



THE SYSTEM OF VALUES AND ETHICS IN ISLAM

Ridwan al Sayyid ●

Those with an interest in Islamic studies hailed the publication of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah Draz's book *Dastour al Akhlaaq fi'l Qur'an (Ethical Code in the Qur'an)*. Muslim modernisers were not really interested in ethics but in issues revolving around modern civilization and progress, although it is true that they regarded modern civilization as being subject to certain practices, causal factors and conditions, including moral discipline and avoidance of the two *Fasaads* (corruptions): *al Kabir* (Major Corruption), ie. *al Fasaad fi'l Ardh* (Corruption upon Earth), and *al Shar'iy* (Sharia Corruption) involving violations of some of the provisions of the Sharia.

However, they also maintained that the practices leading to worldly progress could be followed successfully by non-Muslims – people whose teachings were not the teachings of their (ie. the Muslims') religion – to the extent that when they (the Muslim modernisers)

● Thinker and academic from Lebanon and editorial adviser to *Al Tafahom (Understanding)* magazine.



referred to the West (the French in particular), they quoted the statement attributed to Mohammed Abduh that in the West he found Muslims without Islam, while in the Muslim world there was Islam but no Muslims!

A second reason was that after the Second World War moral philosophies and academic papers appeared and were widely circulated, and became set texts in Arab universities, particularly in Egypt. Consequently, people came to feel that Western moral philosophy was an equal counter or alternative to the *deen* (Islamic religion) and that ‘we should follow either the *deen* or Western ethical principles, or a combination of the two’. This led to the appearance of a number of books on moral philosophy translated from the French, including Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Materialist (Western) and spiritual (Islamic) concepts were discussed and propagated; Othman Amin produced his *Gawaniya* (Internalist) philosophy and Tawfiq al Tawil his Moderate Internalism.

Daraz’s book marked a new departure, inspired by a new awareness that endorses the existence of an independent ethical system based on Divine Revelation, even if, in doing so, it owes some of its inspiration to Bergson’s book *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.

With the appearance of Mohammed Abdullah Daraz’s book, a concept of vital importance was propounded, ie. that religion (and Islam in particular) has a comprehensive ethical system of thought, action and behaviour. And more importantly, that this is the idea there are no such things as separate intellect-based and religion-based ethical systems, since all ethical behaviour has to have a religious foundation.

However, should one consider the *Qur’an*’s treatment of questions of good and evil – and good and bad behaviour – as ethical *values*, or are they all concerned with *practical* ethics and teachings and rules on what is *halal* (permitted), what is *haram* (forbidden), what is *makruh* (disliked) and what is *mandub* (recommended), ie. not concerned with pure values that consider questions of good and evil as absolute concepts? Furthermore, should ‘human action’ have a purpose and an ultimate goal in order to acquire an ethical dimension, or is it sufficient that it should just stem from ‘individual choice’ in order to be classed as ethical?



These are all obviously modern, or perhaps one should say ‘contemporary’, questions. However, they can be responded to using the *ta’wiliy* (interpretative) methods used in earlier times, in both the West and the East. As we are ‘contemporary’, or should be in order to live or enjoy a better life, we shall examine all these ethical questions using the prevailing approach of today, so that we can establish markers that will enable us to proceed with our discussion and investigate the major value issues and questions concerned with ethical life in Mediaeval Islam and the modern world.

1. Values and their Rulings in the *Holy Qur’an*

According to the Qur’anic view the main, and unique, value is the existence of God and Divine Unity. This is derived from the Oneness of five basic values, which have numerous ramifications with practical and behavioural dimensions. They are: the oneness of creation, mercy, justice, *al khair al ‘aamm* (general good or general goodness) and human action insofar as it falls between intentions, consequences and goals.

The oneness of creation is a value stemming from the Oneness of the Creator, which, in turn has several other connotations: equality between human beings, both before the Creator and between themselves, and the oneness of mankind or the oneness of the human world. The *Holy Qur’an* says, ‘He created you from a single self and created its mate from it, and then disseminated many men and women from the two of them.’ (*Al Nisa* – The Women: 1). It also states, ‘Mankind was a single community. Then Allah sent out Prophets.’ (*Al Baqarah* – The Heifer: 213).

So there is a ‘single self’ and a ‘single community’. This is the ‘original state’, which gave rise to the first value under consideration: that is to say, the oneness of mankind, or the equality that exists in this part of creation, nature and existence along with the possibilities and potential that can arise from it. Human differences – ‘but they will not cease to dispute’ (*Hud*: 118) – occur not because of a change or difference in the original state, but because of the oneness itself, that is to say, because there is equality; because differences arise from the different choices, which human beings are equally qualified to make. Hence, the second consequence of the



oneness of creation after equality is freedom. One can thus consider human freedom as a 'subsection' of a value and an essential reality of equality.

The second value – mercy – is one of the names of Allah the Most High (*al Rahman, al Rahim* – the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful) and an attribute of His actions: 'He hath inscribed for Himself [the quality of] Mercy' (*Al An'am* – The Cattle: 12). Moreover, mercy, when applied to Allah the Almighty, Glory be to Him, is a value and an attribute of His act of creating the universe and its systems and creatures: 'And My Mercy extendeth to all things' (*Al A'raf* – The Heights: 156), while it applies to Man since he is one of the subjects of Divine Mercy; indeed, this Divine Gift is one of the values governing his existence and his, that is to say, governing the relations that ought to exist between human beings.

We, therefore, have two qualities that cannot be ignored in relations between human beings; they enjoy equality in value, rights and duties, while mercy is the second value that governs relations between them within their 'small society' (the family) and their 'medium and wider societies' (tribes, peoples and nations).

The third value governing the relationship between Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, and mankind, and between members of the human race, is justice. Justice is also an attribute of Allah the Almighty and comes next in order after equality and mercy, not as a consequence of the two of them but rather as a separate, independent value; it is one of the free choices derived from equality. That is to say, Man has the freedom to be merciful and the duty to be just; disinterested justice is an element of mercy in many cases, but not an alternative to it.

The fourth value, *al khair al 'aamm* (general good, or general goodness), is one of the attributes of Allah, Glory be to Him, as well as an essential element of the human psyche and human action, and the prime factor in the teleological aspect of human behaviour. The word *khair* (goodness) occurs hundreds of times in the *Holy Qur'an* and has various meanings, though they are all related. The *Holy Qur'an* itself is quite clear on the different connotations of its meaning and on how it ought to be the dominant factor between human beings where actions and intentions



are concerned, ‘So strive together (as in a race) towards all that is good’
(*Al Baqarah* – The Heifer: 148).

The fifth value may be described as *ma’yaariyyah* or *maqiyaasiyyah* (relating to norms or standards). This means that human action is intention-driven and should be judged on the basis of its origin, that is to say, faith (because of its relationship to oneness) and its intentions (the four aforementioned values): equality, mercy, justice and general goodness. The texts of the Book and the Sunnah tell us that Allah judges an action on the basis of its intention, but also on the consequences of that intention or action insofar as they relate to those four values. Hence, I consider the judgement of a human action to be a value, because it impacts directly on relations between human beings and reflects a person’s inner nature.

2. Values and the Islamic Experience

When Aisha, the Mother of the Believers, was asked about the *akhlaaq* (manners and morals) of the Messenger (may the Blessings and Peace of Allah be upon him), she replied, ‘His *khuluq* (moral constitution) was the *Qur’an*.’ Linguistically, the word *khuluq* generally means the natural disposition (or dispositions) that results in actions. This disposition has two aspects: one relates to human nature with its values (as referred to above), which Allah has rendered capable of transformation into behaviour and action, ie. faith, while the other relates to man’s individual and general environment. Both these aspects are affected by learning and acclimatisation to the dominant influences of the family, immediate surroundings and society.

The truth is that this ‘worldview’ has two dimensions. One of them is related to behaviour in a person’s immediate surroundings, while the other relates to overall concepts and ideas of good, evil and the dispositions of the human world. These exist in two spheres – the contemplative and the behavioural – and are expressed in the *Holy Qur’an* as *ma’ruf* (good) and *munkar* (reprehensible).

Are *ma’ruf* and *munkar* social phenomena that are acquired through learning and adaptation, or are they inborn, mental and religious, stemming



from man's ethical disposition, affecting his overall view and priorities and not acquired by learning? Al Harith bin Asad al Muhasibi (243 AH) called human intellect an 'instinct', or, in modern parlance, a 'motivation', and called for an 'intellectual knowledge of Allah' through intensifying the interconnection between the visible world (man and the cosmos) and the hidden world (the *Qur'an*). The *amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* (commanding the good and forbidding the reprehensible) in his view is a command to promote this interconnection, which is at the same time both advisory and exploratory.

This concept of al Muhasibi's was not the predominant or sole view of man's relationship with the universe and the *Holy Qur'an*. Many 'Aqadiyeen of the first and second centuries saw the relationship between faith and action as purely mechanical. Therefore, they saw sin or wrong action as a violation of the faith of its perpetrator. This gave rise to a long debate, which lasted for about a century, about the question of faith and its relationship to action, alongside another question – the question of *qadar* (destiny) in relation to man's freedom of action. However, this was considered vis-à-vis Allah, Glory be to Him, and not within the human world.

The *mutakallimun* (theologians) value and action four issues that are relevant to us with regard to their discussions and debates, whether among themselves or with other peoples and nations. The first is the question of oneness and prophethood and is concerned with correcting the concept of oneness and, consequently, the relationship between man and Allah. There has been a debate on this topic with the other two Abrahamic faiths, the proposition being that man is not a god, nor is he a being devoid of intellect and freedom. This debate and its impact on scholars or students of values is best exemplified in modern times by what is known as the Islamic-Christian Dialogue, but here is neither the time nor the place to discuss it.

There remain three other important issues that have been discussed extensively by Muslim theologians. All of them are value-related to some degree or other. They are the relationship between faith and action; destiny and determinism; and goodness and badness in human action. On the first topic – as we have pointed out – there are three positions.



The first maintains that there is an inseparable correlation between faith and praiseworthy, charitable or pious action (which are three different things); those who are of this opinion consider *ma'siyah* (wrongdoing), such as murder or failing to perform the *fara'idh* (obligatory actions) such as *salat* (prayer), as constituting abandonment of the faith.

The second sees the two matters as more or less separate issues, with faith being solely belief (including the values and virtues stemming from belief in the One God) and thus totally unaffected by good or bad actions.

A third position sees the relationship between faith and action as being one of 'permanent tension', if such an expression is permissible. This would mean that there is no complete and systematic interrelationship between faith and action, nor can there be a complete separation between the two. Wrongdoing diminishes faith without eliminating it altogether, just as acts of 'obedience' to Allah increase faith; (there are no details of how this happens if faith is solely a matter of belief).

This is a topic of critical importance, despite the purely '*aqadi*' position it adopts, because it deals with questions of 'human awareness' that affect behaviour through different forms or awareness. For example, to what extent does man act in an aware manner? Indeed, what is the actual meaning of the 'awareness' that leads to this or that behaviour? And how much do religious or conventional values affect it? And what are the limits of moral responsibility in the different situations?

The strange thing is that it is under this topic that questions of values and their effects on human behaviour have been studied, and not under the topic of good and evil. This explains why, in the view of the *tamamiyeen* (perfectionists), the perpetration of a sin of injustice or oppression would justify revolution. However, revolution could mean the shedding of blood and that is another sin. One can add to that the evil or bad consequences that occur when the *tamamiyeen* resort to *takfir* (accusing someone of unbelief) or *bida'* (heresy) so that they can produce a decisive and unqualified judgement against a person. Hence, an adherence to values derived from faith, or the practice of faith, becomes the criterion for understanding values and their relationship to, and effect upon, human behaviour.



Investigations into *qadar* (destiny / predestination) are of similar importance to investigations into faith. Both issues are related to actions or behaviour. However, the fact is that an action cannot be human if it is not free. Yet freedom in what way and towards whom? This is the problem theological investigations have to deal with. Because freedom here is towards Allah, Glory be to Him. If the Creator is One, Omniscient and Omnipotent, then what space is left for human choice? Some people say that man is the 'creator' of his actions, otherwise how can actions be 'his' and how can he be held to account for them? Others say that human action – and man himself – is nothing more than an 'echo' and a tool in the process of creating and organising the universe, and that the difference between man and other creatures is no more than a difference in the manifestations of the Divine Will and Divine Action. Finally, there are some who maintain that the Oneness of the Creator, creation and Divine Will is not incompatible with human 'freedom', since man 'reaps' his actions and does not 'create' them, since they are based on values, models and conventions and man, as an individual, has played no part in creating them. Hence, when we say that he 'reaps' this or that deed, this means that he acquires it, or carries it out, or 'harvests' it through a deep internal choice.

There can be no doubt that this is a topic of supreme importance because it is concerned with the relationship between actions and human freedom. However, it misses its target when it makes it a matter of tension between the Creator and the created, who struggles to obtain his 'freedom' from his Creator, which is the kind of thing we find in the legends of Ancient Greece. The issue is actually a lot simpler than that, because the 'gods' were not creators, nor were they possessed of Divine Will.

In modern times this subject acquired different dimensions when the issue of creation became a topic for discussion among scholars of ethics. And as for the problem of values, Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, is the source of the Greater Values derived from spirituality and faith. In this sense the 'freedom' needed for human action becomes effective in other ways that are not concerned with origination but, as has already been mentioned, with the choice between good and better.

It is the choice between good and better, or between good and bad,



that theologians consider when discussing the question of good and bad in values and human actions. That is, how are good and bad determined? Or in the language of the theologians, are good and bad intellectual or *shar'i* (legal, according to the Sharia) categories, or are they religious categories determined by Divine revelation? If the models or values belong to the present or the past, then this topic is not of great significance unless we consider the choice as falling within the scope of values or virtues that are between good and better. However, even those who maintain that good and bad are *shar'iy* or religious think that this applies to the afterlife or to what the Sharia defines as reward or punishment. So it is the intellectual choice – or the choice influenced by awareness regarding those things which are permitted, or issues or values leading to judgemental or behavioural consequences in the purely human sphere (and not in the spheres of punishment and reward, which are generally theoretical and evaluative matters) – that is classed as being within the actual value sphere. However, even if we consider the matter as falling between good and better, disagreement on these points is not limited to the theologians. Even so, it is actually a useful disagreement because it is about a vision of the world encompassed by the five fundamental values we discussed at the beginning of this paper and which stem from the *Holy Qur'an*.

Among the theologians there is a view that maintains that the basic value that exists between Allah and his *'ibad* (worshippers/slaves/servants), and between the *'ibad* themselves, is the value of justice, while others see the basic value that exists between Allah and His *ibad*, and between the *ibad* themselves, as being mercy. Those who maintain that it is justice generally regard good and bad as being mental issues, while those in the 'mercy' and 'caring' camp consider value issues as being *shar'iy* or religious matters. In their view, relations between human beings that are based on freedom, fall squarely within the context of Divine Care and Divine Mercy. These are issues that definitely fall within the context of the all-encompassing 'worldview' of Allah's relationship with His creatures and between His creatures themselves and the basis upon which such relations are founded.

In my own view this is the most useful and fruitful topic for investigation in the present day and the most productive subject for discussion between



those who have a secular, scientific vision and those whose vision is value, spiritual and religious-based, since it concerns itself with two issues: the relationship between the Greater Values and religions, and the principles upon which relationships between human beings ought to be founded. The *Holy Qur'an* cites two options: the option of justice, 'And let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just; that is next to piety' (*Al Ma'idah* – The Table Spread: 8); and the option of mutual knowledge, 'We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you' (*Al Hujurat* – The Inner Apartments: 13). The point to note here, in both cases, is that justice and mutual knowledge are ramifications of a higher value – if that is the right term for it – which is the value of righteousness.

The *Fuqaha* (Legal Scholars) and Value; Motives and Objectives

While the theologians in the Middle Ages saw the topic of good and bad as being linked to these aspects of the relationship between people on the basis of 'preferential values', or 'good and better', then the other main line of approach in medieval and modern Islam has been the *fiqhi* (legal) approach.

The *fuqaha*, who base their approach on religious texts, are concerned primarily with the regulation of relations between people and the topics they focus on that deal with two issues that differ from each other without being mutually contradictory: the issue of the direct application of Qur'anic and prophetic rules in human life – thereby ensuring that it is ethical, orderly and satisfies interests; and the issue of the general objectives of Divine legislation that are derived as principles from those rules.

In the first instance they judge the human actions of worship and conduct, ie. acts of obedience to Allah, on the basis of religious text and *ijtihad* (discretionary judgement) in its interpretation (if it is not clear in terms of its language and applicability, owing to the emergence of new realities, which did not originally exist). In their view, actions in this category



are permissible or allowed, forbidden, disliked or recommended under the Sharia. In this respect they are somewhat similar to the theologians on the issues of good and bad; however, they lay greater emphasis on the direct applicability of the text and the choices it offers or permits where the satisfying of interests is concerned. Here, established practice plays a major role in assigning preference to one position over another.

On the other hand, the *fuqaha* who are concerned with the ‘philosophy of legislation’, who are known as scholars of *usul al fiqh* (origins/fundamentals of the law), identify five basic items, objectives or interests related to Divine legislation. They are the *nafs* (soul or psyche), the intellect, the religion, procreation and property ownership. Of these five, the *fuqaha* put *deen* at the top of the list because it enables these priorities to be defined through the study of its texts. Thus, according to the *Qur’an*, Divine legislation has priorities aimed at maintaining human life. They are the *nafs* – that is, the safeguarding of human life, starting from marriage, pregnancy, childhood and youth up to death and the afterlife. Divine legislation has rules or directives governing every stage for the sake of the ultimate objective – the safeguarding of human life. As far as intellect is concerned, it has several functions and is entrusted with the tasks of understanding the Sharia and organising human life in respect of man’s awareness and behaviour. The other two items – procreation and property ownership – are related to the environment in which human life exists and thrives, and to ensuring that human life is conducted in the proper manner; they are subject to Sharia conditions (marriage, family and sexual reproduction) and social conditions (property ownership, rights and duties within the community).

Is the approach adopted by the *fuqaha* regulatory or value-based? The regulatory approach is concerned with rulings on actions (permitted, forbidden, recommended and disliked). However, the definition of ‘essential interests’ or ‘rights’ is a value-based issue concerned with the maintenance of human life, human dignity and human activity. In reality, the Greater Values referred to in the *Qur’an* (equality, mercy, justice and *al khair al ‘amm*) are values, symbols and points of reference for giving human life its meaning within the context of man’s freedom of choice.



This does not lessen the importance of regulation and organisation, but these are values and not organisational or regulatory matters. They may involve subsidiary issues, or ramifications of one value or another; however, there remains a fundamental difference between value and regulation and organisation.

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So the theologians and the *fuqaha* had two different approaches to the question of values in the Middle period of Islam, or what we may call the historical perspective of Islam. However, these were not the only approaches to the subject. Other approaches include the philosophical approach and the Sufi approach. According to the philosophers, the greatest value – or goal – of human life (that is, of an aware life) is happiness, while the Sufis maintain that the goal is the gnosis within which human life is ordered under Allah’s protective wing. While the philosophers base their approach on the Greek and Hellenistic ideas that we have inherited from the past, and use those sources, among others, in interpreting Qur’anic texts, the Sufis give more weight to the inner meaning of the text than its apparent meaning. However, whatever the circumstances, it would be wrong to deny the direct impact of the Qur’anic value system on Islamic ethical life during the Middle Ages.

As we have already pointed out, the present era has seen major changes in the way questions of values and ethics in human life are considered. In the modern view of the world and human life it is rational and secular values and attitudes that take precedence. This can be seen in international agreements and charters, which regard religion-based morality as a personal and private affair or a cause of controversy between different religions and nations. Even so, the last four decades have seen, and continue to see, a powerful trend towards returning to religion-based ethical values as an integral part of the human condition and, to a large extent, as common to all humanity to a degree that cannot be ignored. Muslims have also become aware of this trend and they have begun to make their own contribution to it, inspired by the *Qur’an*, their history and contemporary *ijtihad*.