

REFLECTIONS

The Criteria of Religious Devotion

*Muhammad Al-Ghazali**

'Is not the one who establishes his edifice on the firm foundation of God-consciousness and Divine pleasure better than the one who builds it over a crumbling, overhanging precipice so that it topples with him into the fire of hell' (9:109). This along with many other verses of the *Qur'an* underlines the fundamental significance of *taqwa*, and its concomitant fruit, namely, the pleasure of Allah (SWT), as the sole criterion for judging the value of human endeavour.

A probe into the teachings of Islam would show clearly that Islam has a temporal and exterior side along with a spiritual and interior dimension. Whatever pertains to the corpus of religious injunctions that manifest themselves in time and space, such as the oral testimony of the unity of Allah (SWT) in His essence and attributes (*shahadah*), observance of rituals in their tangible forms (*ibadat*), acts falling in the vast category of *mu'amalat*, i.e., rules governing human social concourse, and the norms of moral behaviour on individual, familial, societal, human, environmental, and cosmic planes etc., all this may be termed as the temporal side of Islam. It is on the basis of these outer and visible designators of faith or un-faith that we may classify people into Muslim and non-Muslim or regard ideas or modes of human behaviour as Islamic or un-Islamic.

It appears from a survey of the relevant Qur'anic verses that it is the other side of Islam which constitutes the very core and essence of a Muslim's religious experience. Without prejudice to the inevitable temporal aspect of the religious dispensation, we can say that it constitutes no more than the tip of the iceberg. The real value and worth of all human services, deeds and devotional practices, however, lies in the inner dimension.

Profuse statements of the Qur'an, read in the framework of its authentic explanation provided in the *Sunnah* of the final Prophet of Allah (SWT)

* Muhammad al-Ghazali was Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage, International Islamic University, Malaysia.

and concretized in the lives of his companions, make it explicit that the end and objective of all injunctions (*ahkam*) or of all forms of 'ibadah for that matter, is that men attain the state of *taqwa*:

'... Serve your Lord who created you and those before you, so that you attain *taqwa*.' (2:21).

The Prophet (SAAS) has clearly identified the heart as the repository of *taqwa*. Leaving various shades of meaning and subtle nuances that this pivotal Islamic term contains, it can be explained as a deep-seated consciousness in the innermost precincts of the heart which stems from an unflinching conviction that Allah (SWT) is ever watchful to take into account all acts, attitudes and even utterances of humankind.

'Every act of hearing, or of seeing or of feeling in the heart will be questioned' (on the Day of judgement) (17:36).

Taqwa is progressively augmented by the constant remembrance of Allah (SWT) and a consciousness of His watchfulness and of men's accountability before Him. This consciousness keeps in the heart a concern for discriminating between right and wrong and an active pursuit of Allah's pleasure (*maradat-Allah*) and a *personal* abhorrence for evil or the displeasure of Allah (SWT). Through maintaining this consciousness, men are naturally driven to good deeds and feel an aversion to evil. Their love and hate gradually become identified – through continuous prayers and purification – with the pleasure and displeasure of Allah (SWT). It was to this level of consciousness that the Prophet (SAAS) was referring when he said: 'if your good deeds please you and your evil acts displease you then you are a *mu'min*'.

It is this inner state of the human heart which is the Divine criterion for judging men. Men will be assigned to Paradise or consigned to hell on the basis of *taqwa*, and not on the basis of demographic allocation. According to the Qur'an, all rituals and sacrifices (22:37), all religious activities organized on a social scale (9:108), all acts of justice (5:8), all acts of forgiveness and clemency (2:237), all endeavour to bring peace among mankind (2:234) and, in short, all that man is capable of achieving in this temporary and transient stage of his existential enterprise is valuable if it is rooted in *taqwa*, and all is valueless if it is devoid of *taqwa*.

Therefore, the real and ultimate success belongs to the *muttaqin* (11:49; 22:17-28; 77:41-44); i.e., complete bliss and lasting happiness is available only to the *muttaqin*. It is they who are the objects of Divine love (9:4). It is they who shall be afforded admittance to Divine proximity (63:34). It is only they who are the friends and followers of Allah (SWT) (8:34).

It is a matter of human psychology that if an act is once committed, it becomes easy to commit it again. Therefore, a constant performance of good acts increases the tendency to do good and decreases, at the same time, the inclination to do evil deeds. Similarly once an evil act is committed, it paves the way for the subsequent perpetration of evil. It drags the evil-seeker towards further degradation and misguidance (2:15). But those who seek and pursue guidance are granted it excessively and they progressively ascend higher in the scales of spiritual purity (47:17).

An active pursuit of good on the part of man promotes his healthy natural temperament (*fitrah*), which is predisposed to *taqwa*. Through a lack of such active pursuit, this ingrained human quality (7:172 30:30) is dulled and man is lulled into deep slumber which gradually leads to a state of negligence (*ghaflah*). Thus, man eventually jettisons his inherent religiosity into complete oblivion. In this hopeless state of the human mind and heart, only an extraordinary event, no less than a metamorphosis, can retrieve such lost cases.

According to the Qur'an, man has been created with a capacity for both *taqwa* as well as its antithesis namely *fujur*, (90:80-10; 91:1-10) He is then shown the way: Divine signs in the nature within and the nature without. These signs are visible, audible, tangible and perceptible within his own self and in the environment around him. They are further supplemented and reinforced by the revelations communicated to man through the agency of Prophets. He then is left free (2:256; 18:29) and is afforded full opportunity to employ his faculties of thinking and contemplation in order to pursue either way by his free choice. The decision for some time lies with him. It is on account of this free decision that he is held accountable.

If man pursues the right path, the path of *taqwa*, then Allah (SWT) is on his side. He will attain Allah's pleasure and shall merit His reward which is worth receiving. But if man negatives his healthy nature, wilfully and intentionally chooses evil ways and persists in them, evil gradually engulfs his personality and he is eventually blinded to reality (2:7, 15, 81; 7:179).

Taqwa is thus the only means to man's salvation. It demands concerted effort for initial attainment. Once attained, it requires vigilant and incessant struggle throughout man's existential career for its sustenance, protection and promotion. *Taqwa* can be achieved and maintained through the following four ways: i) *ikhlas* (sincerity); ii) *tawakkul* (trust in Allah [SWT]); iii) *sabr* (steadfastness); iv) *shukr* (gratitude). These may be elaborated as follows:

***Ikhlas*.** It denotes unshared and total loyalty of man to Allah (SWT). This loyalty should be free from any servitude to non-God. This means that all concerns, pursuits and interests in life, should be subordinated to a higher commitment to Allah [SWT] (39:3).

The antithesis of *ikhlas* is the worship of self or desire. This drags human soul to egocentricity which is the very opposite of theocentricity. According to the Qur'an, this is the worst form of misguidance and infidelity (28:5).

- ii) ***Tawakkul***. It refers to men's placing their total reliance on Allah (SWT). This reliance must precede as well as succeed the pursuit of all legitimate material means which are also a creation of Allah (SWT). Through *tawakkul* men can cure their selves from the greatest disease of the heart namely conceit and arrogance. This disease, if left uncured, carries the potential of liquidating all our acts of worship and devotion (40:60).
- iii) ***Sabr***. It means that men should follow the right path with persistence, perseverance and steadfastness. This requires an inner and outer strength to confront all possible hurdles hindering man's pursuit of the Divine pleasure. Through attaining *ikhlas* and *tawakkul*, it becomes easier to remain steadfast in the path of *taqwa*, and to check the evil propensities of the self (31:17; 16:126-128).
- iv) ***Shukr***. Whatever is acquired or achieved should make men grateful to Allah (SWT). Gratitude is one of the basic characteristics of faith. In fact it is synonymous with Islam itself which is another name for gratitude (76:3). *Ikhlas*, *tawakkul*, and *sabr*, lead to a behavioural pattern in which the servants of Allah (SWT) actualize *shukr* through their adherence to the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

May Allah (SWT) enable us to translate into action the words we utter and to achieve harmony and concord between heart, mind and body.