

“Call to the path of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation,
and argue with people in the best manner.” (Holy Quran, 16:125)

The Light

AND

ISLAMIC REVIEW

Exponent of Islam and the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement
for over one hundred years

January - December 2023

In the spirit of the above-cited verse, this periodical attempts to dispel
misunderstandings about the religion of Islam and endeavors to
facilitate inter-faith dialogue based on reason and rationality.

Vol. 100

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احمدیہ انجمن اشاعت اسلام لاہور

◆ Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha‘at Islam Lahore Inc., U.S.A. ◆

The Light was founded in 1921 as the organ of the AHMADIYYA ANJUMAN ISHA'AT ISLAM (Ahmadiyya Association for the Propagation of Islam) of Lahore, Pakistan. The Islamic Review was published in England from 1913 for over 50 years, and in the U.S.A. from 1980 to 1991. The present periodical represents the beliefs of the worldwide branches of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam, Lahore.

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The main objective of the A.A.I.L. is to present the true, original message of Islam to the whole world — Islam as it is found in the Holy Quran and the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, obscured today by grave misconceptions and wrong popular notions.

Islam seeks to attract the hearts and minds of people towards the truth, by means of reasoning and the natural beauty of its principles.

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), our Founder, arose to remind the world that Islam is:

International: It recognizes prophets being raised among all nations and requires Muslims to believe in them all. Truth and goodness can be found in all religions. God treats all human beings equally, regardless of race, nationality or religion.

Peaceful: Allows use of force only in unavoidable self-defence. Teaches Muslims to live peacefully under any rule which accords them freedom of religion.

Tolerant: Gives full freedom to everyone to hold and practise any creed or religion. Requires us to tolerate differences of belief and opinion.

Rational: In all matters, it urges use of human reason and knowledge. Blind following is condemned and independence of thought is granted.

Inspiring: Worship is not a ritual, but provides living contact with a Living God, Who answers prayers and speaks to His righteous servants even today as in the past.

Non-sectarian: Every person professing Islam by the words La ilaha ill-Allah, Muhammad-ur rasul-ullah (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah) is a Muslim. A Muslim cannot be expelled from Islam by anyone.

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad taught that *no* prophet, old or new, is to arise after the Holy Prophet Muhammad. However, Mujaddids will be raised by God to revive and rekindle the light of Islam.

About ourselves

Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam Lahore has branches in many countries including:

U.S.A.	Australia
U.K.	Canada
Holland	Fiji
Indonesia	Germany
Suriname	India
Trinidad	South Africa
Guyana	Philippines

Achievements:

The Anjuman has produced extensive literature on Islam, originally in English and Urdu, including translations of the Holy Quran with commentaries. These books are being translated into other languages, including French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic. The Anjuman has run several Muslim missions around the world, including the first ever in Western Europe.

History:

1889: Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad founds the Ahmadiyya Movement.

1901: Movement given name Ahmadiyya after Holy Prophet Muhammad's other famous name Ahmad.

1905: Hazrat Mirza appoints central body (Anjuman) to manage the Movement.

1908: Death of Hazrat Mirza. Succeeded by Maulana Nur-ud-Din as Head.

1914: Death of Maulana Nur-ud-Din. Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam founded at Lahore as continuation of the original Anjuman. Maulana Muhammad Ali elected as Head.

1951: Death of Maulana Muhammad Ali after fifty years of glorious service to the cause of Islam. Maulana Sadr-ud-Din (d. 1981) becomes Head.

1981–1996: Dr Saeed Ahmad Khan, an eminent medical doctor and religious scholar, led the Movement, at a time of intense persecution.

1996–2002: Prof. Dr Asghar Hameed, a distinguished retired University Professor of Mathematics, and learned Islamic scholar, served as Head.

2002: Prof. Dr Abdul Karim Saeed Pasha elected Head.

Introduction to Special Issue

By the Editor

The Lahore Ahmadiyya Islamic Society has an over 30-year tradition of hosting an annual symposium to offer interfaith attendees an opportunity to better understand the spiritual basis of the religion of Islam. In July 2023, it presented a program dedicated to the topic of “Divine Love.”

Today, Islam is viewed in many ways. It is recognized as a monotheistic religion and an Abrahamic faith. It is appreciated as a rich tradition from which great historical contributions were made to the development of modern civilization. It is also accepted as a way of life and a source of spirituality for over a billion people on earth today. But what it is not normally associated with, is the concept of love.

Quite surprising to most is that the very essence of the Islamic faith is based on the notion of love. One of the names of God expressly mentioned in the Quran is *Al Wadud*, or *The Loving*. The primary Divine attribute mentioned in the Quran, that of *Rahma*, defines God’s nature as lovingly compassionate and tenderly merciful, like the nurturing environment of a mother’s womb. And the very purpose of life presented in Islamic theology is to achieve an inner state of peace in which a loving relationship with the Divine is formed, the primary condition for which is kind and caring treatment to all creation.

The 2023 annual symposium explored the *The Path of Love*, according to the spiritual tradition of Islam. This special issue of *The Light and Islamic Review* consists of papers compiled from the symposium presentations, including: Divine Love, by Fazeel S. Khan, Esq.; Union with the Beloved, by Dr. Ayesha Khan; A (Loving Mercy) to Mankind, by Dr. Noman Malik; and Reflections on the Everlasting Beauty of the Divine, by Prof. Omid Safi (Duke University Islamic Studies Center)

Also in this issue is a paper by Prof. Michael Birkel (Earlham College, School of Religion) titled “Interfaith Reflections on the Divine”, prepared for the symposium, and a section of the book “Love in the Quran” by Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad. Finally, a compilation of quotations from a few sermons by Maulana Muhammad Ali on the topic of Nurturing Divine Love is included.

We hope the information presented here will afford lessons appreciated by persons of all faiths and no faith alike, and will serve as a valuable lens through which the religion of Islam (and the concept of religions itself) may be understood. The video recording of the presentations from the symposium are available on the Lahore Ahmadiyya Islamic Society’s YouTube page at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7781Vo2uGs>. ■



The Path of Love
According to the Spiritual Tradition of Islam

Saturday, July 22, 2023 10:00 am to 2:30 pm (no charge / lunch provided)	Columbus Marriott Northwest 5605 Blazer Pkwy Dublin 43017	RSVP by July 10, 2023 to Fazeel S. Khan at: fazskhan@aol.com
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Presented by The Lahore Ahmadiyya Islamic Society

Introduction to 2023 Symposium titled “The Path of Love”

By Fazeel S. Khan, Esq.

Bismillah ir Rahman ir Raheem – I begin in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Good morning everyone! I would like to greet you all with the Islamic salutation *Assalamu Aleikum*, which means “may peace be upon you.” It is my absolute pleasure and honor to welcome you to the Lahore Ahmadiyya Islamic Society’s 2023 annual symposium. We are very pleased, and grateful, to be able to host you all in-person once again, after having to conduct virtual online programs the past few years due to the pandemic. We really hope that each one of you will enjoy your time with us today!

The Lahore Ahmadiyya Islamic Society (which is the US branch of the international Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement) works to educate people (those who are not Muslims and in some cases Muslims themselves) about the true, spiritual basis of the Islamic faith. Although our work is international in scope, one way in which we do this locally is by hosting an annual symposium devoted to a topic about Islam that is relevant to some contemporary issue. In the past, our symposiums:

- We dealt with demystifying terms like “**jihad**” and “**sharia**”.
- We also addressed misperceptions about the Islamic concept of “**Caliphate**” and the Islamic principles on “**Human Rights**”.
- We also discussed, from an Islamic perspective, issues like the connection between “**science and religion**”, and lessons on “**civility and religious harmony**”.

This year, we are very excited to present on the subject of “**Divine Love**”.

What is Love?

A basic question we will be addressing today concerns: “what is love?”. Is “love” simply a fleeting emotion, temporary and changing depending on circumstances that arise? And what does love actually entail – what does it mean to actually love?

Looking for definitions of “love”, I found various descriptions. In particular, I found a Rabbi explain that: “True love is the process of two halves of one soul reuniting again for all eternity.” And I found on a Christian website that: “Love is the deliberate act of valuing something more than you value yourself.” And there were many other descriptions that seemed to

incorporate these two insights, in some way. Generally, it seems that love is understood as a “condition”. It is a condition or state in which a connection is made with something, whereby one cherishes that thing and places its interest or benefit above one’s own. And, based on this understanding, it is difficult to find a more perfect illustration of the condition of “love” than in the intrinsic connection that a mother has towards her child.

According to the spiritual tradition of Islam, the condition of “true love” is actually only with the Divine (the Source of all love). And all of the other forms of love we experience in this world – between romantic partners, between family and life-long friends, between a person and his/her pet, with the feelings one associates with a certain place or activity, and even in the intrinsic bond between parent and child – all of these are understood as being but a metaphor (a reflection or a glimpse) of the infinite and eternal love with the Creator and Sustainer of all.

Maulana Rumi expresses this sentiment in this way; he writes:

Love is neither a fairy tale nor a book.

Love is neither a signature on a paper,
nor what a couple say of each other.

Love is a tree with branches,
reaching far beyond time into eternity,
and roots set deep in the everlasting life.

According to Islam, this supreme form of love with the Divine is possible because every person is a spiritual being, the material body being a mere vessel for one’s “soul.” And the Quran explains that our soul is in fact the “spirit of God” breathed into us.

So when I made him (man) complete and
breathed into him of My Spirit ... (15:29; 38:72)

So each one of us has the Spirit of God within us. And the “reuniting of the souls,” as the Rabbi put it, is in fact establishing a connection with the Divine; God being each person’s ultimate soulmate (so to speak). Maulana Rumi hints at this connection of innate love with the Divine in the following way; he states:

Lovers do not finally meet somewhere.

They are *in* each other all along.

And striving to develop this loving bond with the Divine is understood as the very purpose of life. It is what is referred to in the spiritual tradition of Islam as “Union with the Beloved” (God being the *True Beloved*). Maulana Rumi alludes to how this union with the Divine is not to be sought in some external place, but rather within own ourselves; he states:

I searched in temples, churches and mosques,

But I found the Divine within my heart.

And it is this understanding of “love” – as a condition in which one forms an intimate bond with the Divine – that forms the basis of all the beautiful poetry by Muslim mystics throughout the ages, like Rumi, that have become so popular in recent times. This was rather humorously pointed out in a meme I saw on Facebook recently; it was a quote attributed to Rumi that said: “My love poetry is about God ... not your ex-girlfriend.”

Islam and Love

Curiously, despite this principle of “love” being so central to the religion of Islam, the Islamic faith is rarely associated with the notion of “love”. Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, explained that the meaning of the word “Islam” itself indicates that its principal characteristic is that of “love.” He writes:

The real meaning of the word “Islam” is to submit to God and be genuinely ready to sacrifice everything for Him. This is a practical state that is borne out of **love**.

The point being that the meaning of the word “Islam” relays the notions of both **worship** and **sacrifice**, both of which are the practical aspects of the highest form of love. Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad also explained that the Islamic profession of faith – *la-ila-ha-ill-Allah* (which means: “There is no God but God”) – is also indicative of the central position that the concept of “love” holds in Islam. He explained that the word “*ilah*” is derived from the root “*walah*” which means “a **beloved** that is worshipped.” So, the Islamic profession of faith – what is recited by every Muslim, and which is repeated in the call to prayer from the minaret of every mosque throughout the world five times every day – stands for the principle that: *there is nothing worthy of being worshipped other than the dear and beloved Divine*. And it is this understanding of “Divine Love”, that we will be exploring today.

Program

As for the Program:

- I will be sharing with you a short talk on *what* “Divine Love” entails;
- Dr. Ayesha Khan will then present on *how* union with the Divine is formed;
- And then Dr. Noman Malik will be sharing lessons from the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, being an *exemplar* of this Path of

Love.

- And we are honored to have a guest speaker, Professor Omid Safi, present an hour-long lecture for us on the beautiful poetry by Muslim mystics and sages throughout history on the subject of Divine Love.

But first, as is customary, we would like to start the formal program with a recitation from the Holy Quran. ■

Divine Love

By Fazeel S. Khan, Esq.

As I mentioned in my Introduction, “True Love” according to the spiritual tradition of Islam, is with the Divine (the Source of All Love). So, what does Islam teach about the nature of the Divine? There is an often-quoted hadith (a recorded saying of Prophet Muhammad) in this regard, in which the Holy Prophet relays a sentiment expressed by God for the very reason for creation. It is as follows:

I was a hidden treasure, and I desired (or loved) to be known.

This sentiment reveals a number of subtle, but profound, points. I’ll mention 4 of them.

1. The first point is that there is **purpose to creation**. That, life is not random and trivial, but rather there is a goal to which we are to strive to achieve. The Quran similarly expresses this elsewhere by questioning the reader: “*Do you think We have created you in vain ...?*” (23:115).
2. The second point is that this purpose of creation entails “**knowing**” God. Many commentators and saintly personalities have explained that the real significance of “knowing” God is “loving” God, an allusion to the fact that “recognition” is built on “love.”
3. The third point is that there exists some **personal connection or bond** between the Divine and humanity, whereby man is *capable* of actually “knowing” (or developing love for) God.
4. And the fourth point is that “knowing” (or “loving”) God is a resplendent “**gift**,” like a “treasure”. It suggests that recognizing and developing closeness to the Divine leads to a bountiful transcendent reward.

Fascinatingly, the very first chapter of the Holy Quran, titled “Al Fatihah” (or “The Opening”), only 7 short

verses in length, encapsulates all of these four points. *Al Fatihah* is regarded as a summary of the entire Quran and the quintessence of the lessons contained within the entire Book. And, as we will see, it is in essence “The Opening” or commencement of the Islamic understanding of the Path of Love with the Divine.

Sura Al Fatihah: Alhamdulillah

Al Fatihah starts with the words “**Alhamdulillah**”, which translates as: “Praise be to Allah (God)”. This is a common phrase that is used by Muslims in their everyday speech. It is used to express one’s belief that everything good comes from God. But there is a *much* deeper significance to the phrase. The word translated as “praise” is the Arabic word “*hamd*”. *Hamd* signifies something much more refined than simple praise in the sense of acknowledging gratefulness or thanks (like when one claps after being pleased with a performance). Rather, *hamd* signifies that feeling of having so much genuine appreciation for a thing that one desires to be close to it or incorporate it into one’s own being. Like, when a person accepts someone as a role model, there is a sense of not only admiration, but also a desire to replicate those characteristics within oneself. And the word “**Allah**”, although signifying “God”, has a specific literal definition. It means:

That Being Who exists necessarily by Himself (meaning, He is One) and Who is the possessor of all the attributes of perfection (meaning, He is Perfect and has no deficiencies).

So, the phrase “**Praise be to Allah**” signifies that it is only God that one should truly appreciate and admire to the extent of wanting to incorporate it into one’s being, due to God being the *sole* possessor of *all* attributes of perfection. It is a subtle acknowledgement that because nothing other than God is perfect, God alone is worthy of such sincere admiration, emulation, love and worship. Hence, the understanding that the purpose of creation is to strive to know and develop love for God, is suggested in the very first verse of the Opening chapter of the Holy Quran. Elsewhere, the Quran beautifully elaborates on this concept, by stating:

(We take) Allah’s color, and who is better than Allah at coloring. (2:138)

The “color of Allah” refers to the radiance of a personality that manifests the divine qualities. Prophet Muhammad further explained this by stating:

Adorn yourself with the Divine qualities.

The question that would naturally follow is: what then are these perfect attributes (or qualities) of God that one is to know and love and emulate? The verses in *Al Fatiha* that follow then present the reader with a

description of the four primary attributes of the Divine. These are the four fundamental attributes from which all other attributes are derived, and which serve as the lens by which the nature of the Divine is to be understood when reading and interpreting the remainder of the Quran.

Sura Al Fatihah: Rabb-ul-Alameen

The first attribute presented is that of “**Rabb ul Alameen**”, translated as “Lord of the worlds.” But the word “Rabb” conveys a very refined concept. Its technical meaning is that:

God is not only the Creator, but also “the One Who fosters and nourishes creation in such a manner as to make it progress from lower to higher conditions until it reaches its goal of completion.

So in the definition of the word “Rabb,” we find a description of the law of evolution. And keep in mind, that God is described as the *Rabb* or Lord of “all the worlds,” meaning both the vast material universe, from which our planet and all life on it emerged, as well as the mystical spiritual realm, from which our souls appeared. The implication being, that just as God creates and fashions the material world so that it progresses from crude conditions to advanced states, so too does He foster and nourish each individual soul so that it too develops, grows and progresses.

One cannot but help but see in this description – of creation and continued fostering and nourishing of that creation – the similarity to the role of a loving parent who dutifully and responsibly raises a child, from infancy to full adulthood. And, in this definition of the attribute of *Rabb*, the reader is given assurance that man is not left alone in trying to achieve this goal of attaining closeness to the Divine – as implied in the phrase *Alhamdulillah* (or, “Praise be to Allah”) – but rather God, as *Rabb*, provides the fostership and care that is needed to reach that goal to completion.

One last point I’ll make about this attribute, is that the reference to God being the Lord “of all the worlds” is also indicative of the intimate bond that exists between the Divine and each and every person. Normally, the reference to “worlds” is understood as describing all nations of people (or, possibly, all life in the entire universe). But it can also allude to each person’s individual “world.” See, every person has their own “world”, made up of their unique upbringing and environment, their particular life experiences, their distinctive strengths and their specific limitations. When I go outside, I see the world differently than everyone else; I view everything through a lens made up of my personal composition and disposition. So, the implication is that God is not unaware of each person’s unique makeup and

diverse experiences, but rather provides fostership and care according to one's specific circumstances, just as a parent may raise children differently depending on their particular nature and disposition.

Sura Al Fatihah: Rahman and Raheem

The next two attributes presented in *Al Fatihah* are: **Rahman** (translated as Beneficent) and **Raheem** (translated as Merciful). Both these attributes are derived from the root "**Rahma**", which signifies the condition of "having so much love and tenderness for something that one is compelled to do good to it." In fact, the word literally refers to the "womb", and thereby implies maternal love and mercy. Many commentators consider "**Rahma**" as the prime attribute of God. In the Quran, it states that God has made this particular attribute "binding on Himself", thereby evidencing the predominant position that "love" and "mercy" hold in the nature of the Divine. Throughout the Quran, we read how paramount the qualities of this love and mercy are to the nature of the Divine, just a sample of such verses are as follows:

And my Mercy (*Rahma*) encompasses all things. (7:156).

Your Lord is the Lord of all-encompassing Mercy (*Rahma*) (6:148).

Our Lord! Thou embracest all things in Mercy (*Rahma*) ... (40:7).

And the two derivatives of the word *Rahma* in *Al Fatiha* expound on 2 aspects of Divine "love" and "mercy". **Rahman** (translated as "Beneficent") means that God, out of His love for His creation, provides it with whatever it needs to attain its goal of perfection (without creation having done anything first to deserve it). And the complimentary attribute **Raheem** (translated as "Merciful") signifies that God rewards (and multiplies without measure such reward) when a person makes use of what He provides. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that:

Rahman is the Beneficent God Whose *love and mercy* are manifested in the creation of this world, and **Raheem** is the Merciful God Whose *love and mercy* are manifested in the state that comes after (i.e. in the consequence of one's deeds).

Sura Al Fatihah: Maliki Yaumid-din

The fourth Divine attribute presented in *Al Fatiha* is that of **Maliki Yaumid-din** (translated as "Master of the Day of Requital"). This attribute now describes Divine judgment. And the description of God being "Master," as opposed to "King" or "Ruler," is significant. The rationale being that, as "Master," God's mercy and

forgiveness is not limited or restricted by any rule or other formality (as is the case with a king or a mere judge) but rather God's forgives can be as expansive as He desires. This predominant feature of "mercy" and "forgiveness" in the Divine judgment is expounded upon elsewhere in the Quran, as it states:

O My servants who have been prodigal regarding their own souls, despair not of the mercy (*Rahma*) of God, surely God forgives sins altogether. (39:53)

Another subtle point inherent in the meaning of this attribute is that, in life, one should *only* be concerned about the ultimate judgment by God, not anyone else's judgment, as *only* God (who knows each person's individual world) is the True Master over assessment of deeds. And, conversely, it requires one to accept that passing moral judgment on others is not their responsibility, as that would be trying to undermine God's position as the "True Master." This includes judgment over oneself, as many of us are our own harshest critics. The meaning of this attribute gives comfort and consolation in that, despite how hard we may be on ourselves for any wrongs done, it is the Merciful and Forgiving nature of the Divine that will ultimately prevail.

Conclusion

Thus, in *Al Fatiha*, the opening chapter of the Quran, we are presented with a detailed description of the loving nature of the Divine, in a perfectly arranged and orderly manner. We are told that the Divine not only creates but **fosters and nourishes** creation (like how a loving parent raises a child). And this is done through **unbounded love and mercy** (nothing short of like the tender and nurturing environment of a mother's womb). And – despite all of these benevolent gifts – one's shortcomings are ultimately judged with **forgiveness** being the foremost consideration.

This is the understanding of "Divine Love" according to the spiritual tradition of Islam. And developing this love within oneself to the extent that a union is formed with the True Beloved, is life's real purpose. This further shows us that the goal is not about reciting the correct formula of belief or performing the correct ritual. Nor is it about trying to "get into" heaven or "escaping" hell, as if religion is some sort of game. Rather it is about a transformation of the heart in this very life.

This understanding was beautifully conveyed by a female Muslim saint and mystical figure from 8th Century Iraq, referred to as Rabia of Basra. I'll quote one of her famous prayers and conclude:

O Lord,

If I worship you for fear of hell,

Burn me in that hell.

If I worship you hoping for paradise,
Make it forbidden to me.

But if I worship you only for your own sake,
Do not withhold from me your everlasting beauty.

With that I'll end, thank you very much for your kind attention. ■

Union with the Beloved

By Dr. Ayesha Khan

Assalamu aleikum everyone.

In a 2005 study, researchers hooked participants up to functional MRI scanners, technology which detects variations in blood flow to measure brain activity, and analyzed participant responses to pictures and questions concerning their significant others. Researchers concluded that love, rather than a single emotion, is a state of motivation which leads to many distinct and separate emotions. The findings, which have since been mirrored by numerous studies, suggest that love activates the parts of our brain which control goal-oriented motivation.

Islam is often thought to be a mechanistic religion. Explanations of Islam usually represent faith in terms of dogma, ritual, and aspects of outward behavior. Often the impression one gets is that what Islam requires from its followers is merely mechanical belief and ritualistic observance without any involvement of thought or feeling, or development of a relationship with God.

This article endeavors to convince the reader differently – to not think of Islam as a set of rules and regulations but rather to think of the religion as love in practice motivated by desire for communion with the Divine. Too often in religion, motivation can come from fear and guilt. Fear and guilt are easy to instill, but if you are doing the rituals of religion out of fear and guilt, you will never develop love for God, which should be the aim. Conversely, motivation that comes from understanding is difficult. It takes work to arrive at the scholarship of religion and understand its rationale but the natural consequence of these things is love for the Divine. Love for the Divine and union with the Divine may seem too nebulous of concepts to be arrived at through reasoning. But perhaps like other fields, the things that are too advanced for one to understand may seem magical though they are not so. If you saw a bolt of lightning rip across the sky, and you had no understanding of it, surely it would either fill you with fear or it would seem rather magical. But if you take the

time to understand it, to do the work, you would gain knowledge of electricity, a phenomenon that is neither terrifying nor magical, but rather is an awe-inspiring, moving, and integral, even indispensable, part of our lives.

This article outlines the work of understanding religion and, consequently, provides a mechanism by which one may appreciate the meaning of Divine love and union with the Divine.

Important Concepts: Religion and the Soul

The work of religion is tied to an understanding of the purpose of life and where that purpose takes you. So, the first concept that is important to understand is this destination or what heaven is. When Prophet Muhammad was asked, “where is hell?” since the Holy Quran states that heaven extends everywhere, he replied, “where is the night when the day comes?” In Islam, the concept of heaven is not a place you go after death. Rather it is a state of being or a condition of the soul. Because it is a state of being, it can be achieved at any point in a person's life. Heaven is union of a person's soul with its origin, with the Divine.

The second important concept to understand then concerns the soul. The soul is the spiritual essence of a person, an immaterial aspect or perhaps a phenomenon emergent from our mind and body. It is our identity. In most religions, the soul is believed to be able to survive physical death. In many religious and philosophical traditions, as in Islam, the soul is thought to be breathed into us by the Divine. More specifically, in Islam, the soul is that part of a person that preceded the human body and will succeed it. The Divine has one name, Allah, but he is referred to in 99 other ways, a reference to His attributes. The soul then, has latent in it the 99 attributes of the one who breathed it into us. Our soul has the potential to be a reflection of the Divine. This is why Maulana Muhammad Ali said, the real conviction that God is, comes not from belief there is a God in the outer world, but by the realization of the Divine within oneself. But we are only part soul, the rest is our animal body, and it desires all the things animals naturally do for survival— food, sex, power etc. An important thing to understand is that none of our attributes, not those arising from the soul nor those arising from the physical self, are inherently good or evil. It is the way they are used that makes them such. Food is good when it is used to nourish us, and not so good when we are gluttonous with it. Intimate relations are good when used to strengthen the bonds of love in a marriage and not great when the desire for instant gratification consumes your being. Mercy, an attribute of the soul is good when it drives benevolence and forgiveness for those in distress and need, but not so good when it prevents us from

holding the unjust accountable. Thus, we derive a fundamental principle: it is only when reason and rationality guide the use of a natural condition in its appropriate context that it becomes a moral quality; good or evil arise from our choices and choices guide the development of our soul.

Progression of the Soul

The development of the soul is marked by three distinct evolutionary milestones noted in the Quran. In the Quran, these translate as: “the animal spirit,” “the self-accusing spirit,” and the “soul at rest. In his famous book, *The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad refers to these as the three springs from which human states flow, and he expounds on the progression of the soul through them.

The first stage of the soul, the one we are all born with, is the spirit God breathed into us. At the beginning of this stage in our spiritual development, we are guided by instinct, the way any animal is. We may feed our children or our family, but this wouldn’t really be considered a great act of benevolence because we are hard wired to ensure survival for ourselves and our family. Though we may exercise what seems like moral qualities, it would be more correct to call them natural conditions. To progress through this stage, we must develop our attributes to act for more than just our immediate circle.

Progression in this stage has to do with developing what one may call societal reforms or actions that result in the development of a pro-social being, ready to exist in a joint society. So, we go from being at the beginning of this stage where we are concerned only with the gratification and survival of the self (and perhaps family), to a stage where our actions acknowledge social values and we become civilized social beings. The motivation that fuels this progression can be simple societal approval and external validation. Humans are a tribal animal, and our survival is ensured by creating strong group bonds. Disapproval and isolation often mean death and so we are preconditioned to get along. The evolutionary remnant of this desire for inclusivity is the embarrassment one feels when differing from the group. Getting to the point of progressing beyond this stage is not too difficult, in the sense that all our systems and societies are made to guide us here. As this stage completes, we are faced with the more difficult stage where our natural conditions progress to moral qualities.

The hallmark of the second stage is using reason and rationality to deliberately exercise a natural condition in the appropriate context— this is what makes a natural condition a moral quality. In this stage, we are aware of what is good about goodness and bad about badness.

But there is a struggle between the action that results in material gain or gratification and what is the right, moral course of action. In this stage, we may falter in making the “right” choices but when we do, we recognize our mistake and try to remedy it.

Let’s look at an example to illustrate the progression through these levels using the attribute of honesty. In the lowest stage, telling the truth occurs as a natural condition of a person. It is simply part of the social contract. We don’t lie without reason because we understand that if lying was the norm, our society would fall apart. But it is no real decision born of reason that makes us tell the truth, it is simply the default mode of action. Our ego will certainly incite us to lie if we have something to gain and can get away with lying. By degrees, as we do the work of understanding why truth is inherently important, we progress to the second stage. Here we may be tempted to lie for some gain or prevention of harm, but we overcome this temptation, usually. Let’s consider the example of someone who goes to pharmaceutical school and never cheats on an exam, even if she finds out her classmates got a copy of an old biochemistry exam. She applies for a license to open a pharmacy and waits forever for it to come through even though the medications she pre-ordered are starting to expire. Then she opens the pharmacy and prices the medications, mostly fairly, but half of them expired so she has to make up cost by overcharging on some things. The struggle to price fairly is a difficult one. Who’s watching? What’s a little white lie? It may not hurt anyone. Sometimes in this struggle between our soul and ego, we may not win. And that is why this stage is also called “self reproving.” This is the wrestling that Rumi mentioned in his quote, “love is the work of wrestlers.” But for this great fight, God has provided us with a training regime.

Training Regime: Five Pillars

The seen part of Islam, the rituals that encompass the 5 pillars, are practices by which a Muslim can awaken Divine consciousness and strengthen the soul for this striving. The so-called pillars of Islam are the ritual practices by which a Muslim lives her life that strengthen the soul to bolster against compromising moral action.

What follows is a brief pause in the discussion of the progression of the soul to examine the practices of Islam, what is their significances, and why they provide a practical framework for society ... and a race to the top.

There are 5 pillars of Islam:

- Prayer
- Fasting (in the month of Ramadan)

- Hajj (going to pilgrimage in Mecca)
- Zakat, (obligatory charity mentioned in the Quran, which is 2.5% of accumulated wealth, applicable only to those with accumulated wealth)
- Profession of faith (in One God and Muhammad as his messenger)

The seen part of Islam, the rituals that encompass the 5 pillars are practices by which a Muslim can awaken Divine consciousness, ritual practices by which a Muslim lives her life that strengthen the soul to bolster against the slide to the bottom.

So, let's reframe these rituals of Islam, that to an outside observer may look mechanistic, in our new understanding of the soul and the quest for alignment.

Prayer (Salat): introduction

Prayer is often viewed as the begging of a helpless individual to a God of the Gaps (a god that fills in what you don't understand). Rather than being associated with growth or empowerment, it is associated with the cowering/imploring of a helpless being. Instead, let's look at prayer in the philosophy of Islamic teaching. A Muslim is to pray 5x a day. I remember my father told me once that I should be going to prayer as I would go to meet my love. It blew my mind because instead of fear and punishment, he encouraged me with the opposite idea.

A ton is said in the Quran regarding prayer. Most often it is in these "simple" direct verses with the theme faith and action together are needed to be a successful person. The Quran is full of these ("those who have patience and pray are the successful" "believe in God and do good" "exort to truth and patience"). Lastly, there is the very simple chapter (Quran 107) that succinctly summarizes the true purpose of prayer:

*Hast thou seen him who belies religion? □
That is one who is rough to the orphan and urges
not the feeding of the needy. □
So woe to the praying ones □
Who are unmindful of their prayer □
And do good to be seen □
Who refrain from acts of kindness*

The illustration here is what prayer is **not** which is almost as important as what prayer **is**. It is not a ritual or routine begging. In fact, to pray, and not have that translate to action is akin to belying religion. If you follow that thought through, though, you may think, if action is what matters, why pray at all? So here is my favorite saying by Prophet Muhammad on that topic: "Pray as though you see God. And if you cannot, then at least as though He sees you." Every aspect of prayer as we do it, every ritual/posture/word is directed at the

purpose of awakening the conscious to the soul—another way of saying that, is that it is attaining God Consciousness (true alignment or self actualization). That awareness keeps the motivation to make the "right choice" at the forefront of the mind, because prayer occurs in a specific way. Five times a day one steps away from whatever they're doing to realign their compass. Muslims face Mecca and there is a ritual form and content to the prayers that works toward the goal of aligning action to purpose.

Prayer: ritual

The soul is what God breathed into all of us. That makes it our commonality and the greatest equalizer. You, me, the president all have the same genesis and the same raw soul inside of us. So outward descriptors become meaningless. Black, brown, he, she, German, Maple Leaf, Sigma Chi or whatever silly label you shroud your real self with fade away, and we are equal before each other because of our commonality. Looking at another person means seeing their soul which reflects your own. How can you possibly trample their rights or harm them in any way? Facing Mecca five times a day (a unified community facing the same direction... or toward the same goal if you think of it symbolically) standing shoulder to shoulder with someone you may never know in real life (king and pauper) as equals, is a pretty strong directive to recognize the soul and the ties that bind us all.

The tradition also serves to strip away our tribal mentality (an innate survival mechanism in our less evolved ancestors but one that is destroying us now). It pushes us to define ourselves through this divinity and not through group validation. The only group left that you belong to in prayer is the one that says, you are essence of the work you put into developing your soul.

Prayer: the words

The words of our prayer remind us of the Divine attributes and our responsibility to emulate them. The Fatiha or The Opening of prayer includes four attributes of God that are said to encompass within them the others. These four attributes and their significance are detailed below in brief:

- *Rabb*: He who nourishes a thing stage by stage till it reaches its level of perfection. □ *Rabb* is succeeded by *al-amin* (nourisher of the WORLDS). A very important consequence of the plural form worlds here is the recognition that we all have our own world we live in metaphorically. That is a recognition of the differences we have to understand the many facets of life...equity not equality is what is at play here. Also, it means God belongs to all of us

equally (no chosen people here). Perhaps it also hints at life elsewhere in the universe.

- *Rahman*: the One whose love and mercy gives without the recipient having done anything to deserve the gifts. Rahman is said to be the form of God's beneficence that we experience in this world regardless of our actions.
- *Raheem*: the One whose love and mercy multiply manifold the consequences of your good deeds. This form of beneficence manifests following your actions. Whatever good you do is going to be multiplied manifold.
- *Maliki yaum-i-din* — the Master of the Day of Requital: This attribute points to the quality that makes this religion practical. All actions have consequences but even the word for hell in Islam is described as "an abyss that is a mother to us" meaning that even in that punishment is the love of a mother trying to improve her child...it is not punishment for punishment's sake, but rather it is for reform and is temporary. It's more an internal burning to alter your actions than a fire of hell. Also, God's mercy supersedes any affliction or distress your deeds may cause. Because he is the Master, not a king or judge bound by law, he can all together forgive wrongs.

Prayer: conclusion

The point of prayer, the ritual, is to step away from the material rat race, stand with your community as equals, and stand detribed. Saying these words one checks the development of these within oneself. Meditating on each, weighing their significances and contemplating the Divine (who embodies these attributes in their most perfect form in His actions toward His creation) fills one with gratitude and love. Standing before Him as though you can see Him (though that may be hard if you don't have a true feeling of that attribute inside yourself) and contemplating your progression on the scale of these qualities is motivation to continue aligning action and purpose and reflect on what, if anything, one has done to exercise these characteristics since last standing before Him.

So that is how prayer, tactically, helps evolve the divine attributes. On many levels, it is communion with God. Seeing His beauty, yourself, your place in this world (a tiny one), your potential to progress (a limitless one) and recognizing that you are part of a much bigger family that stems from the same source—simultaneously you are no one and everyone. You are in this world but not of this world. So why gain just the world? Why not, instead, spend our time elevating to heights unknown?

Fasting (Saum)

Next, we can look at fasting. Fasting is enjoined on every Muslim in the month of Ramadan. In scriptures revealed prior to the Quran, fasting is usually associated with mourning, sorrow, atonement and affliction. Islam introduced a unique significance to the institution, by making fasting (which entails abstaining from food, drink and intimate relations during daylight hours but also waking up in the night to reflect, and spending evenings with community to break the fast) a regular practice annually for the entire month of Ramadan. The focus shifts from an act of penitence to a deliberate spiritual exercise.

If you think Islam is about giving up food, then all you gain is hunger. It is, instead, about quieting the buzz in your head that constantly screams, "I need! I need!" (sleep, sex, fun, money, entertainment...). Quieting that buzz allows the quiet voice of consciousness and greater purpose to be heard. The lesson learned through this exercise is that rather than being a slave to one's appetites and desires, one harnesses them to fuel the fire of their choices. Rather than an animal that rides you, you ride the animal.

Fasting is the spiritual bootcamp that creates self-control, discipline, acts as equalizer with your community as you share the same two meals a day and experience the same hunger and thirst together. It builds empathy and binds the community – because you do it voluntarily, from a place of joy.

Charity (Zakat)

Zakat literally means "it grew." It is the annual giving away of 2.5% of savings to serve those in need. This is only one kind of charity mentioned in the Quran (even a smile to a stranger is considered as an act of charity). But it is an obligatory one on those who have accumulated wealth so they do not become beholden or overly attached to the wealth. Not allowing hoarding of wealth also stimulates the economy and is one of many practical civil and economic benefits in Islam.

This is literarily a way to detach from excessive wealth and material gain. However, it is a very practical means as ascetism isn't the goal of life. Life is the gauntlet in which the soul is made, and shirking wealth all together means losing the chance to develop the soul. Work and the importance of work are stressed in the Quran. So work, earning, and giving back of some earned wealth creates economic benefit for all.

Pilgrimage (Hajj)

When one arrives in Mecca for the Hajj, everyone dons plain white sheets as clothing. All vestiges of their life outside, disappear. If you're a king, you're wearing

white sheets. If you are someone who lives in poverty on the streets, you are wearing white sheets. Everyone has the same dress, the same duties, and has made the journey to arrive at Mecca.

An illustrative example of the power of this institution can be seen in how it affected Malcolm X:

During the past seven days of this holy pilgrimage, while undergoing the rituals of the hajj [pilgrimage], I have eaten from the same plate, drank from the same glass, slept on the same bed or rug, while praying to the same God—not only with some of this earth’s most powerful kings, cabinet members, potentates and other forms of political and religious rulers—but also with fellow-Muslims whose skin was the whitest of white, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, and whose hair was the blondest of blond—yet it was the first time in my life that I didn’t see them as ‘white’ men. I could look into their faces and see that these didn’t regard themselves as ‘white.’

Their belief in the Oneness of God (Allah) had actually removed the ‘white’ from their minds, which automatically their attitude and behavior toward people of other colors. Their belief in the Oneness of God has actually made them so different from American whites, their outer physical characteristics played no part at all in my mind during all my close associations with them.

I have never before witnessed such sincere hospitality and the practice of true brotherhood as I have seen and experienced during this pilgrimage here in Arabia.

In fact, what I have seen and experienced on this pilgrimage has forced me to ‘rearrange’ much of my own thought pattern, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions.

Malcolm X was well known to be hardened against the injustices of white America during the civil rights movement. Imagine the spiritual force behind the institution that could de-tribe someone like Malcolm X.

Profession of Faith (Shahada)

The *Shahada* is the profession or declaration of faith in Islam. It entails professing, with conviction of the heart, “*La ilaha ill-Allah Muhammad-un Rasulullah*”, two short sentences which mean: 1) There is not God but God (Allah), and 2) Muhammad is the Messenger of God. This simple formula of faith summarizes the essence of the religion of Islam, and this is what is professed when one wants to become a Muslim. The first part emphasizes the Unity of God and it signifies that God alone deserves to be the true object of one’s love,

adoration and worship. It also functions as a grounding compass for all one’s motivations, decision and actions in life. The second part acknowledges that Prophet Muhammad is a divinely appointed messenger of God and it signifies that Prophet Muhammad serves as a role model for how to achieve the goal, above all else, cherished in one’s heart.

This profession of faith, as with all articles of belief in Islam, is in reality a principle of action. As God (“Allah” in Arabic) is understood as “the Being Who possesses all the perfect attributes,” belief in God means setting one’s goal to achieve closeness to the Divine by living one’s life in a manner that develops the Divine attributes within. It entails controlling one’s lower desires and reinforcing the higher values of life so that a person can be at one with the Source of all Goodness, what is referred to as “Union with the Beloved”.

Progression of the Soul, continued

To return to the progression of the soul, these pillars are the rituals that move one’s attachment from material gain or benefit to attachment to the greatest good, the Divine, and urge a life aligned with awakening the Divine within oneself. To inculcate this love for humanity and the creator in one’s heart, makes it easier to exercise moral qualities over and over, and we subdue our ego so that there is no more struggle as there was in the second stage of progression. Instead of a person that practices these qualities, we become these qualities. To return to the example of the attribute of honesty, the progression from the second to the third stage of the soul is that instead of being a person that tells the truth, one is an honest person.

Our society frequently emphasizes the pursuit of happiness. But what is that happiness? Is it chasing good times, good food, and fun? Most realize that these pursuits do not bring long term happiness. Rather than happiness, it seems that what we might be chasing, is contentedness, a state in which our soul is at peace. Peace comes with aligning with your authentic self. But who is it you want to be, and where does the image of “who you want to be” come from? Is it an internal bar you set, is it an external standard other people set, or does it come from somewhere else? And how will we know that the person we want to be is the right kind of person?

Identity work and how we get there is an important field in psychology, with Piaget constructing a model of cognitive development where a child interacts with the environment to mature and construct a model of the self and the world. Kohlberg built on this work to try to understand the development of our moral reasoning. His theory outlines 6 stages that inform our decision between what is right and wrong as follows:

1. We are motivated to avoid punishment so what is right is that for which we don't get punished.
2. We are motivated by our own gain so right action is that which gains us the most.
3. We are motivated by what society deems appropriate.
4. We are motivated by what the law thinks is right.
5. We realize not everything is black and white, which requires abstract thinking, and what is right is that which results in the most good for most people.
6. This sixth stage is a way of thinking about the question of morality in a way that is not personal. Instead, a person tries to empathize with other people and to see the world from the other person's perspective. While this sounds easy, very few people can do this well, and even fewer are capable of doing it consistently. Some researchers have failed to identify people who operate within a stage six mentality at all, while others have identified a very few people who operate within stage six on occasion.

Consistent empathy with many people is difficult. However, if instead of having to try to empathize with others consistently, there is a root layer where one just lives a life aligned with the commonality that binds us all. Rumi stated, "you and I, must live, as though there is no you and I." The switch to this kind of thinking may seem foreign to us now, but a child stuck in concrete thought cannot wrap their minds around abstract thought yet most of us develop it. If we can develop abstract thought, perhaps we can get to the next stage too...where we are aligned with the divine attributes, and the ego and selfish desires are subdued. This stage is one the Sufi's call *fana fil Allah* or annihilation in God, where one become a reflection of the Divine attributes and actions, without struggle, are a natural extension of this. Perhaps tapping into this source layer gets us to stage six morality, and comes from inculcating a love for the Source, recognizing Him in all of us and living a life aligned with this commonality. This is the life that Islam and its rituals stress – not one born out of blind faith but one born out of opening one's eyes to Divine love.

Thank you so much. ■

A (Loving) Mercy to All Mankind

By Dr. Noman Malik

Introduction

Assalamu aleikum everyone. As discussed by our previous presenters, the word primarily used in the Holy Quran to describe this notion of divine love is *Rahma*. It is usually translated as *Mercy*, but it more fully means "to have so much love and tenderness for something that one is compelled to do good to it." It may be considered as the foundational attribute of God, from which all other attributes spring, which characterizes the relationship between God and His creation.

The greatest good that God has done for mankind is to grant us out of His love an immortal soul, which is His own spirit that He has blown into each one of us. Therefore, the soul of every human being, regardless of race or religion, possesses the attributes of the Divine. It is the soul that survives physical death and is capable of leading an eternal life of bliss and happiness with God for eternity. But for this to happen, the divine attributes, which have been likened to seeds in each soul, must be developed by being exercised in our everyday lives through the performance of good deeds.

For this, God Almighty in his infinite love and mercy sends down his guidance to humanity through his prophets and messengers. This guidance is in the form of the holy scriptures and in the practical examples of the prophets and messengers, who also act as role models for people. It is in connection with this understanding of God's love for humanity that the Holy Quran refers to the Holy Prophet as "A (Loving) Mercy to all Mankind," which is the topic of my presentation.

Stages of Progression of Goodness

I would like to start by sharing with you a verse from the Holy Quran that explains the stages of progress of "goodness." In verse 90 of chapter 16, it states:

Surely God enjoins **justice** (*adl*) and the **doing of good** (to others) (*ihsan*) and the **giving to the kindred** (*itaai zil qurbaa*), and He forbids indecency and evil and rebellion. He admonishes you that you may be mindful.

Three levels of goodness have been described in this verse: first, *adl* (which means being just); second, *ihsan* (which refers to goodness without recompense); and

third, *itaai-zil-qurba* (which refers to giving to the kindred, or the condition of unreserved love).

The **first stage** of goodness is responding to a good deed with an equally good deed. This is referred to as “justice” or “good for good”.

The **second stage** is when one does good without expecting good in return. The desire to do good arises from the realization that all souls are from God and are deserving of respect and love. In this stage, no thankfulness is expected or needed in return for any good done. The Holy Prophet Muhammad has explained beautifully the meaning of the second stage of goodness (*ihsan*), in simple easily understood terms; he said: “Do good as if you see God ...”.

But there is a still higher level of goodness (the **third stage**), in which one regards the whole of humanity with love as if close family (*Itaai-zil-Qurbaa*). An example is needed to illustrate this highest form of Goodness. Suppose there is a child dying of a terminal illness. You and I will visit the child and the parents, empathize with them, and offer them our help. But after that, we will go home, get busy with our daily activities and then retire to bed for a good night’s sleep. But who will remain awake at the child’s bedside? It will be the parents, kneeling and prostrating before God and imploring Him to save the child. Similarly, a prophet or messenger of God grieves for a fallen humanity as if they were close relatives. Their love for humanity is so great that they grieve for it just as a mother or father would grieve for a physically stricken child. So, they pour their hearts out to God begging Him to guide humanity out of the darkness of evil and harmful ways into the light and happiness of a life of virtue.

According to Islam, all prophets of God – whether Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad (and even Buddha and Krishna), peace be upon them all – reached this third exalted stage of Goodness. The divine attributes in their souls are developed and purified by the fire of persecution and adversity, just as gold is purified in the intense heat of the crucible. The dross of allegiance to false gods, selfishness, avarice, arrogance, cruelty, unbridled lower passions, lies, deceit etc., are all burnt away by the sufferings they willingly endure for the love of God (Who is the Source of all Goodness). In the spiritual tradition of Islam, this state is referred to as *fana fillah* (annihilation in God, or union with the Beloved). Their having developed a loving relationship with the Divine to perfection is reflected in their purity and beauty of character, which then becomes a reflection of the Divine to others. They then become god-like in their love and mercy towards all of mankind, as if all humanity is their kindred.

Hence, a study of the lives of all these great personalities is a source of edification for one’s soul. Their inspiring examples are essential for spiritual development that leads to God’s everlasting Love and Mercy. Their morality brings Divine Guidance to life.

Prophet Muhammad’s Life Example

With this in mind, I will share with you some facets of the Holy Prophet Muhammad’s life that are a source for spiritual inspiration and revitalization. J.H. Dennison, who has studied the different systems of religion and the civilizations that grew up therefrom, describes the state of the civilized world in the fifth and the sixth centuries in his book *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization* as such:

In the fifth and the sixth centuries, the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible ... had broken down and nothing had been found adequate to take their place ... It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown ... Civilization like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world ... stood tottering... rotted to the core... It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of east and south.

Conditions in Arabia at this time were especially bad. Belief in One Supreme Being, the Creator, was non-existent. There was no central governing body administering civil laws and justice. The Arab nation was divided into numerous tribes fighting with each other. The curse of blood feuds was well established with feuds lasting centuries and fueling deep enmities and rifts.

The position of weaker members of society – particularly, women and orphans at the time – was most disadvantageous. Women and orphaned children had no rights, the rule being that “only he could inherit who could slay with the sword and smite with the spear.” Immorality and taking advantage of the vulnerable was rampant. The Arabs were addicted to vices like alcohol and gambling. Only a few were literate, with the majority priding themselves on their illiteracy. The prospects for a moral reformation of society at the time of the Holy Prophet were bleak. To quote Sir William Muir, historian of Islam and the Middle East:

The prospects of Arabia before the rise of Muhammad were as unfavourable to religious reform as to political union or national regeneration. The foundation of the Arab faith was a deep-rooted idolatry, which for centuries had stood

proof, with no palpable symptom of decay, against every attempt at evangelization from Egypt and Syria.

It was in these conditions that the Holy Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 AD in Makkah, Arabia. He was an orphan. His father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was six years old. He was raised in the loving care of his grandfather and later his uncle when his grandfather passed away.

As a young man, he generally led a reserved life. He had friends, whose moral greatness was admitted by all. His bitterest opponents were challenged to point out a single negative aspect of his character during the forty years that he had passed among them before he received the Divine call, to which they were unable to do so [10:16]. It was in his youth that, on account of his pure character and his love for truth and justice, he won from his compatriots the title of “*al-Amin*,” or “the Faithful.”

Sir William Muir bears testimony to the purity of Prophet Muhammad’s character in his youth; he writes: “Our authorities all agree in ascribing to the youth of Muhammad a modesty of deportment and purity of manners rare among the Makkans.” For years before he was commissioned as a prophet at the age of forty, Prophet Muhammad grieved by the violence and injustice around him, would retire to the solitude of the mountains around Mecca where he would spend hours, day and night, praying and meditating, entreating God to guide his nation on the path of rectitude and virtue. Even prior to Prophethood, he was very solicitous of the wrongs being perpetuated on the less fortunate members of society and he played a leading role in forming an alliance of like-minded people to protect the rights of the disadvantaged called the *Hilf al Fudul* (meaning, The League of the Virtuous). At the age of forty, high in the mountains in a cave called Hira, he had the first revelatory experience which commenced his prophethood. For the next twenty-three years, he would receive these revelations of God’s guidance which formed the pages of the Quran. These revelations are in first person speech, God’s words in first person from beginning to end. The one point I would like to emphasize is that the verses revealed are in response to situations that the Prophet was facing. In each instance he practically demonstrates their execution. In this way the Divine Love (as a mercy to mankind) was manifested in the deeds of the Holy Prophet.

Moral Transformation Brought by Prophet Muhammad

Verse 23 of Chapter 6 of the Holy Quran states:

And the servants of the
Beneficent are they who walk on the

earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say, Peace!

In his translation and commentary of the Holy Quran, Maulana Muhammad Ali relates the results of Prophet Muhammad’s moral and ethical reformatory work in his commentary of this verse. He writes:

From here to the end of the chapter is described the great transformation which the Prophet had already brought about. The great qualities spoken of as being met in the servants of the Beneficent present a striking contrast with the evils which reigned supreme in Arabia. They were an arrogant people, who trampled the rights of their fellowmen under their feet, but the faithful now walked in humility and led lives of lowliness, in which they had the greatest regard for others’ rights (v. 63). In the days of ignorance, they passed their nights in drunken orgies, but now they kept awake at night in devotion and were instead drunk with the love of God (v. 64). In the days of ignorance, they spent money extravagantly, when it was a question of pride, and they did not care for the poor dying of hunger, but now they saved every penny they could to spend on others (v. 67). Formerly idols were worshipped in the land of Arabia, human blood was shed on the slightest pretext, sex-relations were loose to an extreme, but they had now become the torch-bearers of Divine Unity, for whose sake they willingly suffered every privation, homicide was looked upon with abhorrence, the highest value was placed on the chastity of men and women, and righteousness was the one thing in which men and women vied one with another (vv. 68–71). Truth and faithfulness were the great qualities that ruled men’s minds, in the new dispensation, and a life full of vigour and earnestness was seen in the place of ignorance, superstition and immorality, which were the chief features of pre-Islamic Arabia (vv. 72–74).”

In addition to firmly establishing belief in the Unity of God, the Holy Prophet, through his practical example, manifested the principles of goodness, love and mercy that are nurtured and cultivated by Divine Love.

Manifestation of Divine Love on Earth

So what exactly did the Holy Prophet Muhammad establish that can serve as guidance for mankind’s peaceful and loving co-existence? I will share with you just three principles he instituted in this regard.

One principle that formed the basis for his teachings is the **unity of mankind and equality of all people**. As the Holy Quran states unequivocally:

And (all) people are but a single nation (10:19), and

Mankind is a single nation (2:213)

And it was this principle of unity of mankind and equality among all people that was at the core of the societal changes that he effectuated during his lifetime.

Another principle that formed the basis for his teachings was the universal experience of Divine Love, in that **all prophets and messenger** and founders of faith traditions were from God and deserved respect and reverence. Prophet Muhammad is recorded as saying that 144,000 prophets had been sent to mankind from the creation of Adam till the time of his appearance. As the Holy Quran clarifies:

... And there is not a people but a warner has gone among them. (35:24)

Hence, a platform for respect and appreciation among faith traditions was laid.

And yet another principle that formed the basis for his teachings was that **salvation** is not limited to any one group of people, but is available to anyone who develops a relationship with the Divine and does good to others. As the Quran states:

Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah (God) and the Last Day and does good, they have their reward with their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve. (2:62)

Accordingly, the prescribed goal of religion (and, in fact, purpose of life) was not to be dogmatic or ritualistic, but rather to develop a loving connection with the Divine by doing good to others.

It is based on such universal (and timeless) principles of love for God and love for humanity, that the Holy Quran states:

... and We have not sent thee (Muhammad) but as a **mercy to all nations**. (21:107)

The point being, that Prophet Muhammad's life was an expression or manifestation of Divine Love for humanity. That, through the life of the Holy Prophet, one is afforded a practical illustration of how to achieve closeness (or union) with the Beloved. And it is in this regard, the Holy Quran tells the Holy Prophet to say: Say (O Muhammad): If you love God, follow me: Allah (God) will love you, and grant you protection from your sins. And Allah (God) is Forgiving, Merciful. (3:31)

Maulana Rumi expresses this sentiment in the following way:

Be among the community (of believers) who are blessed by (Divine) Mercy. Do not abandon the way of conduct of Muhammad but be commanded by it.

Practical Example

Similarly, the Holy Quran refers to Prophet Muhammad distinctively as "an excellent exemplar"; it states:

Certainly, you have in the Messenger of Allah an **excellent exemplar** for him who hopes in Allah (God) and the Latter day and remembers Allah (God) much. (33:21)

Prophet Muhammad is identified as this timeless "excellent exemplar" because he was able to show by his practical example how to live a life of love in all types of circumstances. From an orphan to a king of a great empire, Prophet Muhammad passed through all phases of life. See, if he had not been a **laborer**, he could not have revealed the value and integrity in working with one's own hands and earning an honest living. If he had not in his youth organized grass-roots campaigns to serve the poor and protect the weaker members of society, he could not have been an inspiration to socially conscious **community organizers**. If he had not **married**, he would have left people unguided in practically half of their daily interactions, and could not have shown how to be a kind and affectionate spouse and parent. If he had not served among the ranks of a military, he could not have been an exemplar for a **soldier** laying down his (or her) life in the cause of truth, justice and freedom. If he had not been the head of an armed force, he could not have served as an example for a responsible **general** or an accountable **commander in chief**. If he had not formed rules and regulations for his community, he could not have been regarded as an example for a conscientious **legislator**. If he had not been in the position to decide disputes among people, he could not have served as a model for an impartial **judge** or effective **mediator**. If he had not had life-long friends, he could not have shown the beauty in true and trusted **companionship**. And, if he had not been persecuted by tyrants, and then overcome his persecuting enemies, and forgiven them without enforcing any punishment against them, he could not have *practically illustrated* the lessons on compassion, mercy and forgiveness that are contained in all revealed scriptures.

So, it is due to the diversity of Prophet Muhammad's life experiences and his practical application of love, mercy and goodness, that he is regarded as "an excellent exemplar" and, as a result, a "mercy to all mankind."

The Analogy of the Miraj (Ascension)

I'll end by sharing with you a beautiful analogy about Prophet Muhammad presented in the Holy Quran. It is in reference to the Miraj, a story about the Holy Prophet's "ascension" to the heavens where he passes through the various levels of heaven, meeting angels and former prophets, until he is united with the Divine. Although many Muslims take this story literally, the Holy Quran expressly refers to this episode as a "vision."

Regardless of whether one interprets it as a physical event of a spiritual experience, a beautiful analogy is presented describing the status of Prophet Muhammad. It states in verses 5-9 of Chapter 9:

One Mighty in Power has taught him, the Lord of Strength. So he (Muhammad) attained to perfection, And he (Muhammad) is in the highest part of the horizon. Then he (Muhammad) drew near, drew nearer yet, So he (Muhammad) became as a **chord between two bows** or closer still. (53:5-9)

What is meant here is that the Holy Prophet spiritually ascended towards the Divine and became so close to Him (in the spiritual sense) that he acquired all the perfect divine attributes, all the while being firmly rooted in the earthly station displaying those divine attributes of love and sympathy for mankind in all situations that life has to offer, and thereby occupied the central point between the Divine and humanity, like a *chord between two bows*. The lesson being that the Holy Prophet's life serves as a means by which one may tread on the Path of Love and achieve a state of spiritual life (a rebirth), whereby one is spiritually united with the Divine.

Maulana Rumi expresses this sentiment by stating:

Love is the path of my Prophet.

I was born through love,
Love is my mother.

This love is hidden in my veil,
Hidden from my unfaithful nature.

I wasn't born from a mother.
This love gave birth to me.

Marvel!

A thousand blessings on this motherly love.

I'll end here. Thank you very much for your kind attention. Peace be upon you. And may peace and blessings be upon the beloved Prophet Muhammad. ■

Reflections on the Everlasting Beauty of the Divine

By Prof. Omid Safi

What an incredible joy and an honor it is to get to share some thoughts, reflections and some beautiful teachings from this path of love which is at the very heart of the Islamic tradition. Let's begin with one of the most well-known stories from the life of the *Habib*, the chosen one, God's own beloved, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him.

We are told that one day the Prophet is sitting around with his friends, his companions, and all of a sudden there is a stranger who comes into their midst, and he comes right up to the Prophet and sits knee to knee, thigh to thigh, in a position of great familiarity. And the companions are a bit puzzled — who is this stranger and how come he is sitting in such a familiar position with the Prophet. He says, "I have some questions for you." The Prophet says, "Yes?" He says, "What is Islam?" The companions are baffled! Who is this person, where has he come from, and why is he quizzing the messenger of Allah, the prophet of Islam on what is Islam?!

Nevertheless, the Prophet proceeds to answer, and he states:

Islam is to have faith in oneness, in the unity of Allah, to uphold the prayers, to fast in the holy month of Ramadan, to take care of the poor through paying the Zakat and as one is able to, undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The stranger says, "You have answered correctly." The companions are astonished! Who is this person asking the Prophet what is Islam, and saying, "you've answered correctly" as if he's the one who is in a position of knowing. Then comes the second question: "What is *Iman*, what is faith?" And the Prophet says:

Faith is to have faith in God and the angels and the prophets and the scriptures and the Day of Judgment to come.

"You have answered correctly again," says the stranger. Then comes the third and final question: "And what is *Ihsan*?"

Ihsan is that concept which sometimes gets translated as spiritual excellence. It's a rather dull translation, what some people say is virtue, but really the root of the matter is from *husn* which is goodness and beauty. It is where names like *Hassan* and *Hussein* and *Husna* and *Muhsin* come from. So *Ihsan* is really to make beauty real. It's the actualization, the realization of goodness and beauty. *Ihsan* is the name that is given to that entire

dimension of spirituality and aesthetics in Islam — the spiritual life, the mystical life. This is the *Ihsan* dimension.

And the *Habib*, the chosen one, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, says:

Ihsan is to adore God, to worship Allah as if you see him and if you don't, to remember that Allah nevertheless sees you.

The third time the stranger wearing white head to toe says, "you have answered correctly!" Then he gets up and essentially poofs! He walks out and no one can catch up with him. Then the *Habib*, the chosen one, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, says, "that was *Jibrael*, the archangel Gabriel who has come to teach you your faith."

This Hadith is featured very prominently in the life of the blessed one and in the Hadith collections, and the order of the question itself is also important. We begin the religious life with Islam with doing what is required of us: to pray, to fast, to go on the pilgrimage. And then above that is the level of faith where these become realities in our heart. There's a passage in the Quran where a group of nomads come to the Prophet and they ask him to bear witness that they have faith, and the Prophet is made to answer to them: not quite yet! Yes, you are doing the Islam part, you are submitting yourself to Allah, you are performing the rituals properly, but you haven't yet attained to faith. And above Islam, and above *Iman*, is the level of goodness, the level of beauty, the level at which loveliness permeates the whole of our being.

We can all think of people who religiously might perform everything that is asked of them, but they don't have kindness, they don't have gentleness, and they may not yet have attained to loveliness. That quality of *Ihsan* is really the subject of our whole discussion. This is that love dimension which characterizes our whole faith. It's the goal, it's the aspiration, it's what we yearn for, what we long for. To adore God as if we see Him and if we don't and there's many sages who have read that same saying to mean, but you do. You think you don't, but you do; to remember that God nevertheless sees us.

Imam Ali, may God bless him, and noble his countenance, was asked at one point do you see Allah and his answer was, "I would never worship a God whom I could not see." People said, "How can you see Allah?" and he said, "not with the eyes of the head but rather with the eyes of the heart." This is one of the goals to have an activation, an illumination of our inner faculties. You have eyes, other than the eyes of the head; ears, other than the ears of the head. We're looking for

spiritual faculties with which we are intended to be related to Allah. And this love-based dimension of Islam is ultimately designed to take us to that divine presence directly, immediately.

The wonderful classical Sufi Farid ud-Din Attar tells a beautiful story of a famous Sufi, Dhul-Nun al-Misri, the Egyptian, one of the classic friends of Allah from the early period who has a visionary experience in which the whole of humanity is gathered up. This is a re-creation of that primordial covenant with Allah, and a series of questions is posed to this awesome gathering, not really a quiz per se, but a series of gifts or offerings from God. In this vision, the voice of Allah calls out:

Who wishes to be spared all pain, to never again suffer, and to be spared the torment of hellfire.

What is the catch? There is no catch. It's a free gift. So people look around, and about 90% of the people think to themselves: Wow, to be spared pain, no more suffering, no more heartache, no more agonizing over losing loved ones, no more your knee and your back hurting, no more the fear of damnation in hellfire. Sounds pretty good! So 90% of them put up their hands, and they wait and they wait, and the voice of Allah comes, "it is granted unto you, you may leave!" So, they leave. The gathering shrinks.

The voice of Allah comes a second time:

Who here wishes to attain my loftiest garden, a paradise so sublime and so luminous that no eye has ever seen it and no words have ever described it?

Wow! To attain to that level of paradise even beyond any descriptions that we have ever heard that sounds sublime. So of those who are left, 90% of them raise their hands; they wait to see what's coming. "It is granted unto you, you may leave!" So they leave.

Dhul-Nun says by that time there was just a very small handful of people left: the ones who had turned down the opportunity to be spared pain and suffering and the ones who had turned down, the offer, the promise of the most sublime paradise. And this handful of people now experience the voice of Allah coming to them majestically in a thunderous voice:

I gave you deliverance from all pain, salvation from hellfire, you chose it not; I gave you my supreme pleasure, the highest realm of paradise, you chose it not! What have you come here for?

And these few people left lowered their heads in humility and they say simply:

We did not come to be spared hellfire and we did

not even come for paradise. We came for you.

Now the voice of Allah comes to them in a gentle way, and he says, “In that case, I am yours.”

These are the friends with whom we are concerned, the ones who love the gardener more than they love the garden; the ones who are in it for the sake of Allah even beyond the promise of paradise and salvation, and this is a proud tradition in our beautiful faith. These are the ones whose site is not distracted by the extraordinary fruits of their spiritual experience. So we hear the prayer of friends like Rabia, probably the most famous female mystic that we have had in our tradition. Her famous prayer is as follows:

O Lord, if I worship you for fear of hell, burn me in that hell. If I worship you hoping for paradise, make it forbidden for me. But if I worship you only for your own sake, do not do not withhold from me your everlasting beauty; do not withhold from me your everlasting beauty!

The primary way in which Rabia experiences Allah is through beauty. We get some extraordinary accounts in the lives of these saints of the way in which they come to experience Allah. Of course, we know that in the Noble Quran, we are told that Allah is closer to you than the beating of the heart and the jugular vein, that Allah comes between a person and their heart. Allah mingles inside your consciousness.

There’s a charming story that Rabia is walking by one day. We’re told that she’s walking past a mosque, a church, temple, it’s not very clear; and there’s a preacher sitting on the pulpit, and the preacher is stating that account which is so well known from many scriptures. You hear versions of this in the Gospels:

Ask and it shall be granted unto you. Knock and it shall be opened unto you.

And Rabia sticks her head in and says, “What did you say?” And this preacher who perhaps just a little annoyed that this woman has interrupted his eloquent sermon says, “Woman, I said knock! And it shall be opened unto you,” and Rabia says, “Fool! The door is never closed; the door is never closed!”

A few centuries later, Maulana Rumi, who has grown up with these stories, knows Rabia’s teachings. He pays the ultimate compliment to Rabia by taking her insight and going even further with it. So he has a beautiful quatrain in which he says:

My friend, you have spent your entire existence knocking and knocking and knocking at God’s door. My beloved, you are knocking from the inside. You are already within the divine presence

and you keep knocking at this door to open when you’re already home. There is nothing outside of Allah; how could there be? How could anything have an independent existence outside of Allah? If anything existed outside of Allah, he would be another God.

So that’s why we get South Asian Sufis from the Chishti tradition that say things like “God is closer to you than the ocean is to the fish.”

There’s a beautiful passage that touches on this theme in the Quran: *Wal lahu min wa ra-i-him mu-heet* (85:20), which means “God embraces you. God wraps around you from behind”, and that word *muheet* also has a meaning of an ocean. So, God oceanically wraps around you, and that’s an important insight; that on this path, we can start to let go of the notion of directionality, of this myth that somehow God is somehow to be found out there or perhaps, in some putative future. Instead, God is to be found here and now, always and forever; that the divine is not simply to be experienced in the afterlife, in the heavenly realm, in the celestial realm. Here and now, where you are, where we are, we can come to experience Allah.

That’s one reason why the Sufis, the mystics, the lovers of Allah, who very rarely use the term Sufi, but one of the terms that they do use for themselves is *ibn al waqt*, a child of the moment, a child of the eternal now. That’s a beautiful teaching for us to reflect on. We live in this very eternal moment as a child of the eternal now. We have risen above that mistake of consistently dwelling on what happened to us in the past, perhaps being worried about some pain or some suffering that happened to us back then and there, but nor are we simply waiting for some future to come, some otherworldly reward to come. Here and now, we are here and now in this eternal moment, we come to experience God.

And the reason that we have that capacity is because we have been created in the image of Allah. We have been created with the capacity to know Allah. According to the Quran, Allah states:

Wanafakhtu fihi min ruhi. I have made him complete and breathed into him of My spirit (15:29).

God breathed something of his spirit into us, and you can only know Allah by something that is of Allah and from Allah and that something is the spirit. And the seat of the spirit, the throne of the spirit is the heart. The heart in a western imagination sometimes is taken as an organ of perhaps flesh that pumps blood or in some cases it’s taken simply as the seat of your sentimentality, but not so in our tradition. In our tradition, emotions and sentimentality are embraced and honored; they too have a role, but the heart is the seat of the spirit, and so the

Habib, the chosen one, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, says:

Indeed in the body, there's a piece of flesh, heart. If it is sound, the whole being is sound and if it corrupts, then the whole being is corrupt and that is the heart.

Returning to this ability to be present here and now, to give our full and complete attention, let's think about the fact that in our culture, we use a lot of words for multitasking — the ability to listen to a talk while tending to other things. We hardly have a word or a concept for single-tasking, undivided whole attention. And we know this, of course, from the example of the chosen one, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, the Prophet Muhammad, whom we know when he would speak with someone, whenever he would speak with someone, he didn't make them feel like they were the most important person in the world. They actually describe it as being made to feel like they were the only person in the world. We know that when he would be speaking with someone, he wouldn't just turn his head, he would actually turn his whole body so that his shoulders were square with their shoulders; his face, square with their face; his eyes, square with their eyes and for as long as he spoke with them, he maintained that eye contact. He was entirely present in every task.

One of the great Sufis, Hujwiri (Data Ganj Baksh) in Lahore, describes this ability to be wholeheartedly present as the defining feature of the lovers of God, and he gives this meaning to it — have your heart be where your feet are. It's an antidote to the culture of scatteredness that abounds around us. People are competing for your attention. They want to monetize it. You can get on any of the apps that many of us have, and you scroll and you scroll and you scroll, and the next thing you know, an hour has gone by, and what has happened to your one wild and precious life? You will never get to the bottom of Instagram where Instagram will say, "that's it, Omid! You read them all, you read all the posts, there's no more!" That will never happen. It's an endless doomscrolling.

Instead, what we are called to do is to cultivate the sense of being present, being attentive, and being whole. And we have training for this. The training for this often times in many of our spiritual traditions is connected to disciplining and training the breath. The breath is the connection between the body and the spirit. By the breath, we do not simply mean air. It's not the simple process of breathing, though it's connected to it, It's the attentiveness, the consciousness that suffuses the breath. That's the reason why in our tradition, words like *nafas*, breath and *nafs*, soul are so closely related. Maulana Rumi at one point says, "wherever you are, be

the soul of that place; wherever you are, sanctify that place with your whole being." So your being can be like a light that when you enter a space, people notice that something has shifted. If you are present to yourself, if you're present to Allah, then people receive the inspiration to be present to themselves and present with Allah.

There's a majestic line of poetry from Maulana Rumi which the late Annemarie Schimmel says might be the single most autobiographical line that Rumi ever wrote, and in it he says, "I prayed so often that my whole being became a prayer. Everyone who sees me starts to pray." Not that they start to pray to me, but that prayer is so real in him that other people want that too. They start mirroring that. They start reflecting that. That's the sign of someone who is wholeheartedly present. It's the reason why in our tradition, particularly in the eastern part of the Muslim world, we never mention the names of the prophets or the great saintly ones without adding this word *Hazrat*, e.g., Hazrat Ibrahim, Hazrat Nooh, Hazrat Musa, Hazrat Isa, Hazrat Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him. And that word *Hazrat* is both the sense of a person in whom you detect *hudur*, the presence of Allah and someone who is present wholly, completely present to their own being. And when you are present to your heart, that throne of the spirit, then the heart turns within and opens up towards all. As all of our sages have said, you are the grandness of the universe contained within, you are the *alam saghir*, you are the microcosmos, you contain within you multitudes. And every teaching, every guidance, every light, every beauty, every virtue out there is also to be found within you.

If we can find a way of having risen above dogma, risen above having a limited understanding of God and indeed we cannot even begin to pray until we say *Allahu Akbar*, God is great, God is greater, God is the greatest; whatever idea conception that I've had about God, I begin by acknowledging that God is greater than that. God is greater than my understanding of God. God is greater than the words that I use about God. God is greater than the thoughts I have had about God. If we limit God to the God of one people, the God of one species, a male God, an Arab God, a Jewish God, the God of humans, that's a small god. We deserve a more expansive God. The God of the *Rabbul Alamin*, the God of the infinite universes.

So here's where you get to have teachings like that of Ibn Arabi. You can start to see in this poem how and why it is that there is an openness, there is a universality in this tradition. He talks about coming to this heart, this *qalb* and the word *qalb* in Arabic has that sense of something that is dynamic, something that is perpetually shifting and in motion. It's never static. So the only

way that you can really have a full embrace of the divine is if your capacity to be receptive towards God is itself always growing, always expanding. So this is what Ibn Arabi says:

What wonder is this, a garden among the flames, my heart takes on every form, a pasture for gazelles, a cloister for monks, the idol's temple, a Kaaba for the circling pilgrim, the Torah's tables and the Quran's pages. I follow the religion of love whichever way this caravan turns, I turned. This love is my religion, this my faith.

And of course, this intense and passionate love is connected to the chosen one, to the *Habib* because after all the *Habib*, the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, is God's own beloved. If God is the God of the infinite universes — *alhamdulillah rab-bil alamin* — praise be to the cherishing sustaining Lord of the infinite galaxies and universes seen and unseen, then the *Habib*, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, is *rahmatun al amin*. He is that being sent as a mercy not only to the Quraysh, not only to Arabs, not even just to Muslims or humanity as many universes as there are. The *Habib*, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, has been sent as a mercy to all of them, seen and unseen. That's why he is the firstborn of creation, the *Noor* Muhammad. The light of Muhammad is the very first thing that Allah created. It's for that reason that Ibn Arabi identifies him as *Rasul al-Muhibeen*, the chief of the lovers of God. If you claim to love Allah, he is our chief and it is under his banner that we gather.

Let's come back to this notion of this dynamic way of thinking about Allah of being in fact with Allah. One of the great Sufis Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani says at one point, "my God my Lord, in public, I call you Lord but when we're alone together, I call you my beloved." It's this ability to shift registers, right? Ours is in some ways an age of public declaration of everything. The line between public and private is quite blurred and there's a temptation to have everything be a hashtag something, but not so much for our Sufi friends. There's also a notion of *adab*, of courtesy; courtesy in recognizing that everyone is on their own journey and that somebody else is on a path that might be different than ours. So in public, you observe the decorum, the etiquette, the *adab* of the public but in private, you call on God as the beloved. In fact, many of these Sufis speak about Allah as the *dost*, the *yaar*, the friend. Every whirling dervishes performance, ceremony, ritual — this is the *Mawlawiyya*, the *Mevlevi* order that traces itself back to Rumi. It begins with the line "O Hazrat Rumi, the friend of God, God is your friend." As Rumi says, "if God is your friend, whom do you have to fear?" And is it not the case that for the chosen one, peace and blessings of

Allah be upon him. The very last phrase that he ever uttered as he was taking his dying breath was *ar-rafiq al-a'la* — the highest friend, the highest companion. What is death other than the lifting of one last veil? Here we are with Allah, there we are with Allah. What room is there for fear or even hope for that matter? There's only being with Allah, being with the beloved.

Another significant early Sufi Shibli says, "the mystics are like children in the lap of God." There's so many teachings that one could share about these, beautiful beings connected to the *Habib*, the chosen one, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, him connected to Allah.

One of the important ways in which this relationship with Allah transforms our being is that the path leads to a kind of intimacy with God where the vertical dimension, if you would, the Lord and servant dimension, never disappears but it is supplemented, it is completed perhaps, with this relationship of love, with this relationship of friendship. And so here's the saying from one of the beautiful early Sufis, an illiterate Shepherd named Harakani, and this is how he experiences God. He says:

God Almighty said to me, 'O my devotee, when you set out on the path, I am your path; when you come home, I am your host; when you speak, I listen; when you think, I know your thoughts; when you flee to me, I take hold of you; when you are in awe of me, I comfort you; when you come to me in hope, I faithfully fulfill my promise, I am with you, you too be with me; when you thrive, I am with you and when you are ruined and broken, I am with you; when you thrive, I am with you and when you are ruined and broken, I am with you.'

So one thing that is really extraordinary is that if you love Allah, you have to love the ones whose breath contains something of Allah. If you love Allah, you love the handiwork of Allah, the creation of Allah. There is no duality between the love of Allah and the love of humanity, of nature. Everything sings, everything praises God. In fact in the Sufi tradition, there's nothing that you could call an inanimate object. Even rocks and stones have a soul. Maulana Rumi had this beautiful tradition whenever he would pick up a glass to drink before he would drink, he would kiss it and then he would drink and people would say, "Maulana, why are you kissing the glass?" He would say, because it too has a *jaan* (life), has a soul, has a life force. He says when you see rocks and plants, much less animals, to you they might appear to be things, but in the sight of Allah, they have a soul. So one of the beauties of this particular path is the way in which the love of Allah leads you to demonstrate that tenderness, that love and indeed that

concern for justice towards all. The love of Allah leads to the transformation of the eyes; it changes how we look upon creation; the transformation of the ears, what we hear; the transformation of the tongue, how we speak; the transformation of the hands, the work that we do and how we touch one another; the transformation of the belly, of the sexual organs, of the feet of all of us.

There's a wonderful story, that Maulana Rumi and other sages like Saadi share. The story is told of a great Caliph who has been listening to the great poet Majnun's famous love songs in praise of his beloved Layla. Layla as you might know is the dark beloved, that beloved who is dark like the night. Dark eyes, dark eyebrows, dark hair, perhaps even a dark skin and Majnun is the love crazed one. He's even forgotten his own name. He's only Layla's Majnun and the Caliph reads of these poems. He hears about them and he's like, "I've got to meet this girl." Any girl who would inspire such exquisite love songs has to be a girl of unsurpassing beauty. So he summons up Layla to his court and just because he's the Caliph and he can do that to cover all the bases in case there's one even more beautiful than her. He summons all the women from Layla's village to his court. So all day he's been tingling in excitement, getting to meet this Layla and he walks into the court and sits down and he looks at the gathering of women before him and his eyes start scanning the room because he's sure that one of them is just going to surface above the other ones. But to his surprise, they all look pretty ordinary. No one of them seems to be more stunning than the next. So he turns to his *wazir*, to his adviser, "did you bring Layla?" "Yes, Your Majesty, we brought Layla." "She's here?" "Yes, she is here", and so finally he's so puzzled, he turns to the crowd of women and he goes, "is one of you all Layla?" And you better watch out because in this tradition the women speak back. So Layla steps forth from the crowd. She looks pretty simple, very plain, not distinguishable from any of the other ones, and the Caliph is puzzled and he goes "you, you are Layla?!" He's looking up at the poems and asks "you are the Layla that inspired that poem, all those poems?" And Layla says, "I am Layla, but you, you are not Majnun!" The poets go on to add in order to see the beauty of Layla you have to look through the eyes of Majnun. We need to have eyes that are transformed. We have to learn to see the beauty in each other and the beauty in ourselves, the beauty in nature, the beauty in all. We are the handiwork of a beautiful God. What did Rabia say? "Do not withhold from me your everlasting beauty."

In the ancient and eternal covenant, when Allah had gathered up the whole of humanity and God asks "Am I not your cherishing sustaining Lord?," we say "Yes, we bear witness." And that bearing witness is related to

the word *shahid*, the beautiful one, the beautiful witness; that to see God's beauty is to testify to God, that God is the source of all beauty. As the *Habib*, God's chosen one, God's own beloved, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, said:

Inna Allah-al Jameel, wa Allah yuhibbu al-jamaal. God is lovely and God loves loveliness.
God is beautiful and God loves beauty.

So we need beautiful eyes to see beauty in one another, not just physical beauty, the beauty of the heart, inside, outside. And that love according to so many of our sages like Maulana Rumi, is like water. Water always flows down to the low ground. So Rumi says real love, true love flows down towards those who find himself humbled, broken. There's a saying of the chosen one, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, that you find in the teachings of sages like Ibn Arabi where God asks humanity in the day to come:

I was hungry and you didn't feed me and people say, 'ya Allah, you are the Lord of the infinite universes, how could you be hungry?' If you had gone to the hungry, you would have found me with them. I was thirsty and you didn't give me drink. 'Ya Allah, how could you be thirsty?' If you had gone to the thirsty, you would have found me with them. If you had gone to the homeless to the occupied, to the downtrodden, those out on the margins, those hurting and broken, you would have found me with them.

So God's love permeates all, but is particularly attentive to the broken ones, to the ones hurting. And in this path, we are invited to bring our pain, to bring our hurt and offer it to Allah. That's the one thing that perhaps you could say is missing from God's gathering: brokenness, pain, hurt. So bring it to Allah, offer the one thing that we might have to offer and Allah receives as the Sufi says, "Allah will buy your nothingness and offer you everything."

Let me end this reflection, this reminder that as Maulana Rumi says, "we all have our wounds and the wound is where the light enters you." With one of my favorite stories, this one is also from that dear and beloved illiterate Shepherd Harakani. He tells this story, a charming story of two brothers. Both brothers from the same mother, raised in the same house, but their temperaments are quite different. One of them in the story he's called the "praying brother." He spends morning, noon, and night not only doing the required prayers but all of the extra prayers. The other brother does perhaps the minimum required prayers but instead, he comes to devote his life to taking care of their elderly and weak mother. In the daytime, he says "mama, can I

take care of you? Mama, can I run an errand for you? Mama, can I walk you to the bathroom?” And at night time, he keeps a vigil by her bedside: “Mama, can I get you a drink? Mama, can I wipe your forehead?” And then one day the praying brother finally has a visionary experience of Allah in which he hears the voice of Allah saying to him, “congratulations for the sake of your brother I have decided to forgive both of you and admit both of you to my highest paradise.” And the praying brother says, “O, ya Allah, I have been hoping for this day all of my life, but clearly ya Allah you are mistaken because I think what you meant to say was for my sake, because you see I am the praying brother, for the sake of all of my prayers and my devotion, you have chosen to forgive my brother.” And the voice of Allah comes firmly but gently: “I’m pretty clear whom I am speaking with, because you see all of those extra prayers that you did for me, I have no need of, but your mama needs you.” And that’s the end of the story. Your mama needs you. Do your prayers, do the minimum prayers that are required, and then if there’s a choice between extra and extra and extra prayers or taking care of your mother, taking care of the weak, the elderly, the broken, the hurting, go to that. Be like the water that flows down because that’s pure mercy, pure compassion, pure love. God doesn’t need your extra prayers but the hurting and the wounded in our community do. ■

Interfaith Reflections on Divine Love

By Prof. Michael Birkel

I first learned about the centrality of love in Islam from the spiritual poets.

In his masterpiece, the *Masnavi* (5:3854-9), Rumi writes that waves of love make the heavens turn. Without that love, the universe would be frozen. Every atom is in love with divine perfection and hastens upward like a sapling, purifying the body for the soul and proclaiming, “Glory to God.”

These poets invite the reader to enter into that passionate love. They borrow language from the intimacies of human love as a symbol for the intensity of the ecstatic and transforming power of the experience of divine love, and of the arousal of human love for God in return. God is the soul’s beloved, who visits the soul and upturns one’s life, who then appears to be absent, bringing the pain of separation, until that sense of presence is mysteriously renewed. God invites the soul into a union that paradoxically seems to undo the human lover utterly—some speak of it as annihilation, becoming nothing—and yet somehow there is something that endures.

The poets use an array of images to speak of this intimate experience: God is a flame that wounds or even consumes the human lover; this encounter is both painful and delightful; the experience of union is spoken of as an unveiling; one encounters the breath of the all-merciful.

With those images in mind, I invite you to hear these words from a poem written in the sixteenth century:

O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center.
Since you are no longer elusive,
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter.

...
How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart,
where in secret you dwell alone;
and in your sweet breath,
filled with good and glory,
how delicately you bring me to love you.

This poem on union between God and the soul was not composed by a Muslim. Its author was Juan de la Cruz, John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic, a Catholic Christian from the sixteenth century.

Although they differed from one another in the particulars of faith and in religious practice, I would like to think that Juan and Rumi would have found themselves on common ground, that they would have acknowledged the reality and truth of divine love in each other’s experience. Their poems do more than merely describe divine love. Their poetry seeks to articulate an image of the soul’s beloved in such a way that it has the potential to elevate consciousness itself to the divine realm. Their words seek not only to point beyond the limits of their expression but also to encourage the mind itself to be transformed by wonder.

The great Jewish mystic and philosopher of the last century, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote, “What we encounter in our perceptions of the sublime, in our radical amazement, is a spiritual suggestiveness of reality, an allusiveness to transcendent meaning. The world in its grandeur is full of a spiritual radiance, for which we have neither name nor concept.” (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951), p. 22.)

The soul’s beloved can be neither possessed nor defined, but the language of desire among the spiritual poets has for centuries beckoned lovers of God into that yearning.

Whatever tiny glimpses into that reality that I may have had call me to reflect on divine love and divine truth. I

have great respect and appreciation for Islam, as I hope my words have conveyed. Still, I am not a member of the Muslim community. I have read the Qur'an. At times I have had experiences with the Qur'an that help me to feel closer to God. At other times, the Qur'an helps me to feel closer to my Muslim friends, and they in turn help me to feel closer to God. So my experience of God in Muslim settings or scripture has felt at times direct and at other times mediated. I am grateful for both.

I'm not a philosopher, and I have no orderly case to persuade you of what I am about to say. I'm not sure that such a rational argument exists in matters of faith and of love. But my experience among Muslims creates a desire in me that what I am about to propose could be possible.

Among the beautiful names for God in Islam are Love (al-Wadud) and Truth or the Real (al-Haqq). The Islamic teaching on Divine Unity (Tawhid) suggests that ultimately Love and Truth are One. Divine Love can draw us toward God and toward one another, to commit ourselves to creating a loving society where there is peace and justice. If Love and Truth are One, can God's truth be wide enough to embrace the truths held by various faiths? I am not proposing a relativism that suggests that the truths proposed and held by differing religious communities do not matter ultimately. I am not trying to sneak in some sort of religious superiority that on the surface may seem to acknowledge the dignity of your faith but secretly hopes that you will all come join mine. The spiritual poets of Islam use the language of love and yet also admit that divine love is beyond the capabilities of human language to express. If love is so, may truth also be? In some mysterious way, beyond our understanding, can Divine Truth be expansive enough to embrace the truth of Islam and of other religions? I do not know the answer to this, but Divine Love inspires me to hold this hope. ■

Closing of the Symposium

By Fazeel S. Khan, Esq.

This brings us to the end of the Program. We really hope you all enjoyed your time with us today.

I'm sure that many of you will find that the lessons we presented today resonate with similar teachings from your own faith traditions. And that is because these lessons on "love" are universal, they resound with truth from our very core. I'd like to close by sharing with you a final story – this one is actually true.

This photo was taken in Damascus in 1899. The small person is Samir. He suffers from various disabilities,

including not being able to walk. Samir is a Christian. The person who is carrying him on his back is Muhammad. He is a Muslim, and he is blind. Samir and Muhammad are best friends. Muhammad relies on Samir to tell him where to go, and Samir uses his friend's back to navigate the city streets. They were both orphans and lived in the same room. Samir had the gift of narration and told stories of "A Thousand and One Nights" to the customers of a cafe in Damascus, and Muhammad sold pastries in front of the same cafe and liked to listen to his friend's stories.

One day, when Muhammad returned to his room, he found his companion had passed away. Muhammad wept and mourned the passing of his dear friend for seven days straight. When asked how they got along so well, despite being of different religions, Muhammad said only this: "Here we are the same", pointing to his heart.

And it is in this spirit of connecting hearts, that we thank you for honoring us with your presence today.



Love in the Holy Quran

By Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad

Divine Love

In the Qur'an, love is not merely one of God's acts or actions, but one of God's very own Divine Names and Qualities. The Divine Name 'the Loving' ('*Al-Wadud*'), occurs twice in the Qur'an: *And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then repent to Him. Truly my Lord is Merciful, Loving. (Hud, 11:90) And He is the Forgiving, the Loving. (Al-Buruj, 85:14)*

There are many other Divine Names in the Qur'an which denote God's loving qualities and imply love (by Arabic linguistic definition), such as: 'the Gentle'—'*Al-Latif*'; 'the Kind'—'*Al-Raouf*'; 'the Generous'—'*Al-Kareem*'; 'the Forbearing'—'*Al-Haleem*'; 'the Absolutely Reliable'—'*Al-WakiT*'; 'the Friend'—'*Al-Wali*'; 'the Good'—'*Al-Barr*'; 'the Forgiving'—'*Al-Ghafur*'; 'the Forgiver'—'*Al-Ghaffar*'; 'the Granter and Acceptor of Repentance'—'*Al-Tawwab*', 'the Pardonner'—'*Al-Afu*' and others. This is true *a fortiori* for the two Divine Names 'the Compassionate' ('*Al-Rahman*') and 'the Merciful' ('*Al-Rahim*'), because the stem of these two Divine Names is the tri-letter root *R-H-M*, which means 'womb', and thus implies maternal mercy and love together. Thus God's Loving is inseparable from His Mercy, and indeed love usually comes with mercy, and mercy usually comes with love—though evidently they do not mean exactly the same thing.

This also means that God's Love is twice implied—along with the double mention of Divine Mercy—at the beginning of the Qur'an itself and the beginning of every one of its one hundred and fourteen chapters except the ninth. Moreover, since God says in the Qur'an *...He has prescribed for Himself [nafsihi—His Self] mercy... (Al-Anam, 6:12)*, this means that Divine Mercy—and with it Divine Love—is not just a Divine Quality, but of the very Divine Essence Itself. Furthermore, God, as *Al-Rahman*, created the world and human beings *out of* His Mercy. God says: *The Compassionate One / has taught the Qur'an. / He created man, / teaching him [coherent] Speech. (Al-Rahman, 55:1-4)*. This means that God created the world and human beings *out of* love as well. Indeed, God loves all beings and all things—apart from evildoers as such, as we will shortly discuss, God willing—before and more than they could possibly love Him.

God also created human beings *for* his Mercy. God says: *.... [E]xcept those on whom your Lord has mercy; and for that did He create them... (Hud, 11:119)*. This means that God created the world and human beings *for* love as well. In other words, God created the world and

human beings *out of* His Love and *for* His Love. That is the reason why everything in the world—save only the souls of disbelievers—loves God. God says: *The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein proclaim His glory. And there is not a thing, but glorifies Him in praise; but you do not understand their glorification. Lo! He is Forbearing, Forgiving. (Al-Isra', 17:44)*. Thus the entire universe praises—and therefore innately loves—God. And thus even the most evil person committing the most evil deed—with his or her consciousness rejecting or hating God at that moment—nevertheless loves God innately in every atom of their being and in their deepest heart.

As regards human beings in particular, God's love for them is seen first of all in His great and innumerable favours to them in their creation, their superior faculties and intelligence and above all in the possibility of their knowing Him through His guidance. God says: *And if you were to count God's grace you could never reckon it. Indeed God is Forgiving, Merciful. (Al-Nahl, 16:18)*. However, God loves those who are the most virtuous and good—those whose souls are the most beautiful—with a particular or special love, starting with the best and most virtuous of them, His messengers and prophets, of whom He says: *... [A]ll of them We favoured (faddalna) above the worlds. (Al-Anam, 6:85)*.

As regards the Seal of the Prophets and Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad, God says that He has sent him as *a mercy to all the worlds. (Al-Anbiya', 21:107)* and that God will love more ('*yuhbibkum*') those who follow him (*Aal Imran, 3:31*), which necessarily implies—as is explicitly stated in a *hadith*¹—that the Prophet Muhammad is 'God's Beloved'.

As regards other people, God mentions eight types of people whom He loves as such:

1. 'Those who rely' (on God) ('*al-mutawakkilin*' or '*al-mutawakkilun*') (*Aal Imran, 3:159*);
2. 'Those who cleanse themselves' ('*al-mutatahhirin*') or 'purify themselves' ('*al-muttahhirin*') (*Al-Baqarah, 2:222; Al-Tawbah, 9:109*);
3. 'Those who repent' ('*al-tawwabin*') (*Al-Baqarah, 2:222*);
4. 'The just' ('*al-muqsitin*') (*Al-Ma'idah, 5:42; Al-Hujurat, 49:9; Al-Mumta- hanah, 60:8*);
5. 'Those who fight for His cause in ranks, as

1. The Prophet Muhammad said: *'I am God's beloved, and [I say so] without pride'*. Darimi, Sunan, Hadith no. 47; Tirmidhi, Sunan, Hadith no. 3616, *Kitab al-Manaqib*.

if they were a solid structure' ('*al-ladhina yuqatiluna fi sabilihii sqffan ka'annahum bunyanun marsus*') (*Al-Sqff*, 61:4);

6. 'The patient' ('*al-sabirin*') (*Aal Imran*, 3:146);
7. 'The God-fearing' ('*al-muttaqin*') (*Aal Imran*, 3:76; *Al-Tawbah*, 9:4; *Al-Tawbah*, 9:7); and
8. 'The virtuous' ('*al-muhsinin*') (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:195; *Aal Imran*, 3:134; *Aal Imran*, 3:148; *Al-Ma'idah*, 5:13; *Al-Ma'idah*, 5:93).

In short, even though God's bounty is extended to all creation and all people (whether they deserve it or not), God particularly loves the virtuous and those whose souls are beautiful, in varying degrees, according, precisely, to the very measure of their beauty of soul and their virtue. God says: ... *Truly the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing among you ...* (*Al-Hujurat*, 49:13).

Conversely, God mentions twelve kinds of people as such who He 'does not love' ('*la yuhibb*'). These are:

1. 'The disbelievers' ('*al-kafirin*') (*Aal Imran*, 3:32; *Al-Rum*, 30:45)
2. 'Every guilty ingrate' ('*kulla kaffarin athim*') (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:276)
3. 'The aggressors' ('*al-mutadin*') (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:190; *Al-Ma'idah*, 5:87; *Al-Araf*, 7:55)
4. 'The conceited and boastful' ('*al-mukhtal al-fakhur*'), or every swaggering braggart' ('*kulla mukhtalin fakhurin*') (*Al-Nisa*, 4:36; *Luqman*, 31:18; *Al-Hadid*, 57:23)
5. 'The treacherous ingrate' ('*al-khawwan al-athim*') (*Al-Hajj*, 22:38)
6. 'Every treacherous and sinful [person]' ('*kulla khawwanin kafur*') (*Al-Nisa*, 4:107)
7. 'The treacherous' ('*al-kha'inin*') (*Al-Anfal*, 8:58)
8. 'The corrupters' ('*al-mufsidin*') (*Al-Ma'idah*, 5:64; *Al-Qasas*, 28:77)
9. 'The excessive' ('*al-musrifin*') (*Al-Anam*, 6:141; *Al-Araf*, 7:31)
10. 'Those who exult' ('*al-farihin*') (*Al-Qasas*, 28:76)
11. 'The evildoers' ('*al-dhalimin*') (*Al Imran*, 3:57; *Al Imran*, 3:140; *Al-Shura*, 42:40), and
12. 'The arrogant' ('*al-mustakbirin*') (*Al-Nahl*,

16:23)

In addition to this, God does not love certain evil deeds such as the utterance of evil words (*Al-Nisa*, 4:148) and corruption (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:205).

Nevertheless, God never States—not even once—in the whole Qur'an that He *hates* anyone or any type of evildoer. He only says that He 'does not love' them: not loving is neutral; hatred is negative. Moreover, He does not even say that He 'does not love' anyone personally or individually or as such: He merely says that He does not love them insofar as they are evildoers as such, or do evil things. Admittedly, He says that certain evil deeds are hateful to him², and that He is angry with, combats, punishes and even curses, certain evil doers, but that is still not the same as hatred because it can be done with mercy and love—as many a parent can attest! Indeed, a lesson can be inferred herein to hate the sin but not the sinners.

Moreover, in the Qur'an, God never once proscribes punishment for apostasy, but rather merely says that if people turn away from their religion, He will instead love others, and they will love Him: *O you who believe, whoever of you apostatises from his religion, God will assuredly bring a people whom He loves and who love Him* (*Al-Ma'idah*, 5:54).

From all this it follows that God's love is: *first, the free gift of existence and of countless other favours (including beauty of various kinds) to every created thing, and, second, love of beauty as such.* As an authentic *hadith* says: '*God is Beautiful, and He loves beauty*'.³

Love and Happiness

The Qur'an shows that there cannot be joy (*farah*), contentment (*rida*), peace (*salam*) or pleasure (*muta*) without love, in one way or another, because joy, contentment, peace and pleasure are all *kinds* of love and / or *stages* of love. Indeed, how can one find joy, pleasure, peace and contentment in something without loving it?

Moreover, there cannot be true happiness without love of God specifically, and only love of God. The word 'happiness' only occurs twice in the whole of the Holy Qur'an (in *Surat Hud*), both times referring to Paradise. This implies that worldly love is not sufficient to lead to

2. God says: *If they had desired to go forth, they would have made some preparation for it, but God hated that they should be sent forth, so He slowed them down, and it was said: 'Stay back with those who stay back!'* (*Al-Tawbah*, 9:46) • *And do not walk in the earth exultantly. Indeed you will not rend the earth, nor attain the mountains in height. / All of that—the evil of it is hateful in the sight of your Lord.* (*Al-Isra*, 17:37–38; see also 17:22–36).

3. Muslim, *Sahih, Hadith* no. 99, *Kitab al-Iman*.

happiness, because it does not fill one completely, perfectly and eternally, and that nothing can completely suffice to make human beings happy except the love of God. God says: *Say: 'In the bounty of God, and in His mercy in that let them rejoice: it is better than what they hoard'* (Yunus, 10:58).

Love and Death

As the soul's faculties incline, one by one, towards a beloved, it naturally becomes gradually less attached to its own ego, until the point where the lover no longer cares or even thinks about him (or her) self, and cares instead only for his or her beloved. If this goes on, the ego will die in itself, 'in' the beloved, and for the sake of the beloved. To be clear: the end of love is death. Love eventually leads to the death of (a part of) the lover. 'Amore' leads to 'mort'—this etymological connection exists in most languages: in Arabic we have 'sakra' which means 'drunkenness' and 'death'; and 'ishq', which means 'passionate love' and derives its name from a desert convolvulus (i.e. a bindweed) that grows around other plants until it becomes one with its object of love. How this 'death' turns out depends upon what the beloved is. We already cited part of God's words:

Yet there be people who take to themselves rivals besides God, loving them as God is loved; but those who believe love God most ardently; If those who did evil could but see, as they shall when they behold the chastisement, that power altogether belongs to God, and that God is terrible in chastisement. (Al-Baqarah, 2:165)

God's 'terrible chastisement' at the end of this verse refers back to the ardent love of those who love—to the extent of worshiping—something other than God (and unbridled romantic love is included here). This is quite simply because such souls can never fully be one with their beloveds whilst ignoring the love of God, simply because both they, and their beloveds, will inevitably change, separate and die. Herein lies the whole drama of all the lovers – all the Romeos and Juliets—in history who have committed suicide; they commit suicide because they have ceased to live in themselves and then are deprived of their beloveds: the pain and 'terrible chastisement' is too great for them to bear, so that they can no longer live. For many people, this kind of love is instinctively beautiful because it is in fact the only time in their lives they see people transcend their own egos and pettiness out of love, but unless this love is reintegrated into love of God, it remains a beautiful but futile mirage, and not eternal bliss.

By contrast, those whose egos die out of love of God, enter into the Paradise of God's love. God says: *O soul atpeace! / Return to your Lord, pleased, pleasing. /*

Then enter among My servants! / And enter My Paradise! (Al-Fajr, 89:27–30). Thus the death of the ego or the 'soul which incites evil', out of love for God is the ultimate aim of the spiritual life. God says: *Go forth, light and heavy! Struggle in the way of God with your possessions and your lives: that is better for you, if only you knew (Al-Tawbah, 9:41).*⁴ ■

4. The 'possessions' and 'lives' in this verse can also be understood to be referring to people's passions and egos respectively, because the Qur'an itself establishes that there is 'mirror-imaging' between the outer and the inner worlds of human beings (see: *Fussilat* 41:53, and *Al-Dhariyat*, 51:20–21).

Nurturing Divine Love

Selections from Maulana Muhammad Ali's Khutbas (Sermons)

Compiled by the Editor

(translated by Dr. Mohammed Ahmad)

[This article comprises selections from a few khutbas (sermons) by Maulana Muhammad Ali that provides insight, from an Islamic perspective, on the notion of nurturing Divine Love. Maulana Muhammad Ali eloquently explains how trials and difficulties in life are in fact the source from which one may attain a state of love with the Divine by inculcating and exhibiting the Divine attributes appropriate to the occasion. In these passages, he also provides the wise lesson on how extremes, even when it comes to love, are to be avoided; rather, Islam stresses a balanced approach, the middle or straight path, which requires each individual to assess the unique circumstances before him/her and determine a course of action that will yield the best result. In this, one finds the basis for spiritual development, which is nothing more than a manifestation of Divine Love.]

January 7, 1921

“Quite a few people consider suffering and distress only as a form of punishment. They find it hard to understand why the Merciful and Bountiful God would send suffering and sorrow to His helpless and weak creation. On the other hand, it is also said that a mother's love for her child is like a candle compared to the Light of God's love for humanity. His love and compassion for His creation are unlimited. In the Holy Quran, the attributes of Allah, the Beneficent, and the Merciful have been repeated hundred and fourteen times. The Holy Quran also says, “...and My mercy encompasses all things...” (7:156). We, however, also observe the immense suffering of humanity, and a materialistic person thinks, why does God, the Most Merciful, the All-Powerful, subject

His creation to such suffering? These two characteristics seem mutually incompatible.”

...

“The sum and substance of religion are that one should love God and His creation for His love’s sake. The proof that one loves God can only be manifested through the love of His creation. The true worth of this love can only be determined when one remains steadfast in times of affliction. One who has not taken this test cannot provide proof of his love and compassion. True love can only be known during times of suffering and distress. A poet has expressed this thought well:

A true friend indeed holds his friend’s hand during distress and need.

Someone who tries to test love and loyalty in good times only is in error. Strength and firmness in commitment cannot evolve without encountering suffering and distress. “Those are they on whom are blessings and mercy from their Lord...” (2:157). Grief and sorrow become a source of blessing and mercy for these people.”

...

“For two years, I tended to my ten-year-old sick daughter and faced many difficulties for her sake. My friends consoled me and expressed their feelings in letters, empathizing with my problems. But somebody who knows my inner feelings is aware that this protracted period of caregiving was a source of comfort for me. Getting up at night to tend to her needs and crying before the Lord for her, striving during the day to get her medicines and take her to the doctors, all brought tranquility to my soul. There is no doubt that her suffering was a source of distress for me. No one can call this comforting, but the thought that my loved one was in distress and I was serving and attending to her illness, and Allah the Most-High provided me with this opportunity, was also a source of serenity. Having lost this loved one, that feeling of tranquility has gone. To show compassion towards one’s near relative is due to their natural bond. Hidden within this compassion is the lesson whereby one learns to be compassionate towards God’s creation. Just as one feels love and empathy for the near kindred, one should have the same feelings for the rest of God’s creation.”

...

“Hazrat Abu Huraira reports: “The Holy Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, said: Allah the Most-High will ask on the Day of Judgment, “O son of Adam, I was sick, and you did not tend to me, he will answer, my Lord you are my Provider, Master of all, how could I have tended to you? The Lord will state: Did you not know that one of my servants was ill, and you did not visit him? If you had done so, you would have found Me near him. The Lord will say, “O son of

Adam, I asked you for food, and you did not feed me. He will reply, O my Lord, how could I have fed you? You are the Master of all creation. “Don’t you know that one of my servants asked you for food? You would have found its reward with Me if you had fed him?” God will say, “Son of Adam, I asked you for water, and you refused. He will say, why would I have given You water? You are The Master of the universe! The Lord will say my servant asked you for water, and you did not give it to him. If you had given him a drink, you would have found its return with Me.” (*Sahih* Muslim).

In the verse under discussion, Allah the Most-High has called suffering and distress a blessing and mercy. This is because they engender sympathy toward God’s creation in the hearts of those who undergo trials and tribulations. The fundamental objective of religion is to generate a genuine desire in one’s heart for the service of humanity. Without encountering suffering and distress, man cannot feel empathy toward the rest of God’s creation.”

...

“The greatest attribute of God is His quality of Nurturing unto perfection (*Rabubiyat*). Faith in God means that we should nurture His characteristics within us. This is the meaning of the Holy Prophet’s saying, “Create the moral characteristics of Allah within you.” Thus, the spirit to nurture others should predominate in you. The whole world is God’s family, and He nurtures it; therefore, you should sympathize with all of His creation. Those who learn this lesson by patiently bearing the loss of someone have reached this high stage of excellence.”

February 11, 1922

“There are two sides to greed and lust, as a consequence of which man stumbles and falls frequently. One is manifested as love, and the other as hatred. *Al-Fatiha* (the opening chapter of the Holy Quran) gives us the most comprehensive guidance in this matter. It is stated: “Guide us on the right path, the path of those upon whom Thou has bestowed favors.” This is asking for guidance towards the path of moderation which is safeguarded and distinguished from all sorts of excesses and deficiencies. These behaviors are manifested as extreme hatred or love with the abandonment of the moderate course. In the *Hadith* the Jews and Christians, relative to the manner they treated Jesus, have been cited as examples of these behavior patterns. The Jews took the extreme position of malice towards Jesus, while the Christian’s love for Jesus followed the extreme of raising a mortal to the part of the Godhead. Nothing can be accomplished without these two emotions of love and hate. Extremism in manifesting these is also the basis of all discord in human relations. Love or separation from

someone, mutual attraction or dislike, is the basis of all ties in nature and provides the impetus for all human undertakings.

Sometimes it appears that there is a disruption of flow and connection between the various verses of the Holy Quran. A closer observation, however, reveals a novel link between the very same verses. For example, murder and fornication are generally mentioned together. On the surface, one does not see a connection between the two. However, murder is committed when the emotion of anger is let loose, while uncontrolled love results in fornication. Every individual who recites the *Al-Fatihah* also beseeches Allah to “guide us on the right path” and aspires to reach this level of spirituality. Therefore, he must always be aware of not taking an extreme position in exhibiting his love or anger. Our condition is such that when we love a person, we are ready to follow him blindly, even if we have to go against the word of the Quran and Hadith.

Similarly, we take the extreme position that we disregard all his virtues when we hate someone. These are positions that stall the progress of nations. To make progress, it is essential to follow the path of moderation in exhibiting both emotions.

It is a mistake to try to eliminate these two emotions. They are essential to human character; nothing can be accomplished without them. It is also necessary to follow a course of moderation in expressing these emotions. Following the path of excess in the case of both love and hate is evil. Both of these attributes are also a part of the nature of Allah the Most-High, and they work in a manner that one does not nullify the other. A nation at one time can be the subject of His wrath as a consequence of its evil deeds. If it does good, the same nation deserves His love. Even when a nation that belies His religion and is subject to His wrath undertakes some worldly matter and works diligently, He rewards it with an abundance of wealth. They are not treated unequally because of their disbelief. When a pious person commits some evil, he is punished accordingly, and the good deed of the evil one is not wasted. The Holy Quran states: “So he who does an atom’s weight of good will see it. And he who does an atom’s weight of evil will see it.”

Allah the Most-High punishes or rewards every individual as a manifestation of His attributes. It is, however, certain that His love precedes His wrath. When a person does a good deed, he is given ten times more. When someone is subject to His wrath, his good deed is not wasted, and his evil act may even be forgiven. This is proof that His love takes precedence over His anger. For every individual, these attributes are manifested. Accordingly, evil is overlooked, but good is never

forgotten. It is the duty of every Muslim that these qualities should also be a part of his nature and similarly find expression. One’s love for a person should not be so extreme that even his evil deeds appear good. Again, our dislike for an individual should not make us overlook his good qualities.

Both anger and love should be manifested at the appropriate occasion. Just as love, when displayed under the proper circumstances, becomes an act of goodness, anger shown under the right conditions becomes a good deed. You should not love someone to the extent that his evil becomes good for you, nor should your hatred for a person be such that it takes away the opportunity for you to do good to that individual. Disregarding this principle leads to decadence and the destruction of nations, cultures, and societies. Muslims in the present age are also subject to this condition. When someone commits a mistake, they do not forgive him, and when they like someone, they ignore his shortcomings. This is inappropriate behavior. A Muslim should inculcate the emotions of love and anger in his words and deeds in the manner he finds them manifested in the Divine nature. The Holy Prophet’s character exemplifies these qualities working alongside and being embodied under the appropriate circumstances. Under the right circumstances, he displayed his anger by calling for the stoning of adulterers (subject to Jewish law), cutting the hands of habitual thieves, and smiting opponents’ necks during the defensive battles he had to undertake. When it was the occasion to manifest his love and to care for humanity, he forgave even his most inveterate enemies without seeking revenge. How endearing an example of the Holy Prophets’ character is this incident.”

...

“You should learn from these events. If you are attacked personally, or your sons and daughters are falsely accused, you should not make this a permanent source of resentment and enmity. Get rid of hatred from your hearts and replace it with love. Follow the Holy Quran and the noble example of the Holy Prophet. Carefully study his life history and character, for it frequently happens that lack of knowledge leads to one’s spiritual demise. Having the proper knowledge will prevent this.

Once you become aware of this, you should act upon it. That is why I am giving you this information. Before you take any action, provide due consideration to the circumstances. Keep your emotions of anger and love under control to follow the course of moderation. Do not let your love for someone exceed the limits that his evil seems good to you, nor does your hatred for someone make you oblivious of his good qualities. If someone commits indecency, which affects his person, try to cover his faults and forgive him as far as possible. If it is an evil deed that affects someone else, then punish

him and do not feel hatred towards this individual afterward. If it causes harm to the nation, it should undoubtedly be penalized. Malice towards the individual should not be borne and nurtured further in one's heart. Allah the Most-High allows everyone to reform after committing wrong. When you hold ill will in your hearts, you act contrary to this attribute of Allah.”

April 14, 1926

Happiness is of two types. One is related to the animal faculties or desires, and the other to humankind's higher, angelic, or spiritual side. The first kind, animal desires, is the desire to provide food, water, etc., and the desire for procreation or human sexuality. The second type, called angelic desires, includes spending one's wealth to provide food and drink to comfort others and help remove their difficulties. One gets joy and pleasure through the fulfillment of both types of desires, but there is a difference in the nature of this happiness. The joy received through the fulfillment of the angelic, or the higher spiritual quest is of more outstanding excellence and more exalted in nature than the pleasure received through the realization of one's animal desires. There are three significant differences between the two.

The first and most prominent difference is that joy related to animal desires is connected with the body. The other kind of joy brings pleasure to the heart and mind. Real happiness has its connection with the heart and soul. If an individual has a lot of wealth and means to bring physical comfort, they are useless if their heart remains restless without absolute joy and comfort. Without peace and tranquility of the heart, physical comfort does not bring satisfaction. Our Holy Prophet said it very well:

Be aware that a piece of flesh is within the body (i.e. the heart). The whole body is in the proper condition when it is in the right state. When it becomes defective, the entire body becomes defective.

Joy and comfort are genuinely related to the heart. Physical comfort becomes meaningless if the body is comfortable but the heart is not at rest. If, however, one's heart is at rest, even when the body is without mitigation, a state of tranquility sustains. If you want to see examples of these two types of pleasures, look at Pharaoh and Korah on the one hand and the group of righteous persons and prophets on the other. The first group had all the means of physical comfort at their disposal but lacked true joy and comfort of heart. The second group, on the other hand, had peace and ease of mind. Such a state of mind is reflective of true sovereignty. Look at Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah. From a worldly perspective, he lived a life of poverty, but his heart was the seat of true joy and tranquility

called the Garden (*Jannat*) in the Holy Quran. Not only did he possess this joy, serenity, and inner peacefulness himself, he enabled hundreds of thousands to enter it. This is one significant difference between the physical and spiritual state of comfort and pleasure.

The second difference is that certain impurities or resentments accompany the physical state of happiness. A spiritual form of joy and comfort is entirely devoid of these. A few elements of grief accompany all kinds of physical pleasures. When it enters the heart, spiritual happiness or tranquility fills it with such joy that all types of darkness, sadness, and resentments are removed.

The third difference is that physical comfort is only related to this worldly life, while spiritual comfort and pleasure sustain and is everlasting. Not only does it help in this earthly existence, but it also brings ease at a time of most significant difficulty in human existence, the time of one's death. Moreover, it is carried on into the Life Hereafter. Parting from one's wealth and property appears as regret and chastisement at the time of death. Good deeds take the color of peace and tranquility one experiences in a garden, making even death a pleasurable experience. The impact of good deeds sustains into the Life Hereafter. However, many of this life's pleasures are left behind. Small as it may be, spiritual joy continues through death into the next life. It must be remembered that human life's origins are similar to animals; it is programmed naturally to seek physical pleasure and comfort. Attainment of spiritual development and satisfaction, on the other hand, is the real purpose of human existence. To reach this higher goal, one has to strive hard. Islam has therefore laid stress upon this second aspect but, at the same time, has not prohibited seeking physical comfort. ■

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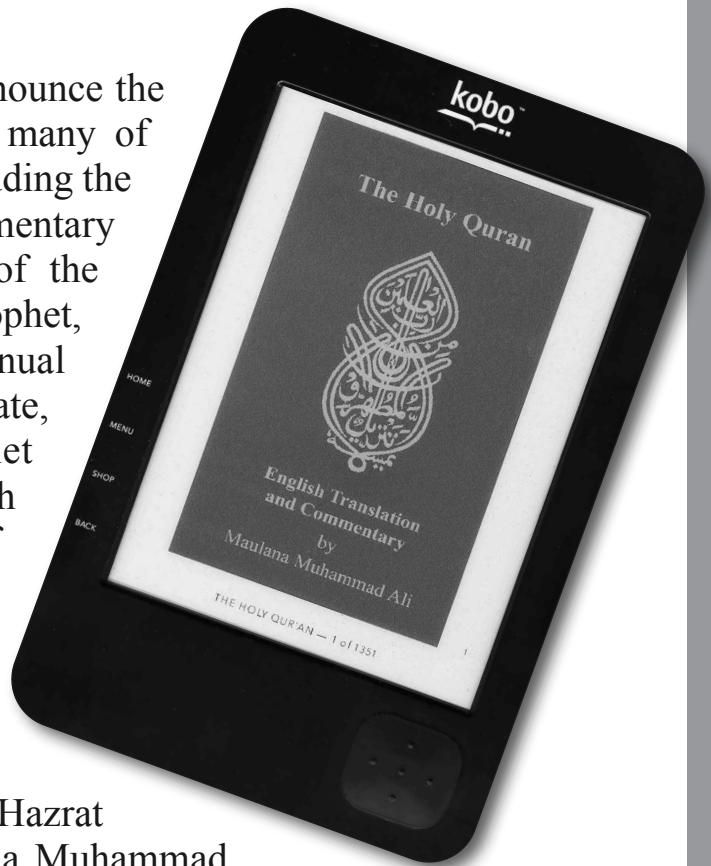
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