

Summary of 6.3 "Human Nature in Islam"

The foundation of any ethical system raises the question of how a person views their own nature. We started by exploring and critiquing some of the common views of human nature. The first view was that man evolved from animals. We said that this basically denies the existence of any purpose in life or that there is a divine plan that makes humans distinct. The next view over emphasizes the spirituality of mankind (which is important but sometimes overdone). This view leads to denunciation of this world and going to the extreme that torturing the body is a virtue which will save the soul. The third view over emphasizes the intellectual aspect of human nature which leads to the worship of the mind and overlooking the fact that as humans we need something more than the intellect, we need something that is divine. The fourth view sees the human as a sinful being. We said that this blows sin out of proportion and leads to a kind of pessimistic view of life as if the person is constantly haunted by sin. We indicated that as far as Islam is concerned even though the story of Adam and Eve appears in the Quran there is no implication of original sin, or that the sin is inherited by the descendents of Adam and Eve as God who created them knew their weakness and nature as humans and forgave them when they repented. We also discussed the notion of repentance for sin in Islam.

Then we discussed the Islamic point of view on human nature. It is summarized in one sentence as human nature for the Muslim is that God has made us His trustees on earth. First of all mankind is made as the crown of all other creations and the Quran indicates that God breathed into humans of his soul/spirit. Thus each one of us has the spirit of God within him which makes us quite distinct from other beings. This view leads to a balanced outlook on human nature without over emphasizing one element or the other as humans are made of matter, intellect and spirit. A result of this dual nature of mankind having the spirit of God which is from the highest and the fleshy nature from the lowest implies that humans have the freedom of choice and that mankind is a free agent. With freedom of choice comes responsibility for ones deeds and whether or not they follow divine guidance, on the Day of Judgment.

6.4□ Muslim View of The Universe

Host:□ What the effects of this view of human nature on a person's attitude and outlook?

Jamal Badawi:

There are four basic areas under effect; the first one is self acceptance. If the human being realizes his or her nature and is quite realistic about weaknesses and strengths then the person would not be in a situation where he is not totally haunted by weakness and sin nor too arrogant and haughty about his strengths.

The second point is that as trustees we have limits in the way we should behave which are set by He who gave us this trust. For example Islam considers suicide as a moral crime because Islam doesn't accept the argument that the human body is ours and we can do with it what we want. In Islam the body is a trust in our hands which is given to us by God and should not be abused, killed or destroyed but to be used to fulfill our mission on earth. By the same token destruction of the environment or unwise use of it is morally wrong because it is not ours but rather a trust. We do not have the right to misuse personal property and things we own, even though Islam recognizes individual ownership it is all still a trust.

Both acceptance and limits of trusteeship lead the individual to have a view of life which is integrated as all aspects of life are put together. In Islam there is no false distinction of those people who are called religious because of their focus on the spiritual aspects of life and those who are secularists whose concern are the non-spiritual aspects as they should all be integrated. This way a person doesn't waste time dividing life into different jurisdictions or spheres and would not get confused with the different rules that apply to each area.

The fourth point is that with this kind of understanding of human nature life is regarded as a test. It appears in the Quran that life on earth is not just something that we go through without a particular mission or sense of purpose. The nobility and dignity of the human race lies in the capability of humans to overcome their weakness and shortcomings and to do their best to fulfill the mission that is entrusted in them. An example from the Quran is in (67:1-2) "Blessed be He in Whose hands is Dominion; and He over all things hath Power; He Who created Death and Life, that He may try which of you is best in deed: and He is the Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving." Life itself is a test and the materials, intellectual or spiritual capabilities that we have are simply tools to accomplish this particular mission. This kind of view enriches life as it provides for a more dynamic view and demands more active participation morally speaking on the part of the human in righting the wrong and in struggling to achieve peace and social justice. This is part and parcel of morality as morality is not based on individualistic salvation. As a great scholar put it one of the great contributions of Islam to moral theory is the socialization of moral laws and that moral law is not individual piety but rather individual piety and the struggle within society to do the right and forbid the evil.

Host: What is the nature of the universe as perceived by Muslims? How does this perception affect the outlook of a Muslim?

Jamal Badawi:

The ethical outlook of the individual is not only connected to the view of nature but also to how a person views the world. More specifically Islam regards the universe as a tool aiding human kind to perform its function as trusteeship of God on earth. This kind of view definitely contrasts other views of human nature which regard nature as an adversary to mankind. In other words the view that Islam presents as an alternative to the common view is that the entire universe is created to be subservient to mankind in fulfilling their duty. This is why a Muslim would not use the terms victory over nature and subduing nature which give the impression that nature is an enemy. To a Muslim the universe is a friend and a person should never feel out of place because the Quran itself says that God created the universe to be subservient and of use to mankind. We also find that the Quran documents this in (16:14) where it talks about God making the oceans subservient to mankind. In (2:29) it talks about God creating the entire earth for human use.

People in the past and even after Islam came believed that if one studies the solar system or tries to explore space that they might be encroaching on the powers of God but 1400 years ago the Quran put it clearly in (45:13) that not only is the entire earth created for the benefit of mankind but also God had made subservient all that in the skies or heavens. This gives mankind permission to explore and harness the powers of nature. The Quran even refers to the phenomena found in nature and that we are required (a moral obligation) by virtue of belief to ponder on these creations as is found in (7:185) “Do they see nothing in the government of the heavens and the earth and all that Allah hath created?” It is quite clear that harnessing these natural resources is part and partial of the trusteeship and that the view of the Muslim of the world is quite open.

Host: Can you elaborate on the concept of worship as viewed by Muslims?

Jamal Badawi:

Worship is not mere ritual. When a Muslim use the term worship it does not imply the performance of certain rituals, rights or acts of piety or devotion to God. In Islam any activity is a potential act of worship as long as two conditions are present, one that the intention behind the activity is wholesome and pure and second it should be done within the limits prescribed by God. A person's whole life can be a constant and continues act of worship. A person's learning, school, office, factory, shop and even recreation can all be acts of worship. The Quran says in (7:31) "Say: Who hath forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of Allah, which He hath produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, (which He hath provided) for sustenance?" Thus even recreation with good intention and within the limits prescribed by God can all be regarded as potential acts of worship. There is one key verse in the Quran in (51:56) "I have only created Jinns and men, that they may serve Me." This verse can not be interpreted to mean that God created us to constantly pray but it means that our wholesome living in accordance to His commands is worship. Even the pure act of worship such as the prayers which are totally devotional acts is not necessarily something that God wants or needs from us but ultimately it is a kind of training for us on discipline and moral virtues which is ultimately beneficial to us.

Host: How does learning relate to a Muslim's view of the world?

Jamal Badawi:

Knowledge and faith are not necessarily contradictory to each other like the thesis and antithesis. The act of learning, as I mentioned earlier is an act of worship provided that one is learning for a good cause. I think it would be interesting to remark here that the very first verse and word revealed in the entire Quran was *Iqra'a* which means recite, proclaim and read. In the first passage revealed from the Quran it refers to teaching twice and the pen as one of the tools of learning. There is no wonder then that the attitude that is found in the Quran and the Prophetic tradition are both very much in favor of learning. One verse in the Quran in (35:28)

“Those truly fear Allah, among His Servants, are given knowledge.” In other words people who have the right knowledge and who have the openness to study this knowledge carefully and objectively are more cognizant of Gods power and mercy and more God fearing than those who are ignorant. In the Quran in (58:11) it says “And when ye are told to rise up, rise up Allah will rise up, to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and who have been granted (mystic) Knowledge.” All types of knowledge that help mankind fulfill their role as trustee of God is a way of moving to higher degrees in the site of God. The same emphasis is placed on the subject of knowledge in the Prophetic Tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), an example is “seeking knowledge is mandatory on every Muslim.” So in Islam it is a duty not just a privilege on every Muslim male or female to seek knowledge and learn. In another saying he said he said that the angels would extend their wings as a symbolic expression of pleasure and satisfaction with people who are seeking knowledge. In that sense to build a balanced civilization that combines material as well as moral progress is not only inline with Islamic teaching but is actually a duty incumbent on each Muslim male and female.

Host: In the first program we answered how secular morality answers common ethical questions that are raised how would these questions be answered by Islam?

Jamal Badawi:

First of all we said that the basic problems in ethical theory are:

1. What is ultimate good? What is worth striving for or living for?
2. What is the ultimate source of knowledge of right and wrong, good and evil?
3. What are the sanctions for following the moral code? Who has the right to enforce it?
4. On an individual level what motivates the individual to observe the moral code?

To answer the first question we said that many philosophers give various answers that ultimate good is happiness, duty for the sake of duty or perfection. Before a Muslim answers any of these questions we have to answer another set of questions:

1. Who are we?
2. What is the nature of the human being?
3. How do humans perceive the world around them and how do they relate to this existence?

These questions have been answered along with other fundamental ethics like believing in God and the hereafter.

For a Muslim the ultimate good that is worth living for is to pursue the pleasure of God. The main goal of a Muslim is succeed in the test of life while emerging from it honorably and successfully. If we are able to achieve the pleasure of God then we know that the act is good or not is whether it aides in achieving the pleasure of God.

The ultimate source of knowledge and right or wrong is divine revelation. Divine revelation is a source of knowledge that comes from God who makes no error. It doesn't deny the use of other sources but simply puts them in perspective under the banner of divine revelation.

The third and fourth questions which deal with the sanction of morality are answered by the combination of the pursuit of the love of God and trying to keep away from anything that

displeases God. So in this case it is both love (more noble and acknowledgement of His bounty) and fear (not just being scared but fear of displeasing He to whom we owe everything including our existence) that motivate the individual to observe the moral code.

This way the whole picture of the ethical framework is easily and logically answered within the framework of Islam.