Editorial

THE VALUE SYSTEM IN A RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Abdulrahman al-Sālimi

The Holy Qur'an describes the moral values and ethics that should characterise a Believer with the following verse: "And who speaks fairer than he who calls unto Allah and does righteousness and says: 'Surely I am of them that surrender as Muslims'? Not equal are the good deed and the evil deed. Repel with that which is fairer and behold, he between whom and thee there is enmity shall be as if he were an intimate friend. Yet none shall receive it except the steadfast; none shall receive it except one of great good fortune."

This shows clearly that the Believer's task is to call people to Allah through good deeds, and this requires him to set an example for others to follow by behaving in every respect as a model Muslim. He must be steadfast, because the path he is called upon to follow demands endless patience in the face of adversity and a commitment from him to dedicate himself to the cause of right and truth. Those who strive in the path of Allah and for the benefit of humanity are indeed

people “of great good fortune”, thanks to a combination of three factors: faith, good deeds and steadfastness in the face of adversity in the hope of a reward and recognition from Allah.

A Believer’s mission to perform good deeds on behalf of humanity epitomizes the Muslim character with its values of equality, mercy, *karamah* (nobility or honour), justice, “*ta‘aruf*” (knowing each other and acting towards each other with due consideration) and a commitment to the public good. All these values are stressed repeatedly in the Holy Qur’an – hundreds of times in the cases of “equality” and the “public good” – and they have become instilled in the Muslim psyche and Muslim behaviour over the generations, to the extent that they have come to form the linchpin of the *Ummah* (Islamic Nation) and its community of Believers.

Nevertheless, if we look at the historical relationship between Muslims and their scriptures we will find that – when considering the question of a person committing a *kabirah*, or major sin – many Believers have wondered why good deeds should be second in importance to faith. A true Believer can never commit a prohibited act such as murder, adultery or theft; despite this, however, misdemeanours occurred at the time of the Companions of the Prophet (PBUH), although some of those who were guilty of them were also known for their strong faith and aspirations towards good behaviour and virtue.

How is it, then, that we should see good deeds as being inferior in status to faith?

Umm al Mu’minin (The Mother of the Believers) Sayyidah ‘A’isha commented on this conundrum with a Hadith about the Prophet (PBUH)’s moral disposition, in which she said: “His manners and morals were the Qur’an.” That is to say, he (PBUH) demonstrated the values of the Qur’an in his thinking and behaviour. We can infer from this that, while it is true that Qur’anic values do not exclude the possibility of human error, they do ensure avoidance of those forbidden acts which the Qur’an considers to form the dividing line between faith and unbelief.

The principle of equality is a value deeply embedded in the Muslim character, since the Qur'an stresses that Allah's creation stems from a single source and that before their Creator all mankind are of equal value and will be subjected to the same yardstick when it comes to deciding their rewards and punishments. This belief in equality acts as an antidote to pride and its companion vice – a sense of superiority.

Similarly, *karamah* is a value that obliges Man to assume responsibility for being true to "the virtue of the two covenants" – the covenant of "*alastu birabbikum*" ("Am I not your Lord?" – Man's acknowledgement of his duty to worship his Creator) and the covenant of "*walaqad karramna bani adam*" ("And We have honoured the children of Adam" – Man's acceptance of his responsibility as Allah's vicegerent upon earth). The Qur'an describes these honours that Allah has bestowed upon Man as representing the Trust He has placed in him – the Trust which distinguishes him from the rest of creation.

Mercy – a value derived from equality and *karamah* – is one of the Sublime Attributes that exemplify Allah's relationship with His creatures, and since He has bestowed an element of it upon them, it has become both a value and a virtue. Referring to it in the Qur'an Allah says: "*kataba 'ala nafsihi al rahmah*" ("He has decreed upon Himself the Law of Grace and Mercy") and "*warahmati wasi'at kulla shay'*" ("And My Mercy encompasses all things"), while He describes Himself as "*al rahman al rahim*" ("The All-Compassionate, All-Merciful"). Moreover, speaking of the Prophet (PBUH) and his mission, the Qur'an says: "And We have not sent you except as a Mercy to all creation". At the same time it also enjoins mankind to be kind to their parents and: "Lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy".

This instruction, which completes the final link between the Creator and mankind, is reinforced by the Prophetic Tradition which states that Allah the Most High extends His Mercy to the merciful.

We should note here that mercy and *karamah* can only exist if there is justice – not merely in the sense of something dispensed through the law courts, but also as the result of clear understanding and a sense of

fairness. In this sense, justice comes from a fine balance between faith, mercy and equity, while a Believer – living in a just society under a just ruler – is just in both word and deed.

All these values are qualities which can be seen in a person's behaviour towards others, and this is the meaning of "*ta'aruf*" – a word which carries the connotation of interaction with the "different other". In this context – in which interaction is based upon the values of dignity, nobility and mercy – the differences between the parties involved actually bring them closer together rather than driving them further apart. The Holy Qur'an sees diversity as a catalyst for unity and integration, not the opposite.

In addition to these qualities, the Qur'an also calls constantly upon people to work for the public good, remain patient and steadfast and wait for their reward from Allah.

If the Qur'an provides the basis – or inspiration – for the social value system in Islam (which is essentially the etiquette and ethics of social behavior), a look at our history will also show the role played by those values in Muslim culture and theological debate. In theology the focus has been on justice, while in other contexts greater priority has been given to solicitude and mercy. Indeed, during times of heated discussion or debate the two values may sometimes have appeared to be separated from each other by a kind of "no-man's-land", though they also came to be seen as concomitant – or even interrelated – by those *fuqaha* (scholars of jurisprudence) and *usuliyyun* (scholars of the "roots" of jurisprudence) who developed the theory of *dhururat* (literally "necessities"), *maqasid al shari'ah* (objectives of Islamic law), or human rights, which they summed up as: protecting human life, protecting the Faith, protecting the mind, protecting progeny and protecting property. To these we can add a further right – protecting freedom.

If we consider these five – or six – principles, we find that they link equality to *karamah*, justice and mercy. This leaves us with two more conditions of the Qur'an's value system – steadfastness and patience (which Allah requires from us), and "great good fortune" (which Allah has promised those of us who have made sacrifices for His sake).

What does “requiring steadfastness and patience” mean in this context? The “calling people to Allah” referred to in the Qur’an demands two things: faith in conjunction with a value system, and patience in the face of adversity. This is because carrying and conveying the “call to Allah” is an extremely demanding operation which involves great hardship, to the extent that, unless they are truly strong-willed, even those engaged in it who are strong in faith and sincerely believe in the value of missionary work may find themselves tempted to abandon it. The Qur’an instructs those who propagate the Faith to be patient and steadfast. If they fail to get a response they must not despair, even if they should suffer persecution for their adherence to their principles. In their response to trials and tribulations their “steadfast and patient” approach reflects a firm commitment to their beliefs as well as a determination to persist in carrying out their sacred trust, regardless of any obstacles they may face.

In the end, the Believer’s steadfastness will pay off and he will be granted his “great good fortune” in both this world and the next. In this world his mission will be successful, while in the next he will receive his reward from Allah, including the satisfaction of knowing that he has done his duty. Thus he will have lived his life according to the Islamic value system by combining his faith with good deeds for the benefit of the Muslim community, Islam and the wider world.