

NEGATING THE MISGUIDING EFFECTS OF SOCIAL PROOF ON HUMAN PSYCHE: A QURĀNIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Human beings tend to act spontaneously. While many factors may lead to that, there is nothing more validating and reassuring than conforming to the behaviours of others while one is on the verge of decision-making. Social proof is one of the most significant factors that heavily take hold of our decisions in daily life, as it exerts forces that can change our behaviours and opinions to meet perceived group norms. It also applies to the way people decide what represents correct behaviour. Even though social proof can be seen as something beneficial at times for positive purposes, the problem arises when people begin responding to it in a subliminal manner so that they can be fooled by fake evidence, manipulated, and misguided. The effects of social proof are not limited to worldly matters, but they could affect the affairs which concern one's practice of Islam, thus affecting one's faith in a harmful way. This study aims to shed light on the approach of debilitating and negating the misleading effects of social proof on the human psyche from the Qurānic perspective. The research adopts inductive and analytical methods in presenting the discussion. It concludes that the Qurān mentions some instances of how social proof affects people's inclination and behaviour in a damaging way, which is clearly in opposition to the Islamic principles and the natural inclination of human beings. Considering the detrimental consequences of it, the remedies to negate the misleading effects of social proof are prevalent throughout the Qurān as guidance for human beings to safely navigate this worldly life for a better life in the hereafter. This research deduces that the practical ways suggested by the Qurān can be summed up into two significant points: seeking knowledge and practising thinking and contemplating.

Keywords: Social proof, social influence, herd mentality, misleading effects, Qurān.

INTRODUCTION

Ibn Khaldūn asserted that society is vital to human development and that humans are predisposed to be cultured and civilised.¹ Even during the creation of Adam AS, Allah SWT created Hawwa' AS as his companion. Allah says:

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﴿هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا﴾

It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her.²

Written accounts or archaeological evidence show that past societies lived in groups. The smallest type of band, which typically consisted of 5 to 80 people, later expanded into larger types of societies such as tribes, chiefdoms, and states.³ Thus, the influence of social environments on how humans act and behave in daily life cannot be avoided, as humans desire to fit in and transform into people who function thrivingly within a particular social system.

It may come unrecognised that many human behaviours can occur automatically, particularly how we respond to certain things. It almost resembles the rigid and mechanical patterns of animal behaviour in the natural environment in response to a stimulus, as observed by ethologists and researchers who study animal behaviours.⁴ One reason such automatic, stereotyped behaviour occurs frequently in human action is that, in many cases, it is the most effective form of behaviour. It can easily save time, energy, and mental capacity, especially in the daily decision-making process.

Many forms of social influence could lead people to respond and react automatically, and one of them is social proof, - a term popularized by Robert Cialdini in his book “Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion -. It is also known as “herd instinct” and “herd mentality”. The principle of social proof states that people tend to perceive what is correct by discovering what other people think is correct. Cialdini says: “We view an action as correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it”. Even though conforming to social proof can be perceived as beneficial at times for worthwhile purposes in certain situations, the problem arises when people begin responding to it in a subliminal manner, allowing them to be fooled by fake evidence, hence manipulated and misguided.

The research will discuss some instances portrayed in the Qurān of human beings being misguided and led astray due to the principle of social proof in action. Because of its likelihood to become widespread, the Qurān provides remedies and practical ways to debilitate and negate its misguiding effects on the human psyche.

¹ Ibn Khaldūn, ‘Abdur Raḥman bin Muḥammad, *al-Muqaddimah*, edited by Khalīl Shaḥādah, (Beirūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1988), vol. 1, 54.

² Sūrah al-A‘rāf, 7:189.

³ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs & Steel*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 257.

⁴ See: Hans Kummer, 'Causal knowledge in animals', in Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann James Premack (eds), *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate*, Symposia of the Fyssen Foundation (Oxford, 1996; online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 Mar. 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198524021.003.0002>. Accessed August 1, 2024.

AN OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL PROOF

Social norms are established by the web of social influence that people have on each other, thus creating a majority influence. Another term used to describe this phenomenon is “social proof”, and this concept has been around for a long time. It has been used interchangeably with “herd instinct”, “herd mentality”, and “herd behaviour”. The phenomenon of social proof was among the earliest studies done in social psychology where early economists and sociologists related it to consumer behaviour that encountered an abrupt change such as fashions and fads⁵. The principle of social proof states that people tend to perceive what is correct and appropriate by discovering what others think is correct. In today’s world of social media and online reviews, social proof has gained new relevance as this platform can easily get ideas and opinions shared and spread widely. There is another branch of social proof which is called “groupthink”. It happens when each individual in a group of people agrees in decision-making and deems any difference of opinion or disagreement towards the opinion reached by the whole group as wrong⁶. In this situation, consensus precedes critical thinking and rational decision-making.

How does social proof prompt people to conform? Since the beginning of life, human beings depend on cues from the social environment and imitate the behaviour of others. Learning in newborns and young children takes place in numerous ways, one through observation and imitation⁷. Later in life, when facing situations in which one needs to decide on how to act and behave, it is still very convenient to imitate the behaviour of others because of the tendency to see an action as fitting when others are doing it works quite well normally⁸. Hence, social proof puts up a favourable shortcut for regulating how to behave. The effects of social force exerted by this phenomenon seem to be unavoidable. People do give off powerful social influence that can steer others to do things even against their rational judgement, as demonstrated in a classic study by social psychologist Solomon Asch in 1956⁹. In this experiment, a person who sat alone in a room had to decide whether two lines with clearly different lengths were alike or not, and the individual always gave a correct answer. But when they sat in a room with other people, who are secretly a part of

⁵ See: Lauren Rooks, “An Economic Psychological Approach to Herd Behaviour”, *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. XL, no. 1, 75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4228225>. Accessed March 26, 2024.

⁶ Rolf Dobelli, *The Art of Thinking Clearly*, translated by Nicky Griffin, (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2013), 73.

⁷ See: Rosalind Charlesworth, *Understanding Child Development*, (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2014), 38.

⁸ Elliot Aronson, Tomothy D. Wilson, Robin M. Akert, and Sameul R. Sommers, *Social Psychology* (USA: Pearson Education, 2016), 228.

⁹ See: Solomon E. Asch, “Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority”, *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, 70(9), 1–70. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h009371>.

the experiment, and the other person states that the lines have the same length, the person will change the answer to conform with the group opinion.

The problem is not that we use others' behaviour to help decide what to do in a situation, but it is when we do so automatically and reflexively in response to the "evidence" provided. The data given by social proof might be correct, but it could also be in error. In general, social proof tends to deteriorate our ability to think independently and rationally and it might exert a downward pull on the way we behave because people are apt to be convinced by what most others believe, even though they might not be true¹⁰.

Human beings are more vulnerable and at risk of succumbing to social proof if these three optimizing conditions are garnered in any particular situation: when they are doubtful and hesitant of the best way of acting or behaving in any particular situation (uncertainty); when numerous others are aligned in a certain behaviour of responding in that situation, hence it is perceived as the best way to act (the many); when the people behaving or reacting to it share the same resemblance in characteristics (similarity)¹¹. For instance, the failure of bystanders to help victims in grievous need of help. This phenomenon is also known as "pluralistic ignorance"¹², which is the tendency for everyone to be watching to see what everyone else is doing in that situation. The principle of social proof is at work at this moment because it cumulates all three conditions; people are uncertain whether the situation is obviously an emergency or not, and there are a lot of other people who are not doing anything. They all share the same characteristic, which is that they are all passers-by.

To illustrate more of this principle and its disadvantages, in March 2017, Netflix produced the web series *13 Reasons Why*, which tells the story of a young high school student, Hannah Baker, who commits suicide due to a series of distressing events and leaves behind a set of thirteen tapes delineating the reasons of her decision. These series have sparked a lot of global criticism and concerns from parents, educators, and society at large, as it has been reported that the series may induce self-harm behaviours among teenagers and young adults¹³. Since then, a lot of studies have been done to investigate the impact of suicidal

¹⁰ Zhang, Wuke, Danping Yang, Jia Jin, Liuting Diao, and Qingguo Ma, "The neural basis of herding decisions in enterprise clustering: an event-related potential study", *Frontiers in neuroscience* 13, 2019, 1175 <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/neuroscience/articles/10.3389/fnins.2019.01175/full#B6>. Accessed March 27, 2024.

¹¹ Cialdini, *Influence*, 143.

¹² See: Miller DT, "A century of pluralistic ignorance: what we have learned about its origins, forms, and consequences", *Front. Soc. Psychol.*, 1:1260896, 2023, 2. doi: 10.3389/frsps.2023.1260896. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsps.2023.1260896/full>. Accessed March 28, 2024.

¹³ See: "Release of "13 Reasons Why" associated with increase in youth suicide rates". <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/release-13-reasons-why-associated-increase-youth-suicide-rates>. Accessed March 28, 2024.

portrayal through media content, which exactly depicts misguided and harmful behaviours that can be learned from the social environment, thus leading it to be a trend or norm.

Another example that can be observed is the rampant inclusion of weak and false *aḥādīth* in publications and motivational books, which can be spread into the society and seriously influence the adoption of certain practices that are not congruent to the Qurān and Sunnah of the Prophet PBUH, whether it be from the aspect of '*aqīdah* (creed), '*ibādah* (worship) and *akhlāq* (character)¹⁴. A more detailed study has been done to examine the practices of funeral management in Tumpat, Kelantan, which indicates that 45% of the practices are based on rejected *aḥādīth* and customary practices which have no clear sources from the authority of the *Sharī'ah*¹⁵.

HERD MENTALITY IN THE QURĀN

The Qurān mentions many instances representing the misguiding effects of social proof and its principle in action, especially in the stories of prophets calling people to *tawḥīd*. Masses of people from different communities that were being called to Allāh by the prophets were resistant to accept the call, and the sole reason was that they chose to adhere to what was practised by their forefathers. Allāh says:

﴿وَكَذَلِكَ مَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِنْ نَذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُوهَا إِنَّا وَجَدْنَا آبَاءَنَا عَلَىٰ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰ آثَارِهِمْ مُقْتَدُونَ ۚ قَالَ أُولَٰئِكَ جُنُثَكُمْ بِهِمْ ۚ وَجَدْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ آبَاءَكُمْ قَالُوا إِنَّا بِمَا أُرْسِلْتُمْ بِهِ كَافِرُونَ ۚ﴾

And similarly, We did not send before you any warner into a city except that its affluent said, "Indeed, we found our fathers upon a religion, and we are, in their footsteps, following." [Each warner] said, "Even if I brought you better guidance than that [religion] upon which you found your fathers?" They said, "Indeed we, in that with which you were sent, are disbelievers."¹⁶

The verse that comes before this verse also tells the condition of the previous nations, and Allah states the script that they professed, "*Indeed, we found our fathers upon a religion, and we are, in their footsteps, following...*"¹⁷ which is similar to the one mentioned by the

¹⁴ See: Usman, A. H., & Nasir, M. N. (2022). Penyebaran Hadis Palsu Dalam Penerbitan Di Malaysia Dan Kesannya Kepada Masyarakat: Distribution Of False Hadith In Publications In Malaysia And Its Effect On Society. *HADIS*, 12(23), 34-50. <https://doi.org/10.53840/hadis.v12i23.182>

¹⁵ See: Muhammad Faleh Lai, N. F., & Ahmad Shah, F. (2020). Hadith Daif dan Palsu dalam Pengurusan Jenazah: Kajian Terhadap Sumber dan Rujukan Masyarakat Islam di Mukim Kutun, Tumpat, Kelantan: Weak and Fabricated Hadith in Funeral Rituals: A Study of Muslim Community Sources and References in Kutun Area, Tumpat, Kelantan. *Jurnal Usuluddin*, 48(2), 25–56. <https://doi.org/10.22452/usuluddin.vol48no2.2>

¹⁶ Sūrah al-Zukhruf, 43:23-24.

¹⁷ Sūrah al-Zukhruf, 43:22.

people of Quraisy in Makkah at the time of Prophet PBUH. They chose to disregard the better guidance brought by the Prophet PBUH due to the blind following of their forefathers. This is what Banerjee mentioned in his study explaining “herd behaviour”, that people tend to follow a crowd despite individual information proposing something else¹⁸.

Taking into consideration that human beings learn through imitation and have the tendency to follow others, Allah sends prophets as models and exemplars to teach humankind how to establish faith firmly and practice religion. Allah says:

﴿أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ هَدَى اللَّهُ فَبِهِدَاهُمُ اقْتَدِهْ﴾

Those are the ones whom Allah has guided, so from their guidance, take an example.¹⁹

But blind conformity should not be the ground of what one decides to believe and how to act religiously. The distinction between following the footsteps of the prophets and following the religion of forefathers in the case of the disbelievers lies in that the calling of the prophets to *tawhīd* emanated from revelation and encapsulated in Books, which Allah sends down with it what He refers to in the Qurān as *al-bayyināt*²⁰. Al-Zujāj construed *al-bayyināt* as unambiguous evidence and proof that thwarts and renders the opposing parties powerless²¹ so as to uphold the ultimate truth (*al-ḥaqq*). In addition to that, Allah has made clear in the Qurān before the command to follow the guidance of the prophets in the previously stated verse (Sūrah al-An‘ām, 6: 90):

﴿أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحُكْمَ وَالنُّبُوَّةَ﴾

Those are the ones to whom We gave the Scripture and authority and prophethood.²²

The following and taking the prophets as exemplars are not plain blind conformity; rather, they are adherence to the people who have been given authority, indisputable evidence, and justifications in their undertaking of calling people to Allah.

¹⁸Andrea Morone, “Simple Model of Herd Behavior, A Comment”, *EERI Research Paper Series*, No. 12, 2008, Economics and Econometrics Research Institute (EERI), Brussels, 2. https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/142523/1/EERI_RP_2008_12.pdf. Accessed April 2, 2024.

¹⁹ Sūrah al-An‘ām, 6: 90.

²⁰ Allah mentions *al-bayyināt* in thirty-four places throughout the Qurān. See: al-Baqarah, 2:87, 92, 159, 209, 213, 253, Ālī-‘Imrān, 3: 86, 105, 183, 184, al-Nisā’, 4: 153, al-Mā’idah, 5: 32, 110, al-A‘rāf, 7: 101, al-Tawbah, 9: 70, Yūnus, 10: 13, 74, Ibrāhīm, 14: 9, al-Naḥl, 16: 44, Ṭāhā, 20: 72, al-‘Ankabūt, 29: 39, al-Rūm, 30: 47, Fāṭir, 35: 25, Ghāfir, 40: 22, 28, 34, 50, 66, 83, al-Zukhruf, 43: 63, al-Ḥadīd, 57: 25, as-Ṣaff, 61: 6, al-Taghābun, 64: 6.

²¹ Ibrāhīm bin al-Sariyy, Abū Ishāq al-Zujāj, *Ma‘ānī al-Qurān wa I’rābuhu*, edited by ‘Abdul Jalīl ‘Abduḥ Syalbī, (Beirut: Ā‘lam al-Kutub, 1988), vol. 1, 168.

²² Sūrah al-An‘ām, 6: 91.

Conversely, the religion that is adopted by the disbelievers which they alleged as true, was based on blind conformity of their ancestors because it has neither authority nor justification. Allah discloses it in many places in the Qurān, for example, Allah says:

﴿قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ شُرَكَاءَكُمُ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ أُرُونِي مَاذَا خَلَقُوا مِنَ الْأَرْضِ أَمْ لَهُمْ شِرْكٌ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ أَمْ آتَيْنَاهُمْ كِتَابًا فَهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَتٍ مِنْهُ﴾

Say, "Have you considered your 'partners' whom you invoke besides Allah? Show me what they have created from the earth, or have they partnered [with Him] in the heavens? Or have We given them a book, so they are [standing] on evidence therefrom?"²³

And in another place, Allah mentions:

﴿وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَنْ يُجَادِلُ فِي اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَلَا هُدًى وَلَا كِتَابٍ مُنِيرٍ﴾

And of the people is he who disputes about Allah without knowledge or guidance or an enlightening book [from Him].²⁴

Ibn 'Āshūr elucidates in his *tafsīr*, the three components mentioned in the verse, which are: knowledge (*ilm*), guidance (*hudā*), and enlightening book (*kitāb munīr*), represent stages in the obtainment of knowledge, which is either through efforts (*al-ijtihād*), or acquiring it from a knowledgeable teacher, or through the perusal of previous books sent down to the previous nations²⁵. Thus, it is shown beyond doubt that conforming and imitating other's behaviour without any justification and clear proof of the behaviour is not considered as "knowledge" that one should build his conviction, and that conforming to others blindly without authority and knowledge should never yield any kind of certainty when it comes to matters of religion. Allah also describes their belief which was not established upon knowledge as following of what is constituted upon assumption (*al-zann*) and desire, the total opposite of understanding and cognition. Allah says:

﴿إِنْ هِيَ إِلَّا أَسْمَاءٌ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَا أَنْتُمْ وَآبَاؤُكُمْ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ بِهَا مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ إِنْ يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا الظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى الْأَنْفُسُ وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُمْ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ الْهُدًى﴾

They are not but [mere] names you have named them - you and your forefathers - for which Allah has sent down no authority. They follow not except assumption and what [their] souls desire, and there has already come to them from their Lord guidance²⁶.

²³ Sūrah Fāṭir, 40: 35.

²⁴ Sūrah al-Ḥajj, 22: 8. The same verse is mentioned in Sūrah Luqmān, 31: 20.

²⁵ Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn Āshūr, *al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, (Tunisia: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyyah, 1984), vol. 21, 175.

²⁶ Sūrah al-Najm, 53: 23.

And Allah emphasizes again in the same *sūrah* which means: “While they have no knowledge thereof. They follow but a guess, and verily, guess is no substitute for the truth”²⁷.

The powerful and weighty misguiding effects of herd mentality can be clearly seen in the demeanour of the disbelievers when they refuse to consider and accept the calling of the prophets, albeit being fully aware of the deviation of their predecessors in worshipping the idols. Allah describes their condition:

﴿وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ اتَّبِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَا أَفْلَحْنَا عَلَيْهِ آبَاءُنَا أَوْ لَوْ كَانَ آبَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ ۝ وَمَثَلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا كَمَثَلِ الَّذِي يَنْعِقُ بِمَا لَا يَسْمَعُ إِلَّا دُعَاءً وَنِدَاءً صُمُّ بُكْمٌ عُمْيٌ فَهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ﴾

And when it is said to them, "Follow what Allah has revealed", they say, "Rather, we will follow that which we found our fathers doing." Even though their fathers understood nothing, nor were they guided? And the example of those who disbelieve, is as that of him who shouts to the (flock of sheep) that hears nothing but calls and cries. (They are) deaf, dumb, and blind. So, they do not understand.²⁸

The verse, as explained by Abū al-Su‘ūd, depicts the disbelievers as cattle which cannot hear except the call of their shepherd, and on top of that, their hearing of the shepherd’s voice is nothing but the sound of shrieking and hollering, unintelligible to them.²⁹ Even the man-made terminology of this phenomenon—herd mentality—matches with what Allah describes the disbelievers as in their blind following of their predecessors, the cattle. Indeed, Allah gives the best examples to humankind so that they can think and ponder.

There were many occasions during the time of the Prophet PBUH whereby the disbelievers were held spellbound just by hearing the Qurān recitation. For instance, al-Bayhaqī reported a story of Abu Jahl, Abu Sufyān and al-Akhnas bin Syarīq, who singly went out during the night to seek the Prophet PBUH reciting the Qurān in his night prayer at home. At the crack of dawn, they bumped into each other while trying to depart from the place discreetly and promised each other not to come again, fearing that their people would be aware of the situation. Yet, they kept coming back a few times to hear the Prophet’s recitation³⁰. On this ground, the disbeliever is called “*al-kāfir*” which is used for farmer in the Qurān, Allah says:

²⁷ Sūrah al-Najm, 53: 28.

²⁸ Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2: 170-171.

²⁹ See: Abū al-Su‘ūd al-‘Imādī Muḥammad bin Muḥammad, *Irsyād al-‘Aql al-Salīm ilā Mazāyā al-Kitāb al-Karīm*, (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabiyy, n.d), vol. 1, 190.

³⁰ Aḥmad bin al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Dala’il al-Nubuwwah*, edited by ‘Abdul Mu‘īṭ Qal’ajī, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1988), vol. 2, 206.

﴿كَمَثَلِ غَيْثٍ أَعْجَبَ الْكُفَّارَ نَبَاتُهُ ثُمَّ يَهِيجُ فَتَرَاهُ مُصْفَرًّا ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطَامًا﴾

Like the example of a rain whose [resulting] plant growth pleases the tillers; then it dries, and you see it turned yellow; then it becomes [scattered] debris³¹.

“*Al-kuffār*” in the verse means farmers or growers, for the literal meaning of “*kafara*” is to conceal, as farmers sow the seeds of plants by concealing them in the soil to grow them³²The disbelievers chose to go against the truth that they secretly attested but buried it deep down in their hearts for the sake of following in their forefathers' footsteps.

QURĀNIC PERSPECTIVE ON NEGATING THE MISGUIDING EFFECTS OF SOCIAL PROOF

Social proof, “herd behaviour”, and “herd mentality” could affect an individual Muslim and society in general in terms of spreading corrupted beliefs, false religious practices, and desensitization of sins. Thus, the Qurān sets forth practical solutions to debilitate and negate its impacts that could take hold of a Muslim.

1. Seeking knowledge

As mentioned earlier, one of the optimizing conditions that could compel a person to vulnerably succumb to the principle of social proof is uncertainty. When someone is uncertain and in doubt about how to respond or behave in a particular situation, the most effortless way one could access at that moment is by observing how people around are behaving and reacting to the same condition, as we tend to be easily convinced and may falsely believe that others have some knowledge about that matter, and thus are certain about it.

Allah has made seeking knowledge a duty and an obligation to each Muslim, which is advantageous to help us overcome our susceptibility to the principle of social proof. Islām has laid stress on the importance of seeking knowledge in numerous verses of the Qurān and the *ahādith* of the Prophet PBUH, as knowledge is able to remove uncertainty and doubt from the heart of the believers. The most obvious sign that highlights the significance of knowledge in Islām is that the first verse of Qurān sent down to our Prophet PBUH comes in the command of reading. *Al-qirā'ah* (reading) is defined as when the pronunciation and utterance of tongue pursues what one sees on a written material³³. The first five verses of *sūrah al-'Alaq* which Allah says:

³¹ Sūrah al-Ḥadīd, 57: 20.

³² See: Muḥammad al-Hilāl, *Tafsīr al-Qurān al-Thariyy al-Jāmi' fī al-'Ijāz al-Bayanī wa al-Lughawī wa al-'Ilmī*, (n.p, Dār al-Mi'rāj, n.d), vol. 27, 390.

³³ See: 'Abdur Raḥmān bin Ḥasan Ḥabannakah Al-Maidānī, *Ma'ārij al-Tafakkur wa Daqā'iq al-Tadabbur*, (Jaddah: Dār al-Bashīr, 2000), vol. 1, 41.

﴿أَقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ ﴿١﴾ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ ﴿٢﴾ أَفَرَأَ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ ﴿٣﴾ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ ﴿٤﴾ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ ﴿٥﴾﴾

Recite in the name of your Lord who created - Created man from a clinging substance. Recite, and your Lord is the most Generous - Who taught by the pen - Taught man that which he knew not,³⁴

consist of commands and messages for human beings to obtain knowledge through reading and writing.

It is interesting to note that, genetically, human beings are not born to read. Reading was invented only a few thousand years ago. In other words, our brains are not structured and wired to acquire the skills of reading as easily as walking and talking, that naturally happens after a certain period in the life of an infant. Maryanne Wolf explains that unlike vision and speech, which are genetically organised, reading has no direct genetic programme passing it on to future generations³⁵. The effortful neurological processes that take place for reading skills to be attained reflect human's capacity bestowed by Allah to go beyond the original design of its structures, overcoming tendencies and inclinations of *al-insān* (human). Reading, which is an essential means to seek knowledge, furnishes human beings with the capacity to think, to feel, to infer, and to comprehend. And it is undoubtedly entailed to bridle the force of social environment that could seize the ability of human beings to think rationally and decide wisely.

Social proof is also able to affect society in a positive way. In today's world, it helps people to make informed choices based on the experiences and decisions of others. Even in Islam, social norms play a role in determining the ruling of Islamic law and the acceptability of certain practices through *al-ʿurf* (customary practice). As stated earlier, the effect of social proof is in action when everyone in a particular group holds the same opinion because they perceive what other people think and do is correct. But the type of "social proof" or majority influence adopted in Islam that is represented through *al-ijmāʿ* (consensus) is not based upon *al-zann* (conjecture, guess and speculation) but rather it is formed based on knowledge that comes from the Qurān and Sunnah of the Prophet PBUH. There are a lot of principles, stipulations and specifications being discussed under the topic of *al-ijmāʿ* in *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, for example, the type of authorities and sources employed by the scholars upon reaching an agreement³⁶; which prove that an agreement of a group of people (they are the knowledgeable scholars in the case of *al-ijmāʿ*) on a particular issue, that later become an Islamic ruling, is founded upon knowledge and deep understanding, and not merely following and imitating the opinion of others. The same goes to *al-ʿurf* (customary

³⁴ Sūrah al-ʿAlaq, 96: 1-5.

³⁵ See: Maryanne Wolf, *Proust, and The Squid*, (London: HarperCollins Publisher, 2008), 11.

³⁶ See: Wahbah Zuhailī, *Uṣūl al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*, (Dimasyq: Dār al-Fikr, 2006), vol. 1, 465-570.

practice) which has certain conditions to be met for a practice to be acceptable and allowable, that it must not oppose the Qurān and Sunnah and it must not bring detriments upon human beings nor outstrip their well-being³⁷.

That being so, the yardstick that one should initially refer to as guidance in any situation is knowledge, before considering the way of numerous others as the direction of our behaviour and response. Allah says:

﴿قُلْ لَا يَسْتَوِي الْخَبِيثُ وَالطَّيِّبُ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَكَ كَثْرَةُ الْخَبِيثِ ۚ فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ يَا أُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ﴾

Say, "Not equal are the evil and the good, although the abundance of evil might impress you." So, fear Allah, O you of understanding, that you may be successful.³⁸

Allah has clearly communicated to us through this verse that He has made evil and good distinguishable and clear-cut. Al-Shawkānī commented on this verse that an evil doing, despite its abundance and ubiquity, should be regarded as non-existent, because the evilness of a matter nullifies its benefits and wipes out its blessings³⁹. Only those who have understanding are able to triumph over the force wielded by the impression of abundance. And understanding only comes with knowledge, as Allah says:

﴿وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَا إِلَّا الْعَالِمُونَ﴾

but none will understand them except those of knowledge.⁴⁰

Allah has also warned us in the Qurān through His verse:

﴿وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا﴾

And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed, the hearing, the sight, and the heart - about all those [one] will be questioned.⁴¹

"Al-qafw" in the verse means "ittibā' al-athar"; that is to pursue, to follow, or to proceed after a trace⁴². Allah prohibits us from following something that we have no knowledge of. One of the wisdoms to restrain oneself from pursuing a matter that he has no knowledge of is the fact that actions have consequences that sometimes human beings are unaware of how much influence they could impose onto the people around them. If the behaviour is set off upon knowledge, which later could be the behaviour that other people are seeing and considering to be their "guidance", then it will yield good consequence, as good practices are being adopted and spread. But if the action is the opposite, whereby it is based upon

³⁷ See: 'Abdul Karīm Zaidān, *al-Wajīz fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1996), 253.

³⁸ Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5: 100.

³⁹ See: Muḥammad bin 'Alī al-Shawkānī, *Fath al-Qadīr*, (Dimasyq: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1414H), vol. 2, 92.

⁴⁰ Sūrah al-'Ankabūt, 29: 43.

⁴¹ Sūrah al-Isrā', 17: 36.

⁴² See: Muḥammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qurān*, (Makkah: Dār al-Tarbiyah wa al-Turath, n.d), vol. 17, 448.

blind following, or it is not based upon knowledge and understanding, then it might yield negative consequence; among which will then promote the spread of unsanctioned practices and behaviours in the society. 'Abdullah bin Mas'ūd said: "To acknowledge and say, 'I do not know' regarding the matters that you have no knowledge of is a part of knowledge"⁴³. Allah reminds us in the Qurān to be responsible and aware of the consequences of our courses of actions as He says about those who denied worshipping Him:

﴿لِيَحْمِلُوا أَوْزَارَهُمْ كَامِلَةً يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ۖ وَمِنْ أَوْزَارِ الَّذِينَ يُضِلُّوهُمْ بَغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ ۖ وَلَا سَاءَ مَا يَزُرُونَ﴾

That they may bear their own burdens in full on the Day of Resurrection and some of the burdens of those whom they misguide without knowledge. Unquestionably, evil is that which they bear.⁴⁴

After suspending any decision regarding the unknowledgeable matters, Allah encourages us to inquire the people of knowledge and understanding as it is one of the means of obtaining knowledge, Allah says in two places of the Qurān:

﴿فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ﴾

So ask the people of message if you do not know.⁴⁵

The three faculties mentioned in verse 36 from *sūrah* al-Isrā' should be capitalized altogether to attain knowledge. What we hear and what we see are not all that is, because information does not translate directly into knowledge, and that it should be enlightened by the heart and 'aql, as Allah created this faculty specially for the purpose of knowing and understanding things⁴⁶. And this brings us to the next practical way suggested by the Qurān to overcome the force of social proof onto human being, which is:

2. Critical thinking and contemplation

Ibn al-Qayyim describes the psyche of human being as a constantly rotating millstone that is used to crush and grind wheats or other grains, considering that human being is always occupied with thinking and ruminating, just like the way he continuously breathes. And he likens the thoughts roaming in the mind of human being as grains that are being fed into the machine⁴⁷.

Meanwhile, in a systematic review that studies a common idiom of distress used across diverse cultural settings, analysing a total of 138 articles, books, book chapters,

⁴³ Muḥammad bin Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, edited by Muṣṭafā Dīb al-Bughā, (Dimasyq: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1993), Kitāb al-Tafsīr, Bāb 266, no. 4496, vol. 4, 1791.

⁴⁴ Sūrah al-Naḥl, 16: 25.

⁴⁵ Sūrah al-Naḥl, 16: 43, Sūrah al-Anbiyā', 21: 7.

⁴⁶ See: Taqiuddīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*, (al-Manṣūrah: Dār al-Wafā', 2001), vol. 5, 164.

⁴⁷ See: Shamsuddīn Muḥammad bin Abī Bakr ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Fawā'id*, (n.p: Dār al-Tawzī' wa al-Nashr al-Islamiyyah, 1998), 173.

unpublished dissertations and manuscripts, and programmatic reports, “thinking too much” idiom is shown to link with ruminations and worries⁴⁸.

Given that thinking and ruminating are natural to human being, as much as he is breathing, and a statistical study that shows the idiom of “thinking too much” is closely related to mental health issues, is it not ironic that Allah commands us to think and contemplate in a great many verses throughout the Qurān? While human beings are not genetically structured to learn reading, the command to read is understandable; that is to emphasise its significance and the necessity to endeavour to acquire the skill. But for a doing that is fixed and ingrained in human beings, that distinguishes us from animals, but every so often may lead to a more significant issue, why are “thinking” and “contemplating” being mentioned repeatedly in the Qurān?

There are more than four hundred places throughout the Qurān which the terms “think” and “understand”, with its different derivatives, are being brought up⁴⁹The frequent mentions and prompts of it in the Qurān may suggest that human beings are prone to thinking in the wrong direction, which can cause more harm than good. Hence, “thinking” and “contemplating” should be reminded to be carried out in the way that Allah has prescribed, which will undeniably benefit humans.

Thinking and contemplation should be exercised in a more deliberate and effortful way for us to reap its benefits and to overcome our biological inclinations of spiralling down into the rabbit hole of unproductive and damaging thoughts. Ibn al-Qayyim stated that because the thinking and ruminating nature of human beings are like that of a rotating millstone, what is produced certainly depends on what is being put into it. And that human should seriously take heed of what kind of thoughts, ideas, and notions he focuses on, as those are the origin of desires, actions, and habits⁵⁰.

Allah says:

﴿إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ﴾

Indeed, this Qur'an guides to that which is most suitable.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Kaiser BN, Haroz EE, Kohrt BA, Bolton PA, Bass JK, Hinton DE, "Thinking too much": A systematic review of a common idiom of distress, *Soc Sci Med.*, 2015 Dec; 147:170-83. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.10.044. Epub 2015 Oct 21. PMID: 26584235; PMCID: PMC4689615. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4689615/>. Accessed May 2, 2024.

⁴⁹ See: Muḥammad al-Majāli, *Muṣṭalah al-Tafakkur Kamā Jā'a fī al-Qurān: Dirāsah Mauḍū'iyah*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322644173_mstlh_altfkr_kma_ja_fy_alqran_drast_mwdwyt. Accessed May 2, 2024.

⁵⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Fawā'id*, 174.

⁵¹ Sūrah al-Isrā', 17: 9.

Allah has made contemplation a free and unrestricted form of worship and encourages us to do so using different means to engage all types of temperament and spiritual state. The more we read the Qurān, the more we feed our hearts and minds with the capitals needed for the investment in true knowledge. Besides that, the Qurān also inspires us to contemplate on Allah's nature, His exalted attributes, His favours, the reprimands for the unyielding hearts, the praise for the pious, the beauty of everything on the Earth and many more. While we, human being, are inclined to pay attention to negative and fruitless thoughts, that can cause worries and other damages to our well-being, especially in the Information Age that we live in, where we are being bombarded with so many unfiltered contents, with good and bad mixed, Allah has sent down the Qurān with His knowledge and commanded us to read, which suggests the sources that we should pay attention to and carefully select to determine the ideas and notions we feed our hearts and minds with.

Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, who was considered as the pioneer of psychological medicine from the ninth century, suggested that healthy, good, and beneficial thoughts can be served as our “first-aid emergency kit” in facing daily emotional distress and outbursts⁵². These healthy thoughts are the products of deliberate thinking and contemplation, and it can familiarize us with the practice of taking a step back and pause before we react to engage in a more careful consideration, hence widening the space between the “stimulus” and “response”. The act of pausing before behaving, reacting, and deciding is not only beneficial to overcome our biological inclinations, but is also helpful to get the better of the social force exerted on us through the principle of social proof. As we have seen earlier, the stimulus of our behaviours and reactions is not only limited to our biological inclinations and personal emotional distress, but also the social environment that we live in.

CONCLUSION

Allah made human beings entail to live in a society. Thus, it is no doubt that social environment has a strong impact on their behaviours and actions. Social proof represents majority influence. It states that people tend to perceive what is correct by discovering what other people think is correct. It becomes problematic when human beings respond to a situation solely based on this phenomenon and forsake careful thought. The Qurān portrays the effects of social proof in the responses of people in a nation towards the call of *Tawhīd*, who blindly followed the footsteps of their predecessors without evidence and justifications. In this case, the number of people and the type of people (their family and clan) has become their “evidence” of which path to follow.

⁵² See: Malik Badri, *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study*, (London: IIIT, 2018), 21-22.

The impact of social proof and “herd mentality” on human beings could be easily overlooked as one lives day by day. Grasping the way, it would have impacted individuals and society in general may spark one’s awareness and sensitivity on how and when this force is at work, and when incorrect data have been put into one’s control system. However, being aware of it is not enough because social proof could take hold of a Muslim in ways more than just nudging them into purchase options. When it comes to matters of the Dīn, a Muslim needs to equip oneself with guidance to make concise decision during the time when social proof is exerting its force upon one’s psyche.

In times of uncertainty, knowledge is power. Whenever uncertainty reigns in any situation, Islam has provided us with the most suitable action to take accordingly. Seeking knowledge and contemplation is not a one-off practice, a Muslim must approach them as a deliberate and continuing endeavor as a Muslim may reap its benefits as long as he lives in so many ways, including to negate the misguiding effects of social proof on an individual.

As there are many factors in our social environment other than social proof that can affect human beings’ behaviours and actions, especially in the matters of the Dīn, it is hoped that more research would be conducted to study the approaches to debilitate its misguiding effects from the perspective of the Qurān and Sunnah.

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