

The Path of Reason

Contributed by Adibudeen
 Friday, 23 December 2005
 Last Updated Friday, 13 January 2006

By Tavis Adibudeen, Staff Writer

It has been related that a man, who presumed himself to be knowledgeable, came upon a bakery one day. He deceived the baker and managed to steal two loaves of bread from the bakery. The man then continued on his path until he came upon a pomegranate seller. He deceived the store owner and stole two pomegranates.

The man then continued until he saw a poor sickly man on the road. He gave the two loaves of bread and the two pomegranates to the sick man and proceeded to depart. He was, however, unaware that someone had been watching the entire incident and was now approaching to question him.

The approaching man asked him why he had taken those four items and then bestowed them upon the hands of the infirm man. He replied, "Are you not Ja'far ibn Muhammad (Imam as-Sadiq)?"

The questioner said,

"Yes."

"What good is your lineage to you if you have no knowledge?"

Imam as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) replied, "Which verse from the Book of Allah confounds me?"

The man then recited,

'Whoever brings a good deed, he shall have ten like it, and whoever brings an evil deed shall be recompensed only with the like of it.' (Qur'an

6:160)

He

continued, "When I stole the two loaves of bread, that counted as two evil deeds, and when I stole the pomegranates, that counted as two more evil deeds. That is a total of four evil deeds. When I gave the four items to the sick man, that counted as 40 good deeds. So, Allah has subtracted

my four evil deeds from my forty good deeds, leaving me with 36 good deeds!"

Imam as-Sadiq said, 'May your mother lose you! It is you who are ignorant of the Book of Allah. Have you not heard that Allah said,

'(Allah)

accepts (deeds) from the pious only.'

When

you stole the two loaves of bread, that counted as two evil deeds. And when you stole the two pomegranates, that counted as two evil deeds, also. And when you gave them to other than their owner without the permission of their owner, you have added four evil deeds to four evil deeds.

You have not added four evil deeds to forty good deeds.'

The man then began staring blankly at the Imam, so the Imam left him.

In

this story, a man who believed himself to be knowledgeable and was even well-respected among the people, actually revealed his own ignorance

and lack of sound intellect ('aql).

The Essential

Reason

Reason is an essential component of religion (din), and it is only through reason that human beings can come to understand how shari'ah (the path of Islam) is to be implemented in their communities and societies. Although revealed knowledge is the first ingredient, if it is not coupled with sufficient intellect and reason, it is doomed to fail.

In

the case of the man in the above story, knowing a verse from the Book of Allah was not enough for this man, without sound reasoning, as Allah says:

"He grants wisdom (al-hikmah) to whom He pleases, and to whomever wisdom is granted is surely given an abundance of good (khayran kabiran); but none will grasp the message except men of understanding (ulul-albab)." (Qur'an 2:269)

In his tafsir, al-'Allamah at-Tabataba`i wrote regarding this verse,

"Al-Lubb literally means kernel, the softer part within a hard shell. It is used in the meaning of al-'aql (understanding) because understanding has the same position vis-a-vis the man as the kernel has vis-a-vis its hard shell.

It is used in this very meaning in the Qur'an. The use of the noun al-'aql with the meaning of understanding, seems to be of a later origin; that is why it has not been used in this form in the Qur'an..."¹

Al-Kulayni reported that the Messenger of Allah (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) said,

"Allah

did not distribute among (His) servants anything better than wisdom; so, the sleep of the wise is better than the wakefulness of the ignorant, and the sitting of the wise is better than the rising of the ignorant. And Allah did not send any prophet nor any messenger until (his) understanding was perfected and his wisdom was superior to all the wisdom of his people. And what the prophet keeps hidden in his mind is superior to the endeavors of those who endeavor. And the servant does not fulfill his obligations (towards) Allah until he knows Him; and all the worshipers together do not reach in the excellence of their worship what a wise (person) attains; and the wise people are the people of understanding; Allah says: and none but men of understanding mind."²

From the eloquent words of the Messenger of Allah, we can gather that understanding or intellect (al-'aql) goes hand-in-hand with wisdom (al-hikmah). The power of the intellect (quwwat-ul-'aqliyyah) is inherent in every human being, but it has two possible uses. It can be used for learning the divine knowledge of Allah and other beneficial knowledge, as well as for teaching and formulating plans that are beneficial to the Muslim community (ummah), or it can be used for deceit and self aggrandizement. Moreover, if the intellect is not fostered at all, if it is not nursed with the supreme knowledge, it will remain in ignorance (jahiliyyah).

It is related from

Abu Ja'far (peace be upon him),

"When Almighty Allah created reason (al-'aql), He tested it. Then He ordered it to come forward and it came forward. Then, He ordered it to go back and it went back. On this Almighty Allah said: 'I swear by My Power and Majesty that no creation of Mine is dearer to Me than you are, and I have only made you perfect in those whom I love. Lo! To you are My orders and prohibitions addressed. And for you are My rewards and retributions reserved.'"3

It is commonly held in circles of materialist thinkers that human beings have very few differences from animals other than a small genetic advantage on the evolutionary chain of life. They maintain that intellect is purely the function of brain waves, while simultaneously insisting that morality and justice are necessary for humanity's continued survival. In the toil of this conundrum, they fail to explain how humanity should determine what is moral and just, if there is no criterion that is above the level of human understanding.

According to the scholars of Islam, basic morality and justice are ingrained in the human soul, but the power of the intellect must be trained (through divine guidance) to understand and apply morality and justice correctly. In doing so, the soul can surpass the spiritual height of angels or be abased into functioning at the level of other animals. Essentially, the animal lower self (nafs) must be taught to connect to its inner spirit (ruh), which is infused in all humans from within their mothers' wombs.

A report has reached us from Imam 'Ali (upon whom be peace) which reads,

"Surely God has characterized the angels by intellect ('aql) without desire and anger, and the animals with anger and desire without reason. He exalted man by bestowing upon him all of these qualities. Accordingly, if man's reason dominates his desire and ferocity, he rises to a station above that of the angels; because this station is attained by man in spite of the existence of hurdles which do not vex the angels."4

If this does not occur, a person is left to follow his own whims and foolish rationalizations, or he is misled by those who use their intellects for the purpose of achieving their own evil ambitions.

Overcoming Ignorance

It is important to understand that there are different degrees of ignorance, and only some of them are blameworthy.

An-Naraqī distinguishes between two types of ignorance: (1) simple ignorance and (2) compound ignorance. Someone with simple ignorance has a deficiency in his power of intellect because the individual, "lacks knowledge and learning, but is aware of his ignorance. This is in contrast to 'compound ignorance'-- a state in which one not only does not realize his ignorance but considers himself to be knowledgeable."5

Those with simple ignorance may sometimes be well aware of the truth but persist in their ignorance for the sake of pride, culture, wealth, or other perceived worldly benefits. They have reasoned that it is more beneficial for them to remain ignorant. In doing so, they are refusing

knowledge, and their simple ignorance then becomes rejection (kufr).

When

it is said to them: "Come to what Allah has revealed; come to the Messenger": They say: "Enough for us are the ways we found our fathers following." What! Even though their fathers were void of knowledge and guidance? (Qur'an 5:104)

Beyond

ignorance, the intellect can also be morphed into cunning, treachery, and deceit. When a person becomes proud of his intelligence and begins to view himself as superior to others, the intellect can become a burden and lead to many vices. Any intellect can be easily humbled by a superior intellect, and even the greatest of intellects is still infinitesimal compared to the knowledge and wisdom of Allah, Who is Al-'Alim (The All Knowing) and Al-Hakim (The Wise).

Our

reason must, therefore, be regulated. While it is conceivable to arrive at Divine knowledge and superior understanding of the Real Realm through pure reason, it is very arduous and dangerous. Many philosophers have gone astray by seeking a purely internal/intellectual quest for true knowledge. To balance this danger, Allah has revealed the Qur'an, which is the Criterion (Furqan) for all thought and action. Reason is used to understand the Qur'an, and the Qur'an clarifies and guides the intellectual seeker.

Allah created all signs in the universe, including the Qur'an, in such a way that they appeal to the intellect. There is a perfect symposium of order between the stars, the planets, galaxies, light, matter, energy, and all living things. Each has perpetual reason and purpose, and man's endless quest is to understand it. In doing so, he comes to know his Lord.

The Miracle of the Human Mind

The caliph once sent a Jewish scholar to debate with Imam 'Ali ibn Musa Ar-Ridha (peace be upon him). The Jew said to him, "How can you accept Muhammad as the Messenger of God when he showed no miracles?"

The

Imam replied, "The greatest miracle of God is the human mind. It allows ideas to be thought through and reasoned out. Man must accept God through reason, not through miracles."

At

first glance it might seem as though this story confirms that the Prophet showed no miracles, while history proves that he performed many remarkable actions that can only be accomplished through Allah's power and will. We know of the moon splitting, rocks, trees, and other inanimate objects testifying to Allah's Oneness and the Prophet's Message, and angels coming to the aid of the Muslim army in a time of need; however, these events were not enacted to prove Muhammad's prophethood to anyone. If they were, then not a single person would have disbelieved. Abu Jahl, the Prophet's arch enemy, witnessed some of these miraculous occurrences with his own eyes, yet he died in disbelief. He had developed compound ignorance.

"That is because they hate what Allah has revealed; so He has made their deeds fruitless." (Qur'an 47:9)

The Jew in the above story was looking for some otherworldly phenomena that would have proved Prophet Muhammad's message and turned him into a believing Muslim. But the reality is that, even if Imam Ridha himself had made a tree speak to the man and profess the declarations of faith (shahadatain), that man still would not have believed. If he could not arrive at belief through the miracle of his own intellect, after obviously having studied Islam thoroughly enough to debate with a Muslim, nothing could turn his heart.

"Allah hath set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a veil; great is the penalty they (incur)."
(Qur'an 2:7).

There are many intellectuals in academia, particularly in the western world, who are not Muslim, but who have a deep undying interest in studying Islam and writing about it, as though they were themselves ulema` (Muslim scholars). I am not referring to those who show enmity towards Islam and Muslims. Their goal is clear. But those who claim another religion while defending Islam unflinchingly are intriguing and puzzling to most Muslims. Even more puzzling are those Muslims who are so firmly established upon error that they refuse to listen to any manner of reasoning. The man in our first story was afflicted with that degree of compound ignorance.

The Middle

Path

The

true path in the realm reason, as with all aspects of Islam, is the middle road. We must not rely completely on reason so much that we ignore revelation or the people of knowledge, nor must we become so content with our own ignorance that any attempt by someone to reason with us is met with contempt. The Muslim Ummah, in this age, is unfortunately plagued with these two extremes. Our disunity and overall lack of forward progress is largely due to polarization of the community.

On the one side are those who have nearly abandoned revelation completely in favor of reason. For them even the shari'ah can be explained away through contrivance. For some it is assuredly intentional, while most people on this end have fallen victim to the societies in which they were raised, where materialism and rationalism are predominant, and knowledge-based faith is alienated.

On the other side of the rift, are dogmatic traditionists who insist on their narrow interpretation of shari'ah to the exclusion of all other sects and schools of thought. They condemn others to Hell and are quick to dismiss any reason, even if it is based upon revelation.

The Prophet himself has answered both sides in beautiful words, such as:

"Ask questions of the learned, speak with the wise, and associate with the poor."⁶

In asking questions of learned people, one gains knowledge outside the realm of one's own opinion and worldly desires. In other words, one

should not rely completely on his own reasoning, rather he should also seek knowledge from those who know. By speaking with the wise, one becomes wiser himself and learns to use his intellect to synthesize the knowledge that he is given. It is not enough to simply have knowledge. One must also possess a degree of wisdom.

Those

first two points are obvious in their benefits, but why has the Prophet included the last piece of advice? Even in pondering that question, we have begun the process of reasoning! Sitting with those who are poor makes us reflect on ourselves, our preoccupation with this worldly life and on how Allah has given us a responsibility of giving to those in financial need and teaching those in intellectual need. This also humbles those with higher intellect to sit with those who have not achieved such levels and to realize that they cannot be superior to them except through piety and good deeds.

We can also find evidence in support of this "middle path" throughout the Qur'an. Allah is constantly reminding the believers to think, to ponder over His words and to investigate matters deeply.

"Do they not ponder over the Qur'an?

Had it been from other than Allah, they would surely have found therein Much discrepancy." (Qur'an 4:82)

Allah

has also enjoined certain ethical standards for our intellectual health that must be upheld so that we might reach intellectual maturation and eventually become people of intellect or people of understanding (ulul-albab).

Allah's Messenger (may blessings and peace be upon him) explains,

"The

character of the intelligent is that he overlooks the ignorant, pardons the wrongdoers, behaves modestly with those beneath his rank, and competes with those of higher rank in giving charity. The intellectual thinks before he utters; he will win when he speaks of good things and will be saved when he abstains from speaking of evil. He clings to Allah firmly when he is forced to encounter a seditious matter; therefore, he withholds his hand and tongue. He hurries to virtue wherever he finds it. He never abandons shyness and never shows acquisitiveness. These ten characteristics distinguish the intelligent.

"The

ignorant one wrongs anyone who associates with him, oppresses one who is less fortunate, and attacks (wrongly) one who is affluent. He utters without thinking about what he says. He commits sins whenever he speaks and forgets whenever he remains silent. He hurries to every seditious matter that would certainly befall him and neglects and moves slowly towards virtue. He does not care for his past sins and does not refrain from committing new ones. He moves slowly towards the act of giving charity. He is neither remorseful for what has passed, nor for what he has lost. These ten characteristics distinguish the ignorant."⁷

Imam 'Ali relates:

Jibril came

down to Adam (peace be upon him) and said, 'O Adam, I have been ordered to have you choose between three things: pick one, and leave the other two.' Adam then asked Jibril what the three things were, and Jibril replied, 'Intellect, modesty, and religion.' 'I choose intellect,' Adam replied. So, Jibril told modesty and religion to go away and leave him. However, they replied that

they had been ordered to stay with intellect wherever it may be. 'So be it,' he said, and re-ascended to heaven.⁸

The Relevance of Islamic Principles

The Islamic Way (shari'ah), its ethics (akhlaq) and laws (ahkam), are based upon the principle of Divine Justice ('adl)

and thus must be viewed as having purpose and meaning. Every action, thought, spoken word, and deed that a Muslim is commanded to do has some benefit for him, and every deed that is prohibited is, in some manner, harmful to him. It is, therefore, on the basis of benefit and harm, right and wrong, justice and injustice, and similar natural truths that scholars of intellect ('aql) determine their ijtiha (deduction of Islamic rulings based on shari'ah

but regarding matters not specifically mentioned in it).

Methods based on opinion (ra'y) or analogy (qiyas)

fail to meet this standard because they are not based upon any universal truths but rather upon circumstantial evidence and relative parallelisms.

Those movements within the various schools of Islamic thought that have sought to erase reason from all avenues (including aqidah, fiqh, and akhlaq), insist upon only following the Qur'an and hadith narrations for their rulings. Some of these groups have even eliminated the position of 'alim (scholar) and allow any layperson to interpret Qur'an and

Sunnah

according to his own understanding. In doing so they are unintentionally promoting the use of guesswork and conjecture within their own schools of thought.

By

eliminating all methods of reasoning, they have also cast out any relevance which Islam might unfold for a believer. Frozen in a ultra-precautionary, culturally oblivious time capsule, a believer in this ideology approaches the world with a myopic lens. One can witness such a person narrating a verse from the Qur'an or a hadith to someone, without any explanation of it, and expect the listener to act upon it as law, oblivious to their understanding of it.

'Allamah Mutahhari explains:

"At

the time of the last Hajj, while encouraging the people to memorize and preserve whatever they heard from him, and to convey to the future generations, the Prophet (S) said:

"How often one conveys

knowledge to

another

who is more learned than himself.

"The one who hears ahadith

may possess more power of understanding and analysis than the narrator himself. He may comprehend its spirit, purpose and meaning in a better way on account of his superior knowledge. The religion can be understood better in the light of knowledge. The secret of greatness and miraculous character of the holy religion of Islam lies in the immense scope of its teachings; and if any aspect of nature is illuminated by means of science, it not only does not make obsolete the teachings of Islam but makes them brighter and clearer.

"9

Anyone

who attempts to understand the religion but who refuses to learn the philosophy, politics, culture, economics, sciences, and even the general time/space circumstances in which he is living cannot be called knowledgeable, and deriving one's understanding from this type of

person can be extremely dangerous. So, what can be said of one who will not apply his own intellect to the knowledge that he obtains? He would have then abandoned every possible method of understanding the religion. If revelation, for example, is not to be understood through reason, nor through the context of any particular science or methodology, then the revelation is not understood at all. It is only blindly adhered to, and only the most literal verse can be transformed into action. Anything that encroaches on the line of interpretation is considered to be invalid.

Islamic

thought can never advance and accommodate all of the people of the world if it is approached using the above method. Even the translation of religious texts would have been deemed reprehensible if it were not for the dire need to relate the meaning of them to the people, beyond basic memorization and literal application.

When a thinker possesses the knowledge of revelation, prophetic commentary, religious sciences, and his own ability to reason, the robe of Islam becomes suitable for him to wear in any setting, in any country, and in any time period. This is not to say that Islam is altered or reformed to meet the needs of secularism or any other ideological or personal agenda. The shari'ah is a living organ that can appropriate a variety of cultural and intellectual ideas into its framework, without sacrificing its undying principles. That which is halal (permissible) remains halal, and that which is haram (forbidden) remains haram, but that which is textually neither grows and adapts to the people and situations in which it appears.

The

proof of this is evidential to anyone who has left another religion to enter into the fold of Islam. The majority of those who convert from another religion do so based on the reasonable proofs presented to them. They make inquiries, solve philosophical problems, and ultimately arrive at a largely intellectual conclusion. Islamic propagation, after all, does not rely on the power of emotive reactions to pleasantries, such as music and dance, nor the carnal desire of worldly possessions. Furthermore, Allah does not expect people to believe on the basis of blind faith. We are instructed to explore, study, and verify the truth of Allah's words and the proof (hujjat) of His real and existing attributes manifested in His creation.

Behold!

in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which Allah Sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they Trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth;- (Here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise.

(al-Qur'an
2:164)

The People of Intellect

Those

who strive to understand Allah's words and the religion that He has chosen for them become the "people of intellect." Their thoughts and actions have purpose and meaning. They do not speak except with their knowledge and wisdom. Their intellectual understanding of revelation guides their decisions.

The

people of intellect are those who study Allah's signs and reach pure belief through their reasoning. They seek nearness to Allah, follow His messengers, seek wisdom from His friends (awliya), teach those who are ignorant, lend their support to those in need, and travel on the path of wisdom, peace, and

tolerance.

"And

when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth: they pray: "Our Lord! we believe; write us down among the witnesses."

(al-Qur'an
5:83)

1. Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an by al-'Allamah Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba`i, commentary on Sura 2, verses 261-274.
2. Ibid.
3. Al-Kafi by Shaykh Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kulayni Ar-Razi. From "Kitab al-'Aql wa-l-Jahl".
4. Jami' as-Sa'adat by Muhammad Mahdi ibn Abi Dharr an-Naraq'i.
5. Ibid.
6. Tuhaf-ul-'Uqul, by Abu Muhammad al-Hasan ibn 'Ali al-Husayn ibn Shu'ba al-Harrani p. 34.
7. Ibid.
8. Mishkat al-Anwar fi Ghurar il-Akhbar by Hassan ibn Fadl ibn Hassan Tabarsi.
9. Al-Tawhid Journal, Vol. IV No. 2, "The Role of Reason in Ijtihad" by Shahid Murtadha Mutahhari.