



Moral Values in Islam

1. Introduction

Islam has laid down some universal moral values for the prosperity and happiness of humanity as a whole. These moral values shaped and inspired Muslims' individual and social life for more than 1400 years. The moral character of a believer is taught by the holy Qur'an and it is perfectly represented by Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)¹. The following verse from Qur'an summarizes the moral character of a believer:

"It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards east or west; but it is righteousness to believe in God and the Last Day and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your property, out of love for Him, for your relatives, for orphans, for the needy, for the traveler, for those who ask; and for the freeing of captives; to be steadfast in prayers, and practice regular charity; to fulfill the contracts which you made; and to be firm and patient in pain (or suffering) and adversity and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the pious." (2:177)

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) stated the foremost purpose of his being sent down in this world:

"I have been sent only for the purpose of perfecting good morals."

His perfect morality and message have left a permanent impression on the history of humanity. The purpose of his message was nothing but to strengthen the moral character of the people so that the world of beauty and perfection may be illuminated before their eyes and they may try to achieve it consciously and with knowledge. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) summarized the moral behavior of a Muslim:

"God has given me nine commands: to remain conscious of God, whether in private or in public; to speak justly, whether angry or pleased; to show moderation both when poor and when rich, to reunite friendship with those who have broken off with me; to give to him who refuses me; that my silence should be occupied with thought; that my looking should be a warning; and that I should command what is right."

Islam sets "the attainment of God's pleasure" as the highest objective of man's life. In this way, Islam has furnished the highest possible standard of morality. By making Divine revelations as the primary source of knowledge it gives permanence and stability to the moral standards which afford reasonable scope for genuine adjustments and adaptations. It provides a sanction to morality in the love and fear of God, which will urge man to obey the moral law even without any external pressure. Through belief in God and the Day of Judgment it furnishes a force which enables a person to adopt

the moral conduct with seriousness and sincerity, with all the devotion of heart and soul.

Islamic morality covers the life from home to society, from the dining-table to the battlefield and peace conferences, literally from the cradle to the grave. In short, no sphere of life is exempt from the universal and comprehensive application of the moral principles of Islam. It makes morality reign supreme and ensures that the affairs of life should be regulated by norms of morality instead of dominated by selfish desires and petty interests.

Islamic morality is based on the following two principles:

Responsibility: In Islam, everybody is responsible for his/her actions in this life, and God will question people in Hereafter (in the Day of Judgment) about their good deeds and bad deeds. In this way, God will decide their destiny: paradise or hell. Without the fear of hell, people tend to be reckless and irresponsible of others. On the other hand, without the reward of paradise, people tend to be hopeless and ignorant. Therefore, without the responsibility of coming Day of Judgment, it is hard to establish a sound moral system.

Spiritual Perfection: Performing Jihad is obligatory for every man and woman in Islam. In general, Jihad means striving in the way of God. On the positive side, Jihad means striving to attain spiritual perfection through adopting good moral values such as piety, love, humility, compassion, and generosity. On the negative side, Jihad means purifying heart and soul from egoism, carnal desires and evil inclinations.

Here I will furnish some basic moral teachings of Islam for various aspects of a Muslim's life. These teachings cover the broad spectrum of individual moral conduct as well as social responsibilities. I will mainly use two basic source of Islam as reference: The Holy Qur'an and Sunna (sayings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)).

2. Individual Moral Values

Faith is imperfect without morality. Qur'an frequently attaches having faith and having good morality together. For example,

"O you who believe! Fear God and be with the truthful people." (9:119)

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) explained that when faith is firm and belief is strong, then strong and lasting moral values can be developed, and if the moral character is low then faith will accordingly be weak.

Qur'an emphasized the moral values such as humility, modesty, control of passions and desires, truthfulness, integrity, patience, steadfastness, and fulfilling one's promises. For example:

"And God loves the patient and the steadfast." (3:146)

"And hasten, as if competing with one another, to forgiveness from your Lord, and to a Garden as spacious as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the God-revering, pious. They spend both in ease and hardship, ever-restraining their rage"

¹ Acronym for "peace be upon him."

(even when provoked and able to retaliate), and pardoning people. God loves (such) people who are devoted to doing good.” (3:133-134)

2.1. Respecting Human Rights

Islam gave humanity an ideal code of human rights fourteen centuries ago. These rights seek to give honor and dignity on humanity and to eliminate exploitation, oppression, and injustice. Based on two fundamental sources of Islam, Qur'an and Sunna, prominent Muslim scholars enumerated some human rights in Islam as follows:

- All people are equal, and no one shall enjoy a privilege or suffer a disadvantage due to his or her race, color, sex, origin, or language.
- Human life is sacred and cannot be violated. Every effort must be made to protect it.
- All people are born free. Slavery and forced labor are abhorrent.
- Both rulers and the ruled are subject to the law, and equal before the law.
- Every person is free to prefer a belief and practice it. No one can be forced to believe or not to believe in a certain belief.
- No one can insult or ridicule the religious beliefs of others. All Muslims are required to respect the religious feelings of others.

2.2. Humility and Modesty

Humility is one of the most important aspect of servanthood. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) said:

“God elevates the humble and degrades the arrogant.” (Hindi)

As the opposite of humility, pride is a forbidden behavior in Islam. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) said:

“Anyone who has in his or her heart the weight of a mustard seed of pride shall not enter Paradise. Verily, God is Graceful and He loves Grace. Pride is disdainning the truth (out of self-conceit) and contempt for the people.”

Qur'an also degrades pride:

“Establish the Prayer in conformity with its conditions, enjoin and promote what is right and good, and forbid and try to prevent the evil and bear patiently whatever may befall you. ... Do not turn your face from people in scornful pride, nor move on earth arrogantly. Surely God does not love anyone proud and boastful.” (31:17-18)

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) indicated that faith cannot be possible without modesty:

“Modesty and faith are twins. A person who gives up one of them has to lose the other one, too.”

In another occasion, he said:

“Modesty is an ingredient of faith.”

2.3. Brotherhood

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) set high standards for brotherhood in Muslim community:

“No one truly believes until he likes his neighbor or his brother in Islam as whatever he likes for himself.”

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) forbade the long-lasting estrangement among believers:

“Neither promote mutual hatred, nor jealousy, but become as brothers and servants of God. It is not lawful for a Muslim that he should keep his relations estranged with his brother beyond three days.”

2.4. Generosity

Another good character of a believer that makes him closer to God is generosity. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) spent his life and his possessions for the sake of God. Once Umar, his second best companion, saw him lying on a rough mat and wept. When the Messenger asked him why he was weeping, Umar replied: “O Messenger of God, while kings sleep in soft feather beds, you lie on a rough mat. You are the Messenger of God, and as such deserve an easy life more than anyone else.” The Messenger answered:

“Don't you agree that the luxuries of the world should be theirs, and that those of the Hereafter should be ours?” (Bukhari, Muslim)

Once Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) said:

“The generous are near to God, Paradise, and people, but distant from the Fire. The miserly are distant from God, Paradise, and people, but near to the Fire.”

Once, a Bedouin came and asked the Messenger for something. The Messenger complied with his request. The Bedouin continued to ask, and the Messenger continued to give until he had nothing left. When the Bedouin asked again, he promised that he would give it to him when he had it. Umar angered to this rudeness and said to the Messenger: “You were asked and you gave. Again you were asked and you gave, until you were asked once more and you promised!” Umar meant that the Messenger should not make things so difficult for himself. The Messenger did not approve of Umar's words. Another companion stood up and said: “O Messenger, give without fear that God will make you poor!” The Messenger pleased with these words and said: “I was commanded to do so!” (Ibn Kathir)

2.5. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an essential character of Muslims. Being trustworthy implies being honest, fair in dealings and punctual (in terms of both regularity and timeliness); keeping promises and commitments; and honoring trusts which are left to someone to protect or keep. The opposite of being trustworthy is lying, dishonesty, breach of trusts and betrayal. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), even before his Prophethood, was known to be *Al-Amin* (the trustworthy one).

God praises the truthful believers by promising them Paradise:

“They are faithful and true to their trusts and to their pledges. ... Those are the inheritors, who will inherit the highest floor of Paradise. Therein they will stay forever.” (23:8, 23:10-11)

God also says in the Qur'an:

"God commands you to deliver trusts to those entitled to them." (4:58)

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) explained the seriousness of upholding the rights due to others:

"God says, 'There are three people whom I shall be their opponent on the Day of Judgment: a man who was given something in My Name and then betrays; a man who sells off a free man (as a slave) and consumes the price; and a man who hires a worker, makes use of his service then does not give him his wages.' " (Bukhari).

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) explained that telling truth leads to Paradise:

"It is obligatory for you to tell the truth, for truth leads to virtue and virtue leads to Paradise, and the man who continues to speak the truth and endeavors to tell the truth is eventually recorded as truthful with God, and beware of telling of a lie for telling of a lie leads to obscenity and obscenity leads to Hell-Fire, and the person who keeps telling lies and endeavors to tell a lie is recorded as a liar with God."

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) indicated that dishonesty and betrayal are completely at odds with the Islamic faith and they are signs of a hypocrite:

"A hypocrite is known by three characteristics: When he speaks, he lies; when he promises, he denies; when he is entrusted, he cheats." (Bukhari, Muslim)

A story from history: When Abu Ubayda was the commander of the Muslim armies in Syria (around 800's), the Emperor of Byzantium set out with a large army to recapture Syria. Abu Ubayda decided to evacuate the city because he had only a handful of soldiers. He gathered the people of Syria in the middle of the city and announced, "We collected the protection tax from you because we planned to defend you. Now we are too weak. In this case, we return the tax we collected." All the taxes collected were returned to the non-Muslim people of Syria. This was the depth of feeling and understanding displayed by the early Muslims. They were constantly aware of their obligations towards God, their brothers and sisters and those who were under the protection of the Muslim armies.

2.6. Love

Loving one another is a prerequisite for belief in Islam. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) emphasized this point as follows:

"You shall not enter Paradise as long as you do not affirm belief; and you will not believe as long as you do not love one another. Should I direct you to a thing which will foster love among you: make this greeting common among you: as-salamu alaykum (peace be upon you)."

In Hereafter, people would be along with one whom they love. A man came to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and asked: "When would be the Last Hour?" Prophet said: "What

preparation have you made for that?" Then he said: "The love of God and of His Messenger." Thereupon the Prophet said: *"You would be along with one whom you love."*

Other sayings of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) regarding love:

"If God loves a person, He calls Gabriel saying, 'God loves so-and-so; O Gabriel! Love him.' Gabriel would love him and make an announcement among the inhabitants of the Heaven. 'God loves so-and-so, therefore you should love him also,' and so all the inhabitants of the Heaven would love him, and then he is granted the pleasure of the people on the earth." "

"When a man loves his brother, he should tell him that he loves him."

"Whoever loves to meet God, God (too) loves to meet him and whoever hates to meet God, God (too) hates to meet him."

"Whoever possesses the following three qualities will have the delight of faith:

1. *The one to whom God and His Messenger becomes dearer than anything else.*
2. *Who loves a person and he loves him only for God's sake.*
3. *Who hates to revert to disbelief as he hates to be thrown into the fire."*

3. Social Responsibilities

The teachings of Islam concerning social responsibilities are based on kindness and consideration of others. In a widening circle of relationship, Islam defines our social obligations as our parents, husband or wife and children, relatives, neighbors, friends, orphans and widows, the needy, believers and other people, and animals and environment.

3.1. Parents and Relatives

Respect and care for parents and relatives are very much stressed in the Islamic teaching and is a very important part of a Muslim's expression of faith. Related verses of Qur'an are

"Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him alone, and treat parents with the best of kindness. Should one of them, or both, attain old age in your lifetime, do not say 'Ugh!' to them (as an indication of complaint or impatience), nor push them away, and always address them in gracious words. Lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy, and say 'My Lord, have mercy on them even as they cared for me in childhood.' " (17:23-24)

"And give his due to the relative, as well as the needy and the traveler; and do not waste (your wealth) senselessly." (17:26)

A person came and asked to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.): "Who among the people is most deserving of a fine treatment from my hand?" Prophet said: "Your mother." He asked again: "Then who (is the next one)?" Prophet replied: "Again it is your mother." He asked again: "Then who (is the next one)?" Prophet replied: "Again it is your mother." He asked again: "Then who (is the next one)?" Prophet replied: "Again

it is your mother.” He asked again: “Then who (is the next one)?” Then prophet replied: “Then it is your father.”

Once Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) said: “Let him be humbled, let him be humbled.” The companions asked: “O God’s Messenger, who is he?” He replied: “He who finds his parents in old age, either one or both of them, and does not enter Paradise.”

3.2. Neighbors

Caring, helping and respecting neighbors are among fundamental duties in Islam. Qur’an mentions:

“And worship God and do not associate anything as a partner with Him; do good to your parents in the best way possible, and to the relatives, orphans, the need of the community, the neighbor who is near, the neighbor who is distant, the companion by your side, the traveler, and those who are in your service. God does not love those who are conceited and boastful.” (4:36)

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) emphasized the importance of good relationships with neighbors:

“He is not a believer who fills his stomach when his neighbor is hungry. He does not believe whose neighbors are not safe from his damaging behavior.”

“The finest person in the sight of God is the one who is best to his friends and his neighbors.”

“Archangel Gabriel advised me so repeatedly to care for my neighbor that I thought that God was to make the neighbor my inheritor!”

3.3. Orphans, Widows, and Needy

Widows, orphans, and the poor need the most understanding, sympathy, and caring of others in the society. It is essential in Islam that believers strive hard to assist and support widows and the poor. Qur’an accuses the ones who does not support orphans with the denial of religion:

“Have you seen the One who denies religion? It is he who turns away the orphan and does not urge others to feed the poor ...” (107:1-3)

Other verses of Qur’an related to this subject are as follows:

“Although their need for food is great, they give food with pleasure to the needy people, the orphan, and the captive. And they say: “We feed you only for God’s sake; we desire from you neither recompense nor thanks.” (76:8-9)

“Restore their property to the orphans (when they come of age), and do not exchange the corrupt for the good, nor consume their property by mixing it up with your own. For doing that would be a great crime.” (4:2)

“Therefore, do not oppress the orphan; nor chide and drive away the seeker of information.” (93:9-10)

Related sayings of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) are:

“The person who strives for the widows and the poor is like the one who strives in the way of God.”

“I and the person who brings up an orphan will be like this in heavens.” He put his index and middle finger together.

3.4. Animals and Environment

According to Islam, Muslims are morally responsible not only to his parents, relatives and neighbors but also to the entire mankind, animals and trees and plants. For example, hunting of birds and animals for the sake of game is not permitted in Islam. Similarly, cutting trees and plants which yield fruit is forbidden unless there is a very pressing need for it.

4. Forbidden Behaviors

The following verses of Qur’an prohibits slandering, insulting, suspicion, spying and backbiting in society:

“O you who believe! let not some people among you slander another people, it may be that the latter are better than the former. Do not defame one another (and provoke the same for yourselves in retaliation), nor insult one another with nicknames (which they dislike). ... Whoever (does that and then) does not turn to God in repentance, those are indeed wrongdoers.” (49:11)

“O you who believe! Avoid much suspicion, for some suspicion is a grave sin; and do not spy (on one another), nor backbite (against one another). Would any of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother?” (49:12)

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) said: “Backbiting is saying something about your brother which he would dislike.”

Someone asked: “What if I say something which is true?”

The Prophet replied: “If what you say of him is true, it is backbiting; if it is not true, you have slandered him.”

Another evil, which usually accompanies backbiting and strictly forbidden by Islam, is gossiping. Gossiping is defined as passing on to others what you hear from someone in such a way that will cause dissension among people and break their relationships.

Other practices which Islam strictly prohibits are committing adultery and obscenity, fortune-telling, magic, gambling, lottery, drinking,

5. Conclusion

Islam builds a higher system of morality based on purification of heart from egoism, indiscipline, recklessness, carnal desires. Islam encourages to adopt higher qualities such as piety, modesty, humility, abstinence, and discipline. Islam induces feelings of moral responsibility and fosters the capacity for self control. Islam generates kindness, generosity, mercy, sympathy, peace, fairness and truthfulness towards all creation in all situations.

6. References

- All numbered references are from the Qur’an. (The Qur’an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English by Ali Unal)
- Named references are from authentic Hadith books. A hadith is a saying or tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.).