



Can a “Good Muslim” Be a “Bad Person”? Aligning Faith and Character

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In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful

Abstract

This article addresses the misconception that religious worship is separate from moral character, or that someone can be a “good Muslim” but a “bad person.” Faith in Islam, as described in the Qur’an and Sunnah, consists of not only a theological creed but also a set of character dispositions. The five pillars of Islam, which are the religion’s core rituals of worship, all contain moral dimensions that inform both a believer’s relationship to their Creator and to other created beings. It is a categorical error, then, to claim someone can simultaneously be a “good Muslim” and a “bad person” because a good Muslim believer is, by definition, a good person.

Introduction

It is common in modern secular society to hear the argument that people do not need God, religion, or revelation to be “good,” to recognize moral values, and be productive members of society. In the Muslim community, some people even say that so-and-so is a “good Muslim” but not a “good person.” Why do people separate religion from morality when in Islam they are so obviously intended to be integrated?

It is true, in a limited sense, that people have access to moral knowledge even without divine revelation. Every person is born with a God-given conscience or instinct (*al-fitrah*) that naturally recognizes the moral truths manifesting from the Attributes of Allah, such as love, compassion, justice, and beauty. The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said, “Righteousness is good character and sin is what disturbs your heart and you hate for people to find out about it.”¹ And Ibn Umar رضي الله عنهما said, “The servant will not achieve true mindfulness of Allah (*al-taqwa*) until he leaves what

¹ Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955), 4:1980 #2553, *kitab al-Birr wal-Sillah wal-Adab bāb tafsīr al-birr wal-ithm*.

disturbs his heart.”² The innate conscience of people can acknowledge good and evil to a degree without being informed by revelation; so, yes, from this perspective a person can be a “good” member of society without being religious or believing in God.

But being good solely on the basis of personal conscience or philosophy is a precarious position to be in. It lacks a metaphysical understanding of reality to ground its ethics and hold it in place when our moral values are put to the test. Put simply, if there is no God to judge us, if there is no divine law to guide us, our moral prescriptions are merely preferences, and preferences can be discarded the moment they become inconvenient. For this reason, Moses, peace be upon him, said to Pharaoh, “Verily, I have taken refuge in my Lord and your Lord from every arrogant person who does not have faith in the Day of Reckoning.”³ Rulers like Pharaoh, who do not really believe they are held accountable to God, inevitably devolve into the most notorious of tyrants. Perhaps the most notable example of 20th century godless despotism was the murderous Communist regime which “subjected the Soviet public to virulently atheistic propaganda on the streets and in the workplace.”⁴ Joseph Stalin certainly did not believe he would stand before God on the Day of Judgment to take responsibility for the millions of souls who died by his command.

Religious people commit atrocities too, some will argue, and it is indeed true. Islam, however, does not separate religion from morality as some people misunderstand. One cannot be a “good Muslim” and a “bad person” at the same time, because worship and character are two sides of the same coin. The use and abuse of religion for evil ends is definitely a reality, but it does not represent the true expression of faith. Rather, it is hypocrisy which Allah has condemned in the Qur’an:

Among people are those who say, ‘We have faith in Allah and the Last Day,’ but they are not truly believers. They try to deceive Allah and

² al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 1:10, *kitab al-Iman qawl al-Nabi* ﺻﻠﻰ ﺍﻟﻠﻪ ﻋﻠﻴﻪ ﻭﺍﻟﻪ ﻭﺍﻟﻪ ﺳﻼﻡ *buniya al-Islam ‘ala khams*.

³ Sūrat Ghāfir 40:27.

⁴ Daniel Peris, *Storming the heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1998), 6.

the believers but they deceive none but themselves, while they do not perceive it. In their hearts is a disease (of hypocrisy), so Allah has increased their disease and they will have a painful punishment.⁵

Again, Allah said:

Among people are those whose speech impresses you in the life of this world and he calls Allah to witness what is in his heart, yet he is most fierce in argument. When he turns away, he strives in the land to corrupt it and destroy crops and cattle, but Allah does not love corruption. When it is said to him, ‘Fear Allah!’ pride in the sin takes hold of him, so Hell will suffice him and wretched is the destination.⁶

There are many religious people who practice their “faith” in an arrogant and hypocritical manner, who commit atrocities, crimes, and offenses by cynically exploiting religious sentiments and the language of righteousness. Their hypocrisy, though, stands in marked contrast to authentic faith as it has been described by Allah and His Messenger ﷺ.

In this article, we will examine the definition of faith in Islam and its inextricable link to ethics, morality, and good character. We will further demonstrate that each of the five pillars of Islam—the testimony of faith, prayer, charity, fasting Ramadan, and the Hajj pilgrimage—include moral dimensions in regards to relations with other people that must be fulfilled for these acts of worship to have merit. In short, we will prove that a “good Muslim” must, *by definition*, be a “good person.”

Islam, faith, and good character

The testimony of faith (*al-shahada*) is the first and most important pillar in Islam. Faith in Islam (*al-iman*) includes not only theological creed (*al-aqidah*) and rituals (*al-'ibadah*) but also a set of character dispositions, moral virtues, and spiritual practices. The classical scholar Ibn Taymiyyah wrote, “It is understood that faith is

⁵ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:8-10.

⁶ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:204-206.

affirmation and not merely belief. Affirmation includes the words of the heart, which is belief, and the actions of the heart, which is compliance.”⁷ After all, even Satan *believes* in the existence of the Creator but “he was arrogant and become one of the unfaithful.”⁸ True faith must manifest itself as outward actions (profession of creed and ritual worship) and inward states (purity of heart, compassion, humility, etc.). It was the pedagogy of the companions to learn faith from this broad-based perspective before seriously memorizing the Qur’an and studying other Islamic disciplines, as recalled by Jundub ibn Abdullah رضي الله عنه, “We learned faith before we learned the Qur’an, then we learned the Qur’an and it strengthened our faith.”⁹

Faith can be spoiled by the appearance of hypocrisy (*al-nifaq*), in which a person outwardly professes and practices Islam but has internalized characteristics of unfaithfulness, such as dishonesty. An outward Muslim who has no faith in his or her heart commits major hypocrisy, tantamount to unbelief, while a Muslim who has faith and manifests sinful actions contrary to faith commits lesser hypocrisy; a egregious sin to be sure, but not enough to completely nullify one’s faith.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*There are four signs that make someone a pure hypocrite and whoever has one of them has a characteristic of hypocrisy until he abandons it: when he speaks he lies, when he makes a covenant he is treacherous, when he makes a promise he breaks it, and when he argues he is wicked.*¹⁰

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ defined Islam and faith according to both their inward and outward dimensions. In regards to the outer meaning, the Prophet ﷺ was asked by the Angel Gabriel about the meaning of Islam and he said, “Islam is to testify there is no true god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, to establish prayer, to give charity, to fast the month of Ramadan, and to perform the

⁷ Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā* (al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah: Majma’ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā’at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 1995), 7:638; see also Ibn, Taymīyah, Salman H. Ani, and Shadia Tel, *Kitab al-Iman: Book of Faith* (Bloomington, Ind: Iman Pub. House, 2010).

⁸ Sūrat Ṣād 38:74.

⁹ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-’Arabī), 1:23 #61, *iftitah al-Kitab bab fi al-Iman*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

¹⁰ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:16 #34, *kitab al-Iman bab ayah al-munafiq*.

Hajj pilgrimage to the House if one can find a way.” Then Gabriel asked the Prophet ﷺ about the meaning of faith and he replied, “Faith is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Last Day, and to believe in the Divine Decree (*al-qadr*), both its good and its evil.”¹¹ These definitions explain the religion according to its concrete exoteric elements—the pillars of worship and the outwardly professed articles of faith.

That said, there is also a spiritual dimension to Islam and to faith that includes moral virtues as they relate to our behavior towards other people. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe, and the believer is the one who is trusted with the lives and wealth of the people.”¹² In another narration, a man asked, “O Messenger of Allah, whose Islam is best?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Those from whose tongue and hand people are safe.”¹³ On several occasions, the Prophet ﷺ would associate faith in Islam with good deeds towards others. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever has faith in Allah and the Last Day, let him not harm his neighbor. Whoever has faith in Allah and the Last Day, let him honor his guest. Whoever has faith in Allah and the Last Day, let him speak good or be silent.”¹⁴ In another narration, the Prophet said, “Let him honor his neighbor.”¹⁵ And in another narration, he said, “Let him uphold family ties.”¹⁶ In other words, the Muslim is, *by definition*, someone who does not unjustly harm other people with their words and actions, who shows good behavior to family members, neighbors, guests, and people in general.

Of course, when a Muslim does commit such offenses they remain a Muslim in the outward sense, but their faith and practice of Islam is deficient until their behavior matches the Prophet’s definition of a Muslim and a believer. Faith, in this sense, increases or decreases according to the measure of our deeds from moment to

¹¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:36 #8, *kitab al-Iman bab ma’rifat al-Iman wa al-Islam, wa al-Qadr*.

¹² al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī* (Ḥalab: Maktab al-Maṭbū’āt al-Islāmīyah, 1986), 8:104 #4995; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

¹³ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 11:366 #6753; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā’ūṭ et al in their commentary.

¹⁴ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:11 #6018, *kitab al-Adab bab man kana yu’minu bi-Allah*.

¹⁵ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:11 #6019.

¹⁶ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:32 #6138.

moment. If we commit a major sin, our faith might entirely vanish in that moment until we repent. The Prophet ﷺ said:

*The adulterer is not a believer while he is committing adultery. The drinker of wine is not a believer while he is drinking wine. The thief is not a believer while he is stealing. The plunderer is not a believer while he is plundering and the people are looking on.*¹⁷

In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Nor is one who kills a believer.” Then it was said to Ibn Abbas رضي الله عنهما, “How does faith leave him?” Ibn Abbas said, “Like this,” and he clasped his fingers together and pulled them apart and said, “But if he repents, then it returns to him like this,” and he clasped his fingers together.¹⁸ For this reason, regular repentance is mandatory for the believers.¹⁹

Since faith, like our internal states and moods, has a tendency to fluctuate, it follows that we need to continue renewing our faith through acts of worship and charity on an ongoing basis. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, the faith of one of you will diminish just as a garment becomes worn out, so ask Allah to renew faith in your hearts.”²⁰ ‘Umayr ibn Habib رضي الله عنه said, “Faith increases and decreases.” It was asked, “How does it increase and decrease?” ‘Umayr said, “If we remember our Lord and fear Him, it will increase. If we are heedless and we forget and we waste our time, it will decrease.”²¹ As such, if a Muslim is committing sins, causing offense, and generally being a “bad person,” that is a reflection of their weakness in faith and not the ideal of faith itself.

An important element of faith, which has direct consequences for our salvation, is the effort we put into purifying our hearts from spiritual diseases such as malice, envy, greed, and worldliness. Allah said, “He has succeeded who purifies his soul, and he has failed who corrupts it.”²² An entire discipline of Islamic learning was

¹⁷ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 3:136 #2475, *kitab al-Mathalim wal-Ghadab bab al-nuhba bi ghayr idhni sahibihī*.

¹⁸ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:164 #6809, *kitab al-Hudud bab ithmi al-zina*.

¹⁹ Roohi Tahir, “Repentance, Redemption, & Salvation: An Islamic Framework,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. February 5 2018. yaqeeninstitute.org/roohi-tahir/repentance-redemption-salvation-an-islamic-framework/

²⁰ al-Ḥākim, *Al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1990) 1:45 #5; declared reliable (*thiqāt*) by Al-Dhahabī in the commentary.

²¹ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu‘ab al-Īmān* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī’, 2003), 1:154 #55.

²² Sūrat al-Shams 91:9-10.

developed based upon this imperative, known as “purification of the soul” (*tazkiyyat al-nafs*)²³ and its importance cannot be overstated. No one will be spared punishment on the Day of Judgment except for those “who come to Allah with a pure heart.”²⁴ The inward actions of the heart are the precursors to all the conscious outward deeds of the limbs and tongue. If our heart is pure, then it should necessarily result in acts of charity and good deeds for others. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The faith of a servant is not upright until his heart is upright, and his heart is not upright until his tongue is upright. A man will not enter Paradise if his neighbor is not secure from his evil.”²⁵ The heart affects our use of language and our language affects our neighbors, for better or worse. What we say reflects what is in our hearts because that is where our words originated. If we cannot, at the very least, refrain from harming our neighbors, then we are in danger of losing our place in Paradise.

When it comes to neighbors and other people in general, our faith and practice must be informed by the *ethics of reciprocity*; i.e., we need to treat others as we would like to be treated. The Prophet ﷺ said, “None of you will have faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”²⁶ That is, faith is to love good for others the same as we would love it for ourselves. Great classical scholars like Imam al-Ghazali made this principle central to their understanding of ethics.²⁷ This reciprocity includes both Muslims and non-Muslims because every human being is your brother or sister either in the specific religious sense or in the universal sense that all people are the children of Adam and Eve عليهما السلام. Ibn Hajar al-Haytami commented on this tradition, writing, “It is apparent that the expression of ‘brother’ here is based upon the general sense, as it is befitting for every Muslim to love

²³ Another term used by classical scholars is *tasawwuf*, from which we get the English term Sufism. Although this term was used appropriately in the past, it has become controversial in modern times due to the behavior of some Sufi groups. Instead of using this term, many scholars prefer to designate the field of classical *tasawwuf* as ‘purification of the soul.’

²⁴ Sūrat al-Shu‘arā’ 26:89.

²⁵ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 20:343 #13047; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb wal-Tarhīb* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 2000), 2:680 #2554.

²⁶ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:12 #13, *kitab al-Iman bab min al-Iman an yuhibba li akhihi ma yuhibbu li nafsi*.

²⁷ Justin Parrott (2017), “Al-Ghazali and the Golden Rule: Ethics of Reciprocity in the Works of a Muslim Sage,” *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, 16:2, 68-78, DOI: [10.1080/10477845.2017.1281067](https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2017.1281067)

See also:

yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/al-ghazali-and-the-golden-rule-ethics-of-reciprocity-in-the-works-of-a-muslim-sage/

Islam for the unbelievers and what arises from it of virtues.”²⁸ Additional evidence and inclusive language from the Sunnah indicates that reciprocal ethics apply to all people. In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Let him treat people the way he would love to be treated.”²⁹ And in another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Love for people what you love for yourself and you will be a believer; behave well with whoever would be your neighbor and you will be a Muslim.”³⁰ Once again, a believer and a Muslim must love good for all human beings the same as they love it for themselves, or else their faith is deficient and incomplete.

Hence, a believer in good standing should have a pure heart and treat others the way they would like to be treated. Put differently, a believer should have good character (*al-akhlaq*), which is the inward disposition of a pure heart, and also good manners (*al-adab*), which are the outward manifestations of good character. Perfecting both the inward and outward moral dimensions of faith comprises the very essence of Islamic teachings, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, I have only been sent to perfect righteous character.”³¹

The primary focus of the Prophet’s teaching was to instill good character in his companions and followers, first towards Allah by holding sound beliefs and performing regular acts of worship, and second towards other people by modeling compassionate, kind, and fair behavior. When the companion Abu Dharr رضي الله عنه first heard about the Prophet ﷺ before he met him, he sent his brother to see what he was teaching. His brother returned and he said, “I saw him ordering noble morals and he did not speak like one of the poets.”³² Likewise, the successors took the matter very seriously, as stated by Al-Dahhak ibn Muzahim رحمه الله, “The head of the matter is good character.”³³ The classical scholar Ibn al-Qayyim even considered the entire religion to be a way of life revolving around moral behavior,

²⁸ Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hajar Haythamī, *Al-Fath al-Mubīn bi-Sharḥ al-Arbaʿīn* (Jiddah: Dār alMinhāj, 2008), 305 #13.

²⁹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3:1472 #1844, *kitab al-Imarah bab al-amr bi al-wafaʿ bi bayʿah al-khulafaʿ*.

³⁰ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 2:1414 #4229, *kitab al-Zuhd bab al-waraʿ wa al-taqwa*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

³¹ Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 14:513 #8952; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnāʿūt et al in their commentary.

³² Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1923 #2474, *kitab Fadaʿil al-Sahabah bab min fadaʿil Abi Dharr*.

³³ Al-Kharāʾiṭī, *Makārim al-Akhlaq* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Āfāq al-ʿArabīyah, 1999), 1:34 #34.

“The religion itself is good character, so whoever surpasses you in good character has surpassed you in religion.”³⁴ Being a good Muslim *means* being a good person, and being a bad person means being a bad Muslim or perhaps not being a Muslim at all.

On several occasions, the Prophet ﷺ defined the best Muslims as those who have the best inward and outward behavior, “The best of you are those with the best character.”³⁵ Good character, however, must be informed by a spirit of learning and devotion to religious instruction. In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “The best of you in Islam are those with the best character, if they have understanding.”³⁶ Implied in good character, then, is to have knowledge and understanding (*al-fiqh*) of the religion, both inwardly and outwardly, theoretically and practically. Certainly, well-meaning religious folks can make serious mistakes if they are ignorant, making knowledge of the religion all the more important.

Faith goes hand-in-hand with family values, positive relationships, and, for men, chivalry. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The most complete of the believers in faith are those with the most excellent character, and the best of you are the best in behavior to their women.”³⁷ And in another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “...and those who are most kind to their families.”³⁸ In fact, Islam defined genuine masculinity in terms of intellect and character, as opposed to machismo and bravado. Umar ibn al-Khattab رضي الله عنه, the second righteous Caliph, said, “The foundation of a man is his intellect, his honor is in his religion, and his manhood is in his character.”³⁹ Expressions of what might be called “toxic masculinity” have no sanction in Islamic teachings.⁴⁰

³⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij al-Sālikīn Bayna Manāzil Īyāka Na’budu wa Īyāka Nasta’in* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1996), 2:294.

³⁵ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4:189 #3559.

³⁶ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 16:94 #10066; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā’ūt et al in their commentary.

³⁷ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1998), 2:457 #1162, *kitab al-Rida bab ma ja’a fi haqq al-mar’ah ‘ala zawjiha*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

³⁸ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:305 #2612, *kitab al-Iman bab ma ja’a fi istikmal al-iman*; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

³⁹ al-Māwardī, *Adab al-Dunyā wal-Dīn* (Bayrūt: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāh, 1986), 1:17.

⁴⁰ See forthcoming Yaqeen article by Dr. Jonathan A. C. Brown on this topic.

In theological terms, good character is central to the Islamic understanding of salvation in the Hereafter. All Muslims, indeed all human beings, will be evaluated on the Day of Judgment by placing their good and bad deeds on the Scale. The character of the faithful is among the heaviest deeds on the side of good. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Nothing is heavier on the Scale of a believer on the Day of Resurrection than good character.”⁴¹ Indeed, good character is one of the primary reasons that people are admitted into Paradise. A man once asked the Prophet ﷺ, “What admits most people into Paradise?” The Prophet ﷺ replied, “Mindfulness of Allah (*al-taqwa*) and good character.”⁴²

Good character and positive relationships are even more important than voluntary acts of worship, such as extra prayers and fasting. The Prophet ﷺ once said to his companions, “Shall I not tell you what is better in degree than voluntary fasting, prayer, and charity?” They said, “Of course!” The Prophet said, “Reconciliation between people. Verily, corrupted relations between people is the razor.”⁴³ In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ added,

*Hatred is the razor. I do not say it shaves hair, but rather it shaves the religion. By the one in whose hand is my soul, you will not enter Paradise until you have faith and you will not have faith until you love each other.*⁴⁴

By good character alone, the believers can reach ranks in Paradise as high as those who regularly performed voluntary acts of worship. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, the believer may reach by his good character the rank of one who regularly fasts and stands for prayer at night.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 3:430 #2002, *kitab al-Birr wa Sillah bab ma ja’a fi husn al-khuluq*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

⁴² al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 3:431 #2004, *kitab al-Birr wa Sillah bab ma ja’a fi husn al-khuluq*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

⁴³ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:244 #2509, *kitab Sifat al-Qiyamah wal-Raqa’iq wal-Wara’ bab minhu*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

⁴⁴ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:245 #2510; declared good (*ḥaḥ*) by Al-Haythamī in *Majma’ al-Zawā’id wa Manba’ al-Fawā’id* (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Qudsī, 1933), 8:30 #12732.

⁴⁵ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Ṣaydā, Lubnān: al-Maktabah al-Aṣṣīyah, 1980), 4:252 #4798; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

In contrast, voluntary worship is of little value to a Muslim if they insist on behaving badly. A man once asked, “O Messenger of Allah, a woman prays in the night, fasts during the day, does many deeds and gives charity, yet she harms her neighbors with her tongue.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “There is no good in her. She is among the people of Hellfire.” The man continued, “O Messenger of Allah, another woman prays the obligatory prayers and gives bits of food in charity, yet she does not harm anyone.” The Prophet said, “She is among the people of Paradise.”⁴⁶ Even some people who were fervent worshippers will find their deeds voided in the Hereafter because of their bad manners and character. The Prophet ﷺ once said to his companions, “Do you know who is bankrupt?” They said, “The one without money or goods is bankrupt.” The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Verily, the bankrupt of my nation are those who come on the Day of Resurrection with prayers, fasting, and charity, but also with insults, slander, consuming wealth, shedding blood, and beating others. Those who were oppressed by someone will each be given from that person’s good deeds. If his good deeds run out before justice is fulfilled, then their sins will be cast upon him and he will be thrown into the Hellfire.*⁴⁷

Even something like backbiting (speaking ill of another person when not in their presence) can lay waste to a person’s record of good deeds. Ibn al-Jawzi commented, “O brother, beware of backbiting and gossip! For both of them harm the religion and nullify the good deeds of the doers.”⁴⁸ When this fact of faith is truly appreciated and internalized within the believer, it provides a strong metaphysical incentive not to harm others with our words.

Another way to look at faith is to think of it as a tree with several branches. The seed is the testimony of faith, “There is no true god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger,” and from this seed grow the fruits of faith like compassion, fairness, and humility, as Allah said:

⁴⁶ al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-Adab al-Mufrad* (al-Rīyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī’, 1998), 1:63 #66, *bab la yu’dhi al-jarr*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

⁴⁷ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1997 #2581.

⁴⁸ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Baḥr al-Dumū’* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Fajr lil-Turāth, 2004), 1:133.

*Have you not considered how Allah strikes the parable of a good word [faith] as a good tree, its roots firmly planted and its branches reaching to the sky? It produces its fruit at all times by the permission of its Lord. Allah strikes parables for people that perhaps they will remember.*⁴⁹

According to Ibn Abbas رضي الله عنهما, the “good word” in this verse is “the testimony that there is no God but Allah” and the “branches reaching to the sky” are the “good deeds of the believer raised to heaven.”⁵⁰ True faith is the root from which the fruit of the branches benefiting humankind is harvested.

The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم himself described faith as having branches, “Faith consists of sixty odd branches, the best of which is to declare there is no God but Allah and the least of which is to remove something harmful from the road, and modesty is a branch of faith.”⁵¹ Modesty (*al-haya'*) is to have a healthy sense of shame, a sensitive conscience that prevents us from doing wrong. Conversely, the vices opposite to the virtues of faith are branches of hypocrisy. In another narration, the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said, “Modesty and reticence are two branches of faith. Profanity and temerity are two branches of hypocrisy.”⁵² Vulgar words (*al-badha'*) originate in the hypocrisy residing in someone’s heart, so to speak with such profanity and obscenity is a sign of this spiritual disease.

The imagery of faith as a tree producing branches with fruit was developed early in Islamic intellectual history. The classical *hadith* scholar Ahmad al-Bayhaqi compiled an entire multi-volume work on this subject, entitled “The Branches of Faith” (*Shu'ab al-Iman*). In the introduction, al-Bayhaqi writes:

Allah, Majestic is His Praise and Sacred are His Names, by His Favor and Kindness has facilitated for me the arrangement of books containing reports to be applied in the fundamentals of the religion and its branches. All praise is due to Allah for that greatly. Then I desired to arrange a comprehensive book on the fundamentals of

⁴⁹ Sūrat Ibrāhīm 14:24-25.

⁵⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 16:567 #20658 verse 14:24.

⁵¹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣahīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:11 #9, *kitab al-Iman bab umur al-iman*.

⁵² al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 3:443 #2027; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

faith, its branches, and what has been related in reports of clarifying its good practice, for inspiring hope and instilling fear (of sin).⁵³

Many of its chapters include large sections on ethical matters such as seeking knowledge,⁵⁴ benevolence to parents,⁵⁵ upholding family ties,⁵⁶ the rights of children and other family members,⁵⁷ good character,⁵⁸ honoring neighbors,⁵⁹ patience with trials,⁶⁰ generosity and magnanimity,⁶¹ guarding the tongue from sins,⁶² reconciliation between people,⁶³ abstinence from worldliness,⁶⁴ and loving for others what one loves for themselves.⁶⁵ Perhaps the most concise description of the character of believers was given by the early successor Hasan al-Basri رحمه الله:

Verily, from the character of the believer is strength in religion, determination with leniency, faith with certainty, eagerness for knowledge, sympathy with understanding, moderation in worship, mercy with effort, giving to those who ask, not wronging the one he hates, not sinning against the one he loves, dignified in turmoil, grateful in ease, content with what he has, speaking to impart understanding, being silent out of caution, and affirming the truth as a witness over him.⁶⁶

All of these moral values are embedded within the faith of Islam. If someone fails to live up to the ideals of the faith, it is a failing of that individual and not the religion itself.

In sum, faith in Islam must, by definition, include good character traits, moral values, and goodwill towards all human beings. From this broad-based perspective, it is inconceivable that any sincere and knowledgeable Muslim could be a bad

⁵³ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 1:83-84.

⁵⁴ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 3:195.

⁵⁵ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 10:246.

⁵⁶ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 10:321.

⁵⁷ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 11:109.

⁵⁸ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 10:353.

⁵⁹ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 12:84.

⁶⁰ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 12:176.

⁶¹ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 13:282.

⁶² al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 6:440..

⁶³ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 13:429.

⁶⁴ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 12:471.

⁶⁵ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 13:459.

⁶⁶ Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi' Bayān al-'Ilm wa Faḍlih* (al-Dammām: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1994), 1:545 #906.

member of society, notwithstanding the occasional slips and mistakes we all make from time to time. All of the ritual acts of worship in Islam reinforce this understanding of faith, to which we now turn our attention.

Prayer and character

Ritual prayer (*al-salat*) is the second pillar of Islam and the most important of them after sincere faith. Every Muslim is required to perform the ritual prayer five times a day. Being a daily practice, the prayer serves as an obligatory act of servitude to the Lord Almighty and a reminder of our accountability for our deeds on the Day of Judgment. As such, it must necessarily affect our behavior by refining our character in the process.

Every worshipper in prayer must recite the opening chapter of the Qur’an, Surat al-Fatihah, either aloud or silently:

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the worlds,

The Merciful, the Beneficent,

Master of the Day of Judgment,

You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help,

Guide us to the straight path,

The path of those whom You have favored, not of those who have earned Your wrath or have been led astray.⁶⁷

This brief prayer reminds the believers that they will be judged by Allah on the Day of Resurrection and therefore should seek guidance from Him to avoid going down the path of those who have strayed from righteousness. A Muslim will recite this prayer a minimum of 17 times day, once for each cycle of prayer (*rak’ah*). That results in at least 17 daily reminders of the metaphysical underpinnings of Islamic morality, the reality of the Last Day.

⁶⁷ Sūrat al-Fātiḥah 1:7.

It naturally follows that the ritual of reciting, bowing, and prostrating—if done sincerely—will motivate the true believers to do good deeds and avoid sins. As Allah said:

*Recite what has been revealed to you from the Book and establish prayer. Verily, prayer prohibits one from immorality and evil, yet the remembrance of Allah is greater. Allah knows what you are doing.*⁶⁸

Prayer and reciting the Qur’an ought to cleanse the heart of spiritual diseases and therefore cause profound positive change to our behavior outside of prayer. Ibn Abbas رضي الله عنهما commented on this verse, saying, “Whoever is not prohibited by his prayer from immorality and evil, then he gains nothing from his prayer but distance from Allah.”⁶⁹

A Muslim whose prayer has no positive effect on their character or behavior is infected with a measure of hypocrisy. Abdullah ibn Mas’ud رضي الله عنه said, “There is no prayer for one who does not obey the prayer, and obedience to the prayer is to be prohibited from immorality and evil.”⁷⁰ To obey Allah is to obey the prayer, and to obey the prayer is to stop sinning outside of prayer. Again, it is incomprehensible that a person recites the Book of Allah several times a day and feels no compunction about harming others. A man once came to the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم and said, “There is a person who prays in the night but steals in the morning.” The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said, “Verily, it should prohibit him from doing that.”⁷¹

The prayer should instill within us a healthy fear of God’s judgment, the type of fear that brings us closer to our Creator, as Allah said, “So flee to Allah, for I clearly warn you of Him.”⁷² Ibn Abbas رضي الله عنهما explained this verse, saying, “Flee to Allah by repenting of your sins, and flee from Him to Him by acting obediently to Him.”⁷³ And Abu Bakr al-Warraq commented, “Flee from obedience

⁶⁸ Sūrat al-ʿAnkabūt 29:45.

⁶⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, 20:41 verse 29:45.

⁷⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1998), 6:254 verse 29:45.

⁷¹ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 15:483 #9776; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnāʿūt et al in their commentary.

⁷² Sūrat al-Dhāriyāt 51:50.

⁷³ al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyah, 1964), 17:53 verse 51:50.

of Satan to obedience of the Merciful.”⁷⁴ But our fear of Allah has to be balanced with hope in His Mercy, as Allah said about the righteous that “they call upon their Lord in fear and hope.”⁷⁵ Prayer not only motivates us to avoid sin, it also inspires us to do good to others in anticipation of reward from Allah. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The son of Adam does not act with anything better than prayer, reconciliation between people, and good character.”⁷⁶ In this tradition, the Prophet ﷺ associated prayer with the virtues of reconciliation and good character, as the ritual cannot be separated from its moral purpose.

If prayer is separated from its purpose of nurturing good character, it becomes an act of hypocrisy and showing off (*al-riya'*), which is a lesser form of idolatry (*al-shirk al-asghar*). Allah issues a clear warning to such people:

*Woe to those who pray! Those who are neglectful of their prayer, who pray to be seen and withhold small acts of help.*⁷⁷

A hypocrite of this nature prays only so other people can see him, and he will not even do small good deeds for his neighbors. Ibn Abbas رضي الله عنهما was asked about the meaning of “small acts of help” and he said, “Things people use between themselves.” Abu Malik gave other examples such as “a bucket, a pot, or a pickaxe.” Muhammad ibn Ka’b said it is any “good deed.”⁷⁸

Such a person who prays but cannot bring himself to do basic acts of kindness has a serious flaw in his faith. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The believer is friendly, for there is no goodness in one who is neither friendly, nor befriended.”⁷⁹ And in another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever is deprived of kindness is deprived of goodness.”⁸⁰ A praying person should be a kind person in everyday life, otherwise what value is the prayer of one who insists on cruelty?

⁷⁴ al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'an*, 17:54 verse 51:50.

⁷⁵ Sūrat al-Sajdah 32:16.

⁷⁶ al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 13:429 #10579.; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ wa Ziyādatihi* ([Dimashq]: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 2:986 #5645.

⁷⁷ Sūrat al-Mā'ūn 107:4-7.

⁷⁸ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, 24:641 verse 107:7.

⁷⁹ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 37:492 #22840; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al in their commentary.

⁸⁰ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2003 #2592, *kitab al-Birr wa Silah bab fadl al-rifq*.

Like the tree of faith as the root, the prayer itself is the source and vanguard of many virtues. For this reason, the companions were very strict about maintaining the prayer both outwardly and inwardly. When Umar ibn al-Khattab رضي الله عنه was the Caliph, he wrote to his deputies, saying, “Indeed, the most important of your affairs to me is the prayer. Whoever maintains it and watches over it will maintain his religion. Whoever is negligent of it will be even more negligent of other things.”⁸¹ Umar knew that if the prayer was respected by his deputies, as it was meant to be, their actions and decisions outside of the prayer would improve. And this is why one of the last things to be said by the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم as he lay on his deathbed was, “The prayer, the prayer...”⁸²

Charity and character

Charity, or almsgiving, is the third pillar of Islam and it has a direct impact on our behavior towards others. There are two types of charity in Islam: obligatory annual almsgiving (*al-zakat*) subject to formal rules and calculations, and voluntary charity (*al-sadaqah*). The obligatory almsgiving is the bare legal minimum that wealthy Muslims owe to the poor and needy, but the spirit of charity in Islam extends beyond the basic obligations, as a charitable and generous disposition should animate all of our interactions with people.

The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم explained the means of calculating the obligatory almsgiving to Ali ibn Abi Talib رضي الله عنه, who would become the fourth of the righteous Caliphs:

*If you have two hundred silver coins and a year has passed, then five coins are due for alms. You will owe nothing until you own twenty gold coins. If you own twenty gold coins and a year has passed, then half of a coin is due for alms. Whatever is extra should be calculated likewise.*⁸³

From this tradition, scholars derived the amount of annual obligatory almsgiving to be a minimum of 2.5% of all surplus wealth (after all bills, expenses, and obligations have been paid) at a set time each year. The poor and needy obviously

⁸¹ Mālik ibn Anas and Abū Muṣ‘ab al-Zuhri, *Muwaṭṭa’ al-Imām Mālik* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1993) 1:6 #6.

⁸² Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 4:339 #5156; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

⁸³ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 2:100 #1573; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

do not pay alms, but rather they receive it. The formal rules of almsgiving, such as who pays and receives it and how wealth is calculated, have been elaborated by scholars in the books of jurisprudence.

The spirit of charity in Islam, however, is rooted in the values of generosity and compassion for other people and all living creatures, including animals. Every time we spend our time, effort, and money to benefit other people, doing so sincerely for the sake of Allah, it should purify our hearts from hypocrisy, greed, and miserliness.

Allah said:

*Take charity from their wealth by which you cleanse them and purify them, and pray for them.*⁸⁴

Al-Tabari interprets the phrase “to purify them” as meaning “to increase them and raise them above the lowly level of hypocrisy to the level of sincerity.”⁸⁵ And according to al-Baydawi, to cleanse them means “of their sins or love of wealth” and to purify them means “to increase by it their good deeds and to raise them to the level of those who are sincere.”⁸⁶ Thus, charity not only benefits the receiver, but it also purifies the heart of the giver from the characteristics of hypocrisy.

In this regard, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Charity does not decrease wealth, no one forgives another but that Allah increases his honor, and no one humbles himself for the sake of Allah but that Allah raises his status.”⁸⁷ These statements might seem counterintuitive from a worldly perspective, but from a religious perspective they make perfect sense. Charity does not decrease the wealth of the spirit, because it generates purity of heart and good deeds on our records; it provides a greater return on investment in the Hereafter than whatever was given away. Likewise, forgiving a wrongdoer might seem meek and cowardly to people from a worldly perspective but in the Hereafter those who forgave their oppressors will be highly honored.

⁸⁴ Sūrat al-Tawbah 9:103.

⁸⁵ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, 14:454 verse 9:103.

⁸⁶ al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl al-Ma’rūf bi Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī* (Bayrūt: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1998), 3:96 verse 9:103.

⁸⁷ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2001 #2588, *kitab al-Birr wa Silah bab istiḥbab al-’afw wa tawadu’*.

Of course, sometimes people give charity in a very insincere manner, doing so to be seen as generous by others or to gain leverage over the vulnerable.

Allah said:

*O you who have faith, do not annul your acts of charity by reminders or harm, as one who spends his wealth to be seen by people and does not have faith in Allah and the Last Day.*⁸⁸

Charity given in this hypocritical manner is not charity in reality. Al-Tabari explains the verse, “It means they do not truly affirm the Oneness of Allah and His Lordship, nor that they will be resurrected after their death to account for their deeds, such that he should make his deeds for the sake of Allah and seek His reward and what is with Him in the hereafter. This is a characteristic of hypocrisy.”

⁸⁹ Just as the prayer of those who sin outside of prayer is defective, charity followed by offenses defeats the purpose of charity to begin with.

There are, in fact, many ways to give in charity even by those who do not possess any monetary assets. Some of the companions came to the Prophet ﷺ and said, “O Messenger of Allah, the rich have taken all the rewards. They pray as we pray, they fast as we fast, and they give charity from their extra wealth.” The Prophet ﷺ said:

Has not Allah made for you ways to give charity? In every glorification of Allah is charity, in every declaration of His Greatness is charity, in every praise of Him is charity, in every declaration of His Oneness is charity, enjoining good is charity and forbidding evil is charity, and in a man’s intimate relations with his wife is charity.

They said, “O Messenger of Allah, is there a reward for one who satisfies his passions?” The Prophet ﷺ said:

⁸⁸ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:264.

⁸⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, 5:522 verse 2:264.

*You see that if he were to satisfy his passions with the unlawful, it would be a burden of sin upon him? Likewise, if he were to satisfy himself with the lawful, he will have a reward.*⁹⁰

A believer does not need to have a lot of money to be a charitable person, because every good recognized by reason and revelation to be good is an act of charity, even simply smiling at another or obeying the law by confining sexual relationships to a valid marriage.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Every good deed (*ma’ruf*) is charity. Verily, it is a good deed to meet your brother with a cheerful face, and to pour what is left from your bucket into the vessel of your brother.”⁹¹ The term *ma’ruf* used by the Prophet ﷺ here is significant, because it is derived from the root meaning “to recognize” and refers to “what is approved by reason and by law.”⁹² Namely, all good acts recognized by our God-given conscience and accepted by revelation as good are regarded as charity.

Charity is not only limited to human beings either. Suraqa ibn Malik رضي الله عنه once asked the Prophet ﷺ about a lost camel who came to drink from his cisterns that he prepared for his own camels. Suraqa said, “Will I be rewarded if I give it some water to drink?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Yes, in every living being with a warm liver is a reward for charity.”⁹³ On another occasion, the Prophet ﷺ said, “No Muslim plants a tree or sows seeds and then a bird, or a human, or an animal eats from it but that it is charity for him.”⁹⁴

The Prophet ﷺ also told his companions the story of a man who was admitted into Paradise:

⁹⁰ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2:697 #1006, *kitab al-Zakat bab bayan an ism al-sadaqah yaqa’a ‘ala kulli naw’in min al-ma’ruf*.

⁹¹ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 3:414 #1970, *kitab al-Birr wal-Silah bab ma ja’a fi talaqat al-wajh wa husn al-bishr*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

⁹² Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-’Arūs min Jawāhir al-Qāmūs* ([Lebanon?]: Dār al-Hidāyah lil-Ṭibā’ah wal-Nashr wal-Tawzī’, 1965), 24:135.

⁹³ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 2:1215 #3686, *kitab al-Adab bab fadl sadaqah al-ma’*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

⁹⁴ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 3:103 #2320, *kitab al-Muzara’ah bab fadl al-zar’ wal-ghars idha ukila minhu*.

A man suffered from thirst while he was walking on a journey. When he found a well, he climbed down into it and drank from it. Then he came out and saw a dog lolling its tongue from thirst and licking the ground. The man said, ‘This dog has suffered thirst just as I have suffered from it.’ He climbed down into the well, filled his shoe with water, and caught it in his mouth as he climbed up. Then he gave the dog a drink. Allah appreciated this deed, so he forgave him.

They said, “O Messenger of Allah, is there a reward for charity even for the animals?” The Prophet ﷺ said:

Yes, in every creature with a moist liver is a reward for charity.

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Note that the man said to himself, “This dog has suffered thirst just as I have suffered from it,” and proceeded to help the dog. He treated the dog the way he wanted to be treated, which shows that the ethics of reciprocity, mentioned earlier as an essential component of faith, also apply, to an extent, to animals. The question worthy of reflection is this: if Allah admitted a man into Paradise because of his charitable act to a dog, how much greater is it to give charity to human beings and especially the righteous?

Fasting and character

Fasting the month of Ramadan is the fourth pillar of Islam and this, like the others, includes a moral dimension in relation to others. A believer who is fasting not only avoids food, drink, and marital intimacy in the daylight hours, but he or she should also avoid harming others, backbiting others, disputing with others, and engaging in trivial worldly activities. Like the two types of charity in Islam, fasting in Islam is also divided into two types: the obligatory fasting during the month of Ramadan, and recommended fasting throughout the year, such as fasting every Monday and

⁹⁵ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:9 #6009, *kitab al-Adab bab rahmat al-nas wal-baha'im*.

Thursday, the three middle days of each lunar month, and the days of ‘Arafah and Ashura.

Allah said:

*O you who have faith, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you that you may become righteous.*⁹⁶

The purpose of fasting is clearly stated here as a means of developing mindfulness of Allah (*al-taqwa*) and its accompanying righteous qualities. According to Al-Suyuti, the goal of fasting is to avoid “sinful acts of disobedience to Allah, for it curbs the desires which precede them.”⁹⁷ If a fasting person has enough self-discipline to control their natural urges to eat and drink, then they have greater control over their manners, words, passions, and anger.

The concept of righteousness, as mentioned in the verse, means a healthy fear and mindfulness of Allah that motivates us to avoid sins. The early Muslims also elaborated the meaning of this righteousness as they understood it. Sufyan al-Thawri and Fudayl ibn ‘Iyad said, “The righteous one (*al-muttaqi*) loves for people what he loves for himself.”⁹⁸ Again, the fasting person should practice the ethics of reciprocity and treat others the way they want to be treated. Al-Junayd ibn Muhammad, however, believed righteousness involved even more than simple reciprocity, “The righteous one is not he who loves for people what he loves for himself. Rather, the righteous one is he who loves for people even more than he loves for himself.”⁹⁹ This is the Islamic concept of altruism (*al-ithar*), which is to prefer others over oneself. Al-Tha’labi offered up another definition he attributed to wise elders, “A man will not reach the peak of righteousness until it is such that, were he to place what is in his heart on a plate and go around the market with it, he would not be ashamed of anything on it.”¹⁰⁰ The ideal of righteousness, then, and by implication the purpose of fasting, is learning to control our natural impulses, to treat others as we like to be treated, and to purify our hearts to such an extent that

⁹⁶ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:183.

⁹⁷ al-Suyūṭī and al-Maḥallī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2001), 1:37 verse 2:183.

⁹⁸ al-Tha’labī, *Al-Kashf wal-Bayān ‘an Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Bayrut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002), 1:143-144.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

our conscience would feel nothing to be ashamed about if the content of our hearts were revealed to the world.

The Prophet ﷺ was clear that fasting involves both outward and inward components, “Verily, fasting is not only from eating and drinking. Rather, fasting is from frivolity and obscenity. If someone insults you or acts foolish against you, then say: Indeed, I am fasting.”¹⁰¹ And Umar ibn al-Khattab رضي الله عنه said, “Fasting is not merely from food and drink. Rather, it is from lies, falsehood, vain talk, and swearing.”¹⁰² Not only is the fasting outward by reining in our natural impulses, it is also the fasting of the tongue from abusive and frivolous speech, and the fasting of the heart and mind from malicious thinking. Recall that bad words corrupt the heart so our tongues must fast as well. As such, Muslims are counseled to be extra cautious in avoiding arguments and pettiness during the fast.

Just as with other acts of worship, sincerity in the fast is a requirement and hypocrisy spoils the fast just as it spoils prayer and charity. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever does not leave evil words and deeds while fasting, then Allah does not need him to leave food and drink.”¹⁰³ And in another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “A person might fast but get nothing from his fast except hunger. A person might pray at night but get nothing from his prayer except sleeplessness.”¹⁰⁴ Such people fast only in an outward sense, but fail to fast in an inward sense. The only thing they get from it is hunger and thirst, unfortunately for them.

Additionally, a fasting person should carry themselves with calm and composure, not with bombast and extravagance. Jabir رضي الله عنه said:

When you fast, let your hearing, seeing, and tongue fast as well from falsehood and sins and avoid harming your servants. Rather, you must

¹⁰¹ Ibn Hibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Hibbān* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1993), 8:255 #3479, *kitab al-Sawm bab adab al-sawm*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

¹⁰² Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Al-Muṣannaḥ* (al-Riyādh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2004), 2:272 #8882, *kitab al-Siyam bab yu’maru bihi al-sa’im min qillah al-kalam*.

¹⁰³ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 3:26 #1903, *kitab al-Sawm bab man lan yada’ qawl al-zur*.

¹⁰⁴ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 1:539 #1690; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

*have dignity and tranquility on the day of your fasting. Do not make your non-fasting days the same as your fasting days.*¹⁰⁵

Our behavior on the days that we fast, whether during Ramadan or as a voluntary act, should not be the same as the days we do not fast. Of course we cannot keep up the ideal of fasting every day of our lives, just as we cannot sprint through life. In the same way prayer affects behavior outside of prayer, days on which we fast are times when we should be extra careful to control our behavior, with the aim of improving our behavior on non-fasting days.

Though abstention is the foundation of fasting, it is also encouraged during the month of Ramadan to proactively increase our acts of charity. Ibn Abbas رضي الله عنهما said, “The Messenger of Allah ﷺ was the most generous of people and he was even more generous in Ramadan when Gabriel would meet him. He would meet him every night of Ramadan to study the Qur’an. Thus, the Prophet would be more generous than a swift wind.”¹⁰⁶ There is even a small amount of obligatory alms that Muslims must donate at the end of Ramadan, if they have the means. Ibn Umar رضي الله عنهما said, “The Messenger of Allah ﷺ made it an obligation upon people to pay charity at the end of Ramadan (*zakat al-fitr*), a portion of dates or barley upon every freeman and servant, every male and female among the Muslims.”¹⁰⁷

Lastly, there is a final top level of fasting that expresses the very heart of Islamic spirituality and mindfulness. The classical scholar Al-Ghazali writes:

Know that there are three degrees of fasting: the fasting of common people, the fasting of the spiritual elite, and the fasting of the elite of the spiritual elite. As for the fasting of the common people, it is restraining the stomach from fulfilling its desires as has been mentioned. As for the fasting of the elite, it is restraining one’s hearing, sight, tongue, hands, feet, and all limbs from sin. As for the fasting of the elite of the elite, it is the fasting of the heart from

¹⁰⁵ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Al-Muṣannaḥ*, 2:271 #8880, *kitab al-Siyam bab yu’maru bihi al-sa’im min qillah al-kalam*.

¹⁰⁶ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:8 #6, *badi al-Wahy kayfa kana badu al-wahy ila Rasul Allah sall Allahu alayhi wa salaam*.

¹⁰⁷ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:130 #1504, *kitab al-Zakat bab sadaqah ‘ala al-’abd wa gharyihi min al-Muslimin*.

*unworthy concerns and worldly thoughts and to restrain it entirely from everything besides Allah Almighty.*¹⁰⁸

Peak fasting is to abstain from food and drink, from all types of sins, and to abstain from unnecessary worldly thoughts, in a perfect state of remembrance and meditation upon Allah. To this end, the Prophet ﷺ would perform a spiritual retreat (*al-i'tikaf*) in the mosque at the end of the month to remember Allah and recite the Qur'an, not leaving its walls unless absolutely necessary, as reported by Ibn Umar رضي الله عنهما, “The Messenger of Allah ﷺ would seek seclusion in the mosque during the last ten nights of Ramadan.”¹⁰⁹ In this serene state of heart and mind, which requires much effort to sustain, the believers cultivate their presence with Allah, their relationship to His Book, and the purity of heart that brings mercy to those on earth.

Hajj pilgrimage and character

The Hajj pilgrimage to the city of Mecca is the fifth pillar of Islam and, as with the other pillars, cannot be separated from its moral purpose. Like charity and fasting, there are two types of pilgrimage: the greater pilgrimage (*al-Hajj*) which occurs once every year during the month of Dhul-Hijjah, and the lesser pilgrimage (*al-'Umrah*) which can be performed at any time.

Allah said:

*Hajj pilgrimage is in the well-known months, so whoever has prepared himself for Hajj, he should not engage in intimate relations, sin, and disputing in the Hajj. What good you have done, Allah knows it. Bring your provisions, but the best provision is righteousness, O you of understanding!*¹¹⁰

The believers are informed that pilgrims must come to Mecca with mindfulness of Allah (*al-taqwa*) and its accompanying qualities, this purpose being the same as

¹⁰⁸ al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma'rifāh, 1980), 1:234.

¹⁰⁹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 3:47 #2025, *kitab al-I'tikaf bab al-i'tikaf fi al-'ashr al-awakhir*.

¹¹⁰ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:197.

fasting in Ramadan. Thus, it requires all the moral behaviors previously mentioned as implied by the term.

The Hajj pilgrimage is an incredibly difficult act of worship to fulfill, even in our times with modern conveniences like air travel, air-conditioned hotels, and supermarkets. In early generations, pilgrims went through even greater hardship to make the journey to Mecca and perform its rites. Naturally, the reward from Allah for completing the Hajj is tremendous, although there is a caveat. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever performs the Hajj pilgrimage to this house without having intimate relations or committing sin, will return [sinless] like the day his mother gave birth to him.”¹¹¹ A believer who completes the Hajj will have all of the sins in their record expiated (except for major sins that require specific repentance like murder, theft, etc.), but only on the condition that they do not commit flagrant sins (*fisq*).

The imagery surrounding the pilgrimage provides a concrete metaphor for the equality of humanity in Islam. Men must wear only two simple sheets of white clothing, with no marking, writings, or designs (women are not required to wear a specific type of dress as long as it fulfills the requirements of religiously mandated modesty). Pilgrims who dress themselves in these garments enter into a state of sanctity (*ihrām*) in which they are not allowed to hunt or harm any living thing, enjoy marital intimacy, or wear fragrances. The unity of humankind is on full display, as everyone from kings and princes to workers and servants appear the same in an endless sea of white. The meaning of this symbolism was explained by the Prophet ﷺ in his farewell sermon, the last time he performed the pilgrimage:

O people, your Lord is One and your father Adam is one. There is no virtue of an Arab over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab over an Arab, and neither white over black nor black over white, except by righteousness. Have I not delivered the message?

They said, “Of course, O Messenger of Allah.” The Prophet ﷺ said:

¹¹¹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 3:11 #1819, *kitab al-Muhsar bab qawl Allah ta'ala fa la rafatha*.

*Let those present inform those who are absent.*¹¹²

The Hajj is a pronounced indictment against all the racist and supremacist ideologies that have caused so much strife and violence in the world throughout history. Racism and violence are the inevitable products of one another, which is why the Prophet ﷺ was clear to reject them in his farewell sermon, “Do not return to unbelief after me by striking the necks of one another.”¹¹³ The act of murder is a crime so heinous that it has been described as a type of unbelief, the lesser unbelief (*al-kufr al-asghar*) which is a serious violation of faith but does not completely eject a Muslim from the fold of Islam.

The power of the Hajj to contribute to racial healing is most vivid in the life of American civil rights activist Malcolm X. Malcolm’s early activism against racist policies and practices in the United States were influenced by the Nation of Islam (NOI), a heterodox Muslim group that preached an anti-white theology. His tragic childhood and early adult experiences made him susceptible to the NOI’s message and their combative approach, but something changed in Malcolm after his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Malcolm wrote a letter to his associates in Harlem about what he had experienced during the Hajj:

Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this Ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad, and all the other prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors...

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered ‘white’—but the ‘white’ attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have

¹¹² al-Bayhaqī, *Shu’ab al-Īmān*, 7:132 #4774; declared authentic due to external evidence (*ṣaḥīḥ li ghayrihi*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb wal-Tarhīb* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif, 2000), 3:135 #2964.

¹¹³ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:35 #121, *kitāb al-’Ilm bab al-insat al-’ulama’*.

*never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.*¹¹⁴

It was a transformative spiritual experience for him, as reflected in the new Muslim name he adopted: El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. He would leave the NOI, denounce racism, and become more open to the possibilities of racial integration. Sadly, his change of heart set in motion the harrowing events that led up to his assassination in 1965. Nonetheless, his enduring legacy continues to be relevant to all who struggle against racism today.

While the Hajj has broad implications for the positive reformation of human social relationships, it is still in its essence a personal act of worship between an individual and the Creator, with the power to transform individuals by cleansing their hearts of arrogance. The color white worn by the pilgrims is symbolic of the purity of heart they ought to cultivate while performing their rites. The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم once prayed the funeral prayer for a man, saying, “O Allah, cleanse him from sins just as the white garment is cleansed from dirt.”¹¹⁵ The clothing of *ihram* is a material reminder to the pilgrim of their spiritual goal in performing their rites.

Unfortunately, Muslims do not always live up to the ideals of the pilgrimage due to lack of knowledge. In particular, there is often misbehavior related to one of the pilgrimage’s lesser rites, kissing the black stone at the Ka’bah. Pilgrims are encouraged to kiss the stone not as if it were a good luck charm but rather to emulate the practice of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. ‘Abis ibn Rabi’ah saw Umar ibn al-Khattab رضي الله عنه go to the black stone and he kissed it, then Umar said, “Verily, I know you are only a stone with no power to harm or benefit me. Were it not that I saw the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم kiss you, I would not have kissed you.”¹¹⁶ However, this is only a supererogatory rite and not an obligation, according to Al-Nawawi, “It is recommended to kiss the black stone during circumambulation after touching it.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: With the Assistance of Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 370-371.

¹¹⁵ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2:662 #963, *kitab al-Jana’iz bab al-dua’ al-mayyit fi al-salah*.

¹¹⁶ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:149 #1597, *kitab al-Hajj bab ma dhakara fi al-hajr al-aswad*.

¹¹⁷ Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1972), 9:16 #1270.

Despite its status as only recommended, uninformed pilgrims often push and shove their way through the crowds to kiss or touch the stone, harming other pilgrims in the process. There is a consensus among Muslims scholars that harming anyone to touch the black stone is forbidden.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, some pilgrims violate an obligation of the pilgrimage (not harming other pilgrims) at the expense of a recommendation. If they had learned how this rite should be practiced, they would know that it is sufficient to supplicate upon seeing the stone, as the Prophet ﷺ would sometimes circumambulate the Ka’bah and when he reached the corner with the black stone, he would declare, “Allah is the Greatest.”¹¹⁹ Then they would be rewarded for the intention to touch it even without having touched it.

The stone itself is a symbol of the darkness that exists in the hearts of people, a concrete reminder of our ego’s capacity to commit evil. According to the Prophet ﷺ, “The black stone descended from Paradise and it was whiter than milk, but it became black due to the sins of the children of Adam.”¹²⁰ Hence, it is a visible, concrete reminder of humankind’s capacity to sin and our need to atone for the wrongs we have done.

The Hajj pilgrimage culminates in the standing at ‘Arafat. The pilgrims gather in the plain around Mount ‘Arafat and spend their day offering prayers, supplications, and renewed repentance, seeking the mercy of Allah and asking for His forgiveness. This ritual is called “the standing at ‘Arafat” (*al-wuquf bi-’Arafat*). The large gathering of pilgrims standing and petitioning Allah together simulates what the Prophet ﷺ said will occur at the time of Judgment in the Hereafter, “People will be gathered on the Day of Resurrection upon a white plain with a slight reddish color, as if it were a white loaf of bread without a mark from anything.”¹²¹ The purpose of the ritual at ‘Arafat, then, is reflect upon our accountability in the life to come, to solicit the forgiveness of Allah for everything bad we have done, and to pledge to do better moving forward. This introspection is

¹¹⁸ Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shu’ūn al-Islāmīyah, *Al-Mawsū’at al-Fiqhīyah al-Kuwaytīyah* (al-Kuwayt: Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shu’ūn al-Islāmīyah, 1992), 2:356.

¹¹⁹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:155 #1632, *kitab al-Hajj bab al-marid yatuf rakiba*.

¹²⁰ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 2:218 #877, *kitab al-Hajj bab ma ja’a fi fadl al-aswad wal-rukn wal-maqam*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

¹²¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2150 #2790, *kitab siffat al-Qiyamah wal Jannah wal Nar bab fi al-ba’th wal-nushur*.

the essence of the pilgrimage, so much so that the Prophet ﷺ said, “The Hajj is ‘Arafat,’”¹²² meaning its most important ritual. How can an informed pilgrim perform all the rituals of Hajj, knowing the rich meaning of its imagery, and not return home as a person changed for the better?

The Hajj ultimately brings together many facets of Islam—prayer, charity, purity of heart, remembering the prophets, unity in faith and humanity—into the spiritual experience of a lifetime. Many Muslims save up their modest earnings and undertake the difficult journey for the sake of their Lord, and when they see the Ka’bah in Mecca for the first time in their lives, you find them “falling down in prostration and glorifying the praises of their Lord, and they are not arrogant.”¹²³

Conclusion

Faith in Islam is a comprehensive way of life, consisting of outward and inward dimensions, ritual and creed, spirituality and morality. It cannot properly be reduced to outward rituals without any practical moral implications in daily life.

No one among the Muslims can be perfect in all spheres of Islamic teachings. Some of us excel in some branches of faith while we are deficient in others. But it is important to note that the deficiencies and imperfections of individual Muslims reflect our own weaknesses, our ignorance, and our shortcomings, not a flaw in the ideal of faith as it is presented in the Qur’an and Sunnah.

The five pillars of Islam are all concrete, tangible markers of faith not only as it appears on the outside, but perhaps more importantly how it manifests on the inside, how it purifies our hearts and refines our characters in a way that benefits the lives of all those around us. Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, the late Egyptian Muslim scholar, wrote at the end of his chapter on the pillars of Islam:

Thus, the prayer, fasting, charity, the Hajj pilgrimage, and whatever is similar to these acts of obedience (to Allah) among the teachings of Islam, they are steps on the desired path towards moral perfection

¹²² al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*, 5:256 #3016, *kitab Manasik al-Hajj bab fard al-wuquf bi-’Arafah*; declared authentic (*ṣahīh*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

¹²³ Sūrat al-Sajdah 32:15.

*and supporters of purification (of the heart), which preserve life and elevate its affairs. Because of these noble qualities, which are connected to them or proceed from them, they have been given a grand status in the religion of Allah. If a person does not make use of their ability to purify their heart, empty their inner-being (of evil), and set right their relationships with Allah and people, then they have failed.*¹²⁴

This quote is a concise summary of everything this article has tried to convey. The rituals of faith cannot be separated from the essence of faith, the positive effects it is meant to have on our hearts and character. A good Muslim must necessarily by definition be a good person; anything less is the fault of our own human weaknesses and not the revealed religion.

Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.

¹²⁴ Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *Khuluq al-Muslim* (al-Qāhirah : Dār al-Riyān lil-Turāth, 1987), 9.