ways of achieving them, and to comment different types of happiness and the ways of gaining the true happiness.

The interpretation of Ethics by Muslim philosophers is not just a set of rules for moral behavior, but it is with the meaning of settled disposition, whether virtue or vice. Virtue is a settled inner disposition that helps a person to think correctly, to control his/her emotions and feelings, to be able to perform moral conducts easily². Thus a person who gives charity without himself being a generous person, i.e. not having generosity as a settled inner disposition, although his act is not morally wrong but it is not of such ethical value and it can not be praised³. Hence, even though acts of moral behavior are of value and they are essential

for achieving the moral virtues but when actions lacking in moral spirit are of no ethical value, they ultimately do not result in attaining virtues.

The moral spirit is defined as the true ethical motivation that guides a person to purify his/her inner self by abstaining from a wrong intention. In Islamic ethics the moral intention is the most important factor for the acceptance of moral acts⁴. Muslim philosophers are of the belief that virtues and true motivation build one's character. They at the same time do not disregard the impact of moral behavior in shaping moral character⁵. Since one's intention is a hidden inner affair and true motivation is unachievable without a purified heart, thus emphasis on one's intention is in reality to give importance to having a moral character and one's moral development.

In the ethical system of Islam there is a hierarchy of intentions. People according to their moral, rational and spiritual degree befit the relevant and appropriate intention. Thus telling the truth because it is good is a true intention but performing it with the intention of God's pleasure, is the best intention. Intentions at a lower level, like going to paradise (doing good for the reward of heaven) and abstaining from prohibited acts (for the fear of the punishment of hell) are also true intentions⁶.

Thus a person who is chaste, and keeps his chastity simply for the sake of chastity itself, is admirable but if he does it for God, this divine intention will complete his training and perfect his action⁷.

In general, the moral life which leads to perfection and felicity, is based on the cultivation of virtues and purification of the soul as one of the most important fundamental principles.

Section2: The Role of Islam in Moral Development

A well balanced person is one who has developed many different aspects of his character and she is able to show appropriate behavior in different situations. According to educationists, the rational, moral, emotional, individual, social and physical aspects, constitute the basic facets of the human character. Muslim philosophers are of the opinion that the human soul is the subject of ethics and try to explain moral development according to its three powers: Intellectual, Anger and Passion. They believe that a person who has reached a balance in ones powers and has attained the virtue of that power is one who is morally developed. Such person can contemplate and judge correctly in different situations, and also control and express his emotions properly. This is due to the balance and compatibility amongst his powers and because of his inner peace, he ultimately will perform good actions⁸. This is why a moral agent needs to acquire moral and intellectual virtues.

It is important to note that, in the interpretation of Muslim philosophers the human soul is not like a puzzle composed of different parts. Rather it is a simple whole with different levels and degrees by which give rise to the appropriate manifestations and expressions. Sometimes the soul manifests in the level of intellectual power and contemplates, and sometimes manifests

in the level of emotional powers and performs the relevant emotional behavior⁹. Since the philosophers are of the opinion that a balanced person is one whose intellectual power dominates over his emotional powers; inner balanced is achieved by harmony amongst the three powers and by compatibility between his beliefs and desires. In this case his personality is unified.

The important question to pose here is: what are the characteristics of a good person in Islam? Is a moral person in Islamic ethics and Aristotelian ethics the same? In other words, does Islam deem necessary the Aristotelian virtues and if so are they sufficient for being good?

The Islamic perspective of the human being, his status in the world and his relationship with God and people will answer this question. The Islamic view is that the human has two facets: physical and spiritual. He has a free will by which can choose the relevant actions which are aimed for a particular goal. He has not been abandoned in the world and was not created in vain¹⁰, but is created to reach perfection.

This perfection does not mean to attain material or simply a moral life. But the aim is to reach a greater happiness. To achieve this kind of happiness one has to be a good person and has to do good actions. This aim is not achieved without belief in God and faith in Him. Indeed a special meaning is given to life due to man's relationship with God. This is why the relationship between man and God requires further virtues than the mere cardinal Aristotelian virtues. Even though the Aristotelian virtues (wisdom, courage, justice and chastity) and other subdivided virtues are necessary but they are not sufficient¹¹. The most important and most necessary virtue is the belief in God.

Faith is not simply a matter of knowledge but it is an in-depth belief from one's heart that changes one's attitude and insight in regard to his place in the world and to his surroundings. It is due to faith and trust in God that renders him help in controlling his emotions. A religious person knows he is always in the presence of God and this is an important factor in his moral development. Through a firm faith in God we can free ourselves from vices and prohibited deeds and find peace and tranquility. Indeed, faith in God is the foundation stone of the Islamic code of ethics. Faith in God strengthens our hearts to achieve the good and shun the evil, because it makes a harmony between one's beliefs and emotions and denies internal incompatibility between them. Internal disharmony is what results in "*Akrasia*", moral weakness. Indeed, this specific meaning of life has been produced due to faith in God, making the individual calm and without inner contradiction and gives a uniformity to his life, so that he can perform good actions easily. Therefore in Islamic ethics though achieving virtues is not possible without practice, faith in God plays an important role in shaping moral character¹². Faith in God promotes one's eagerness to perform good deed.

Having hope in God, as the Best, the Most Perfect, the Most Merciful, Compassionate, Omniscience and Omnipotent Being, will insure a pious person that he has not been abandoned in the world and he will see the consequence of his actions. Thus, in addition to cardinal virtues we come across many virtues in Islamic texts, that one must obtain, if he wishes to become a good person. Virtues such as: faith in God, trust in Him, hope in Him, purity, compassion, charity, truthfulness, dignity, patience, helping others, respecting and loving others, and over all, to love God. Love in God is the result of faith and the root of all moral virtues and good deeds. On the contrary, all moral vices like hate, arrogance, jealousy,

spite, overlooking the rights of others have been forbidden and are abhorred because they obstruct human development.

A fundamental question is how can Islam help us in the process of moral development, i.e., in shaping moral character? In other words, what approaches and methods are used for cultivating virtues? Since the cognitive content of virtues and the factors which make for an inner harmony are of vital important in moral development, they have been concentrated on in this study.

Muslim philosophers believe in the rationality of ethics and from an epistemological aspect believe that one can and should substantiate moral statements intellectually. Thus Islam emphasizes intellection, contemplation, and deliberation and requires us to improve our intellectual faculty; this is because the intellect plays a quintessential role in distinguishing the good deeds from the bad ones and has profound implications for moral behavior. At the same time, Muslim philosophers, due to the inhering correspondence between religion and the intellect, hold that moral statements, which are recognized by the intellect, are in concordance with morals in the Quran and traditions.

In circumstances where one can not make a moral judgment, religion helps by showing the Right Way in a very practical and real manner. Hence the lives of the saints—who are the paragons of morality—are upheld as points of reference and emulation in this connection. From both the epistemological and educational points of view, making mention of these moral exemplars and didactic descriptions of their lives—including the accounts of the lives and behavior of prophets such as Moses, Jesus, Abraham, Solomon and Joseph (pbuh) as they lived amongst their people—is one of the focal points of the Quran and helps people to recognize their own duties¹³. Ultimately, God recognizes the last Messenger the Holy prophet Muhammad (pbuh), as the best example for mankind¹⁴.

In the Islamic perspective, to improve one's spirituality one is not required to abandon the worldly life and limit oneself to the hereafter. Because if so, if one disregards the material life and represses his desires (which can be satisfied in appropriate way), his material life will contradict spiritual life and this fact gradually makes him fall in quandary, inner contradiction, and sometimes in rebellion. Thus Islam's view is that worldly life and the hereafter are not separated from one another. But by living a moral life one can provide a road for attaining heavenly happiness and felicity. Hence even business deals and providing for one's family is an act of worship, of course as long as no injustice is done to others¹⁵.

Islamic ethics regard mundane and routine behavior, whether it is individual or social, to be moral as long as it is not a wrong and was performed with a true intention. It focuses on one's struggle in resolving others people's worldly and spiritual problems. The best persons are those who are of more benefit to others. These are some of the factors involved in order to gain proximity to God. The concordance of the material facets of life to spiritual realities and the inner harmony between the disparate faculties of the human soul are two important factors with profound implication for moral education.

In addition, since individual, social and domestic spheres of life are connected, Islam seeks to cultivate people who are able to manage their personal life and not ignore their social life. In order to succeed in this regard they must try to cultivate the individual and social facets of their character. Thus Islam has proposed a variety of moral codes for different facets of life, and one has to try to possess individual and social moral virtues and also be able to perform his moral obligation required in domestic life¹⁶.

On the other hand, it is not enough to behave with good conduct simply to the human race. The ideal moral person is one who, not only behaves courteously to others, but also is careful to be kind to all creatures, whether plant or animal. By abstaining from cruel and immoral behavior to all, since they are all God's creatures, one will be at peace and one's controlled behavior promoted. Islam has many moral codes with regards to just behavior to others and observing their rights. A moral person by observing these matters can cultivate his virtues and gain nearness to God and find true happiness. In this way, in the Islamic thought system, man is no longer a creature abandoned, perplexed with a lack of identity, but on the one hand due to his relationship of love and loyalty with God and then with others, his life will be tranquil and at peace, and on the other hand he must be aware that any cruelty to others, will be punished. Reward and punishment, are amongst the methods by which one is motivated to perform virtues and to abstain from vices.

In addition to moral conducts for self-purification, rituals, like daily Prayer, fasting, charity, are included amongst the good deeds by which one may become pious and gain proximity to God and ultimately attain true happiness. This is the case as long as he performs those actions with a Divine intention. It is important to note that a pious person can live in a way in which all his life is considered as worship. As I have referred to above, in Islamic culture not only moral conducts but also every routine behavior can be considered as a form of worship as long as they are not classified as bad actions and are performed with a Divine intention. All ritual acts of devotion can be considered as a moral action since they can purify the soul¹⁷.

Indeed Islam uses every opportunity to establish a relationship with God which can influence one's whole life, and by virtue of loving Him, as the source of Ultimate Goodness, can shun vices and perform acts of virtues.

Thus Prayer and supplication to God in an intimate manner, imploring Him with a feeling of servitude has a special place in religious training; since it has a very positive effect on spiritual growth and the purity of the soul and promotes a good character and makes one attain nearness to God and avoid wrong¹⁸.

Conclusion

Islam is a religion of intellectuality, and also of love and charity. Islam gives honor and prestige to the human race and tries, in different ways, to imbue morality and piety in its members so as to facilitate their felicity. Faith in God, hope in Him, and above all love for Him, result in a profound submission to Him. The factors and methods cited in this paper are some potentials which can be cultivated to help one to tread this path easily. But reaping the

benefits of these potentialities depends on ones wanting to be good in the first place, on understanding the nature of the good in the second, and on ultimately making the necessary efforts by proper acts of will to actualize and concretely realize that goodness. Finally, it is only by internalizing these elements that it becomes possible, with the help and grace of God, to maintain goodness throughout ones life. Otherwise—without this element of strong faith—being “religious” is only a superficial and nominal reality that has no real bearing on human morality.

Endnotes:

1. MB Majlesi, **Bihar al-Anwar**, Dar al-Azva', Beirut, 1413, Vol.68, pp.382-83; A motaghi, **Kanz al-Ummal**, Alresale , Beirut, 1413, vol.3, p.16; A Vaseei Yamani, **Musnad al-Rida**, Qoran va Etrat, Qom, 1354, p.131; F Tabarsi, **Majma' al-Bayan**, Maktab Ayatollah Marashi, Qom, 1403, Vol.10, p.86.
2. M Naraghi, **Jami' al-Sa'adat**, Sayyed Muhammad kalantar (ed.), al-A'lami, Moassese al-Matboot, Beirut, vol.1, p. 55 ; M Nasir al-Din Tusi, **Akhlagh Naseri**, M Minavi, A heidari (eds), kharazmi, tehran, 1373, p.101.
- 3 .M Kashani (Feyd), **al-Mahajja albaydha' Fi Tahdhib al-Ihya**, Alsadoogh, Tehran, 1339, vol.5, p.95.
- 4 .MB Majlesi, op.cit, vol.70, p. 212 ; M Koleini, **Osu l al- Kafi**, Dar al-Azva', Beirut, 1414, vol.2, p.84.
5. Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), **al-Hikmat al-muta'aliyah fi'l- asfar al-'aqliyyah al-arba'ah**, Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar (ed.), Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, Beirut, 1981, vol. 9, pp.86-93, 303.
6. M Naraghi, op.cit, Vol.1, p.42.
- 7.for example see: A Ibn Miskaweh, **Tahzib al-Akhlagh va Tathir al-A'ragh**, Mahdavi, Isfahan, p.91-92 ; M Nasir al-Din Tusi, op.cit, p.125;
8. M Naraghi, op.cit, Vol. 1, p.63, Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani , A Gh., **ketab al-Dhari'ah ila Makarim al-Shari'ah**. Cairo,1299, p.27.
9. Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), op.cit, vol.9, pp.56-65 ; **al-Shawahid al-rububiyah fi manahij al-sulukiyyah**, Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani, ed. , together with Sabziwari's commentary, Markaze nashre Daneshgahi, Mashhad, 1981, pp.364-5 ; M Nasir al-Din Tusi, op.cit, p.79.
10. **Quran**, al-Mo'menoon, 117.

11. for example see: A Farabi, **Fusul al-Montaz'a**, Fozi Metri Najjar (ed.), Al-Zahra, Tehran, 1405, p.36;78-86; M Naraghi, op.cit, 3 vols, M Nasir al-din Tusi, op.cit, p. 112-116 , A Ibn Miskaweih, op.cit, p. 44-45; Ibn Sina, “Risalah fi Ilm al-Akhlagh”, **Tis Rasail** ,1298, p.107; A Gh Al-Isfahani,al-Raghib ,op.cit, 1299, p.19f.
12. M Naraghi, op.cit, p.43.
13. **Quran**, for example see: Al-bagharah, Al-nesa', Al-maede, Al-a'raf, Abraham, al-Esra', Maryam, Taha, Al-anbya', Al-saff, Al-zokhrof.
- 14.**Quran**, Ahdhab, 33.
15. H Amili “Ketab al-Tejarat” **vasael al- shi'e** , Al-Albayt Le Ihya' al-turath, Qom, 1412, pp.9-72.
- 16.Ibid.
- 17.For a detailed in this case see: A Gh al-Raghib al-Isfahani, op.cit, Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), **al-Hikmat al-muta'aliyah fi'l- asfar al-'aqliyyah al-arba'ah**,vol.9, 139.
18. The best source in this regard is al-**Sahife al-Sajjadiyyah**, Imam Sajjad.

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