



Islam, Beauty & Balance

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The Prophet, peace be upon him, remarked, “The best of you is the one who learns the Qur’an and teaches it to others.”¹ For Muslims, not withstanding the sheer beauty of its composition and its cadences, the Qur’an is a repository of revealed teachings; a roadmap for the journey through life; and a fountain of timeless truths to meditate upon, deepening endlessly one’s sense of the Divine glory. Moreover, the Qur’an is of Allah: His Word, Wisdom and Divine Will.

Its name is indeed telling, for the word *Qur’ān*, in Arabic, literally means ‘a recital’ or ‘that which is recited’. To this end the Qur’an is possibly the most read or recited book in the world. It is certainly the world’s most memorised book, and is probably the one that exerts the most influence over its readers. It is a book that has caused countless people throughout history to accept its message upon reading it, or hearing it being recited. It has moved hearts to tears, healed spiritual wounds, incapacitated its opponents, and astounded academics and artisans alike. The essence of its message is that there is only one God: Allah, who creates and sustains the material universe and the world of human experience, and that only He is to be deified and worshiped.

I. ALCHEMY OF THE SOUL

The alchemical effect of the Qur'an, the deep transformative impact it has upon the human soul, is such that even its most ardent of opponents have been profoundly affected by it. One such example is of 'Utbah bin Rabī'ah who, on hearing the Prophet recite the Qur'an, was compelled by its sheer sublimity to admit: "I have heard an utterance the like of which I have never heard. By Allah! It is not poetry, nor is it sorcery or soothsaying. O men of Quraysh, listen to me and do as I bid. Do not come between this man and what he is about, but leave him be. For by Allah, the words I have heard from him will soon cause a great stir."²

This sublimity was sensed also by Goethe - the nineteenth century German poet, novelist, statesman and scholar - who professed in his *West-Oestlicher Divan* how, after inspiring initial astonishment and fear, the Qur'an "soon attracts, astounds, and, in the end, enforces our reverence. Its style, in accordance with its content and its aim, is stern, grand, terrible, ever and anon truly sublime. Thus, this book will go on exercising, through the ages, a most potent influence."³

II. EMBODYING THE WORD

The love, affection and attachment that Muslims have for the Prophet, upon whom be peace, is not just an impressive fact of history, it is a central part of faith itself. He was a man who experienced life in an exceptional range. Not only was he a shepherd, merchant, orphan and exile, he was also a leader, law-giver, statesman and soldier. He was also a husband, a father bereaved many times, as well as a widower. And in all these roles he was an exemplar. His favourite wife, the lady 'Ā'ishah, may Allah be pleased with her, was once asked as to what he was like. She replied assertively: "His nature was that of the Qur'an - *kāna kbuluqubu'l-Qur'an*."⁴ So her deep and intimate relationship with the Prophet, peace be upon him, led her to conclude that he was the living embodiment of the revealed Book; or in other words, the walking Qur'an.

In the Messenger of Allah, asserts the Qur'an, *you have a beautiful example for whoever hopes in Allah and the Last Day, and remembers Allah abundantly*.⁵ The Prophet, peace be upon him, is also described in the Qur'an as being of *a tremendous character*.⁶ For believers, therefore, the Prophet's example and teachings - known collectively in Arabic as his *Sunnah* (lit. 'way') - represents the very perfection of human behaviour and being. It is to this beauty of existence, and not to the mediocrity forwarded by the norms of today's dominant culture, that believers fix their gaze. In the botanical world there are certain plants that need to grow on a trellis or a support of some kind if they are to grow to full perfection; otherwise they sprawl across the ground, without direction, their leaves consumed by snails and slugs, their purpose unfulfilled. In a similar way, man is a 'climber' too, and

we need not look very far for examples of the human inability to grow or to flower without a firm support or framework. It may be said that the *Sunnab*: “provides not only a framework but also, as it were, a network of channels into which the believer’s will enters and through which it flows smoothly, both guided and guarded. It is not his way, the Muslim’s way, to cut new channels for his volatile life through the recalcitrant materials of this world, against the grain of things. At first sight one might expect this to produce a tedious uniformity. All the evidence suggests that it does nothing of the kind; anyone who has had contact with good and pious Muslims will know that, although they live within a shared pattern of belief and behaviour, they are often more sharply differentiated one from another than are profane people, their characters stronger and their individualities more clearly delineated. They have modeled themselves upon a transcendent norm of inexhaustible richness, whereas profane people take as their model the fashions of the time. To put it another way: the great virtues - and it is the Prophet’s virtues that the believer strives to imitate - can, it seems, be expressed through human nature in countless different ways, whereas worldly fashion induces uniformity.”⁷

III. THE NATURAL NORM

The miraculous Night Journey (*mi’rāj*) of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him - in which he was transported by night to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, after which he ascended through the seven heavens until finally arriving into the Divine Presence - is, without doubt, the greatest event of his prophetic life: his crowning glory. During it, the Prophet, peace be upon him, was offered the choice between some wine and milk. On choosing the milk, the Angel Gabriel said to him: “*budītul-fiṭrab* - you have been guided to the *fiṭrab*”⁸ - the pure, primordial nature of man. What is distilled here is that the *fiṭrab* - this natural disposition of the human creature - is not only part of, but is indeed the essence of, the *Sunnab*; and it is this *Sunnab* in which we must all try to partake: “I am leaving among you two things,” said the Prophet, peace be upon him, “as long as you cling firmly to them you will never stray: the Book of Allah and my *Sunnab*.”⁹

Our post-modern world is anxious now about having ‘strayed’ from nature. Oceans, air and rivers are polluted with toxic waste from giant industries: chilling expressions of man’s greed and the degrading culture of consumerism. Stress, anxiety and depression are now endemic, as is the use of Prozac and other anti-depressants: a harrowing testimony to the materialists’ project and its grotesque failure to invest the inner human condition with peace, happiness and true meaning. Nutrients in fruits, vegetables and meat are being severely depleted because of intensive farming practices and battery conditions for livestock. Each year, millions of tonnes of rubbish and waste are disposed of in huge landfills, giving-off lethal greenhouse gases like methane and carbon dioxide. The general public indicate their unease

by buying organic and being conscientious of recycling wherever they can. And yet this is a return to form, not to content. Affirming a 'natural lifestyle' is idle if it is only a 'style' and not an affirmation of our higher destiny in life; of our God-given roles as *khalifabs* - vicegerents or caretakers of the earth: *It is He who has appointed you vicegerents of the earth.*¹⁰ For believers, therefore, the world is seen as Allah's creation which we are called upon to 'tend'. This compels us to affirm a natural lifestyle; to treat the world with respect, care and concern; and to live according to the created norm of our kind: *Work not corruption in the earth after it has been set in order.*¹¹ This is not a highly selective reading of Islam's religious tradition designed to extract only those ideas that happen to meet with contemporary cultural approval. It is simply a re-affirmation of a fundamental tenet of the Qur'anic worldview.

The road to reclaiming our natural norm, and to resisting the current dysfunctionality, is found only in the form of the *Sunnab*. For in the radiant humanity of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, we encounter the human norm in its Adamic perfection. For he is humanity itself, and in him and his choice of living the highest possibilities of our condition are revealed and realised.¹²

IV. VEILING BEAUTY

Following the *Sunnab* will be meaningless, though, if we do not seek some share in emulating his inner perfection too. Indeed, we can make no true claim of following the *Sunnab* if we conform to it outwardly, reflecting little or nothing of its inner beauty. Regrettably, there are many Muslims whose manners and behaviour suggest that they have yet to grasp this insight. To pray, eat, dress and observe other aspects of the outer *Sunnab*, without also working on our inward spiritual lives, will only produce a pathology of imbalance; a warped type of Muslim. We need to be aware of our *nafs* - our ego; the lower self. We need both to tame it and train it, *for the soul does indeed incite to evil.*¹³ The *nafs* needs to be worn down so that it does not scar or disfigure the beauty, dignity and serenity of character that the *Sunnab* naturally lends itself to.

Today, however, it is possible to encounter Muslims who observe the outer aspects of the *Sunnab*, but their characters are such that hearts neither warm nor incline towards them, but instead are repelled by them: *Had you been stern and hard-hearted, they would have surely dispersed from around you.*¹⁴ With their harsh and hostile conduct, such people may just be one of the most persuasive reasons for people to flee from practicing religion and embracing the *Sunnab*. Our character, as well as our *da'wab*; our inviting others to Islam, must reflect *nūr*; light, not *nafs* - and *Allab indeed knows the spoiler from the improver.*¹⁵

“Gentleness,” assured the Prophet, peace be upon him, “does not lend itself to anything except that it beautifies it, nor is it absent from anything except that it disfigures it.”¹⁶ The *ḥadīth* canons also preserve for us the counsel that the Prophet, peace be upon him, would give to his Companions before sending them out into the delicate matrix of human affairs: “Give glad tidings and do not repel people, make things easy and do not make them difficult - *basbshirū wa lā tunaffirū wa yassirū wa lā tu’assirū*.”¹⁷ Such advice has, it would seem, been all but erased from the young activists’ religious manual. The *ḥilm*; that gracious forbearance which so characterised our Prophet, peace be upon him, and by which he won over so many hearts, has now been eclipsed by an intolerance and an intense fierceness that - at a time when people are weak and struggle to fulfill even the basic demands of religion - betrays a deep ignorance of the *Sunnah*, and of human nature. Forcing religion down people’s throats will only cause many of them to vomit it up again; for such is the resilience of the human spirit.

However, it is the *Sunnah* that is our benchmark. For it is the Prophet, upon whom be peace, who is as our beautiful example; our *uswatun ḥasanah*, and it is against this standard that the quality of the activist’s *da’wah* and faith must be judged. Is his claim of following ‘pure’ Islam, along with his rage and his fixation on a narrow range of issues, a true reflection of the Prophetic character? Does his conduct and his concern mirror the caring splendour of the Prophetic *Sunnah*? When measured against such a standard, it will soon be discovered that our activist-cum-zealot is no more than a religious failure - possessing, as per the words of Johnathan Swift, “just enough religion to hate, but not enough to love.”

V. RETRIEVING BEAUTY

The Qur’an employs a striking illustration to depict what we have been discussing. In the narrative, or *qiṣṣah*, about Moses and his brother, Aaron, peace be upon them both, and the manner in which they were instructed to go to Pharaoh, we read: “Go both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has transgressed all bounds. Speak to him with gentle words, that perhaps he may take heed or fear [Allah].”¹⁸ Ibn Kathīr, the medieval exegetist, explained:

“This verse contains a great lesson: Pharaoh had reached the height of insolence and arrogance; Moses, on the other hand, was the finest of Allah’s creation at the time. And yet, with this being the case, he was instructed to speak to Pharaoh mildly and gently.” After citing some early authorities who explained the term ‘gentle words’, he then wrote: “What we can gain from their statements is that the invitation to Pharaoh was done with words that were polite, soft and gentle, in order for souls to be touched and moved. Allah, Exalted is He, commands: *Invite to the path of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful exhortation, and reason with them in the most courteous manner.*”²⁹ 20

Imām al-Shanqīṭī offered this insight: “What we can benefit by this noble verse is that it is required, when inviting others to Allah, to do so with gentleness and mildness; not with harshness or severity.”²¹

VI. EXTREMISM AND THE SOUL'S EXHAUSTION

A final point deserves to be mentioned here: the phenomena referred to as ‘burnout’. Oftentimes, the young activist’s ferocious application of religion not only plagues others, but it impacts tragically on his own being too. The Prophet, peace be upon him, advised: “This religion is strong, so go through it with gentleness.”²² Another *ḥadīth* warns: “The religion is indeed easy, no one is overly-strict in it except that it overwhelms him.”²³ None less than Ibn Ḥajr al-‘Asqalānī had this to say about the matter:

“The meaning is that no one delves into religious practice and neglects gentleness except that he will be incapacitated, worn down and eventually overwhelmed (*illa ‘ajaza w’nqata’a fa yaghlaba*) ... This does not mean that one should not strive to perfect one’s acts of worship, for that is indeed something commendable.”²⁴

The story is, by now, all too familiar. Having misread the *Sunnab* - or, in some instances, having had it misread to him - the young activist turns his back on mildness and moderation and embarks on the highway to harshness and extremism. The initial burst of enthusiasm, usually gained in one’s late teens or early twenties, begins slowly to burn itself out over some five to ten years. Not having attended to his inner, spiritual growth, and under an ever-increasing burden that arises from his harsh, stringent practice of religion, the now weary activist - like a once blazing star that has expended all its energy - implodes in upon himself. Gone is the practice; gone is the beard; gone is most, if not all, the vestiges of a once visible Muslim identity. His lot in life then becomes an overly concern with work, wealth, and family, which, in and of themselves, are not blameworthy, but become so if they are of greater concern than Allah and the Afterlife. Quite often, the trauma of such a religious ‘experience’ makes it difficult to bring them back to a sane and more balanced attachment to religion - *except those upon whom your Lord shows mercy.*²⁵

Here, a few words must be voiced about the opposite of extremism, which is religious laxity. For can we really discuss extremism without also mentioning negligence or laxity? Laxity in Islam refers to a failure to submit to the basic obligations of the faith; neglecting to follow the basic prescriptions and injunctions that revelation has instated for our ultimate welfare. Indeed, one now finds many Muslims who, though vehement in their condemnation of religious extremism and militancy, yet their doings betray a disturbing slackness in religious practice and a careless attitude towards the Creator’s guidance. Both extremism and laxity rob the *ummab*, albeit in different

ways, of the beauty which reveals itself in a balanced approach to the faith; keeping in mind the prophetic words: “All the Children of Adam commit sins, but the best of those who sin are those who repent.”²⁶

VII. RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

How is beauty to be retrieved? Only by embracing the *Sunnab*, holistically, may we restore balance and retrieve beauty. Our watchword, though, must be moderation. It is in moderation that Islam - its beliefs, practices and ethics - is rooted. “*Kbayru’l-umūr awsaṭubā* - the best of affairs are the balanced ones,” says one Islamic maxim.²⁷ The Qur’an describes the Muslim *ummab*, or collective, as: *ummatun wasaṭā* - a justly-balanced nation.²⁸ Islam sees itself as unfolding a middle-path for humanity; a path of equilibrium and balance. It advocates a middle way between falling short and going beyond the bounds; between the letter of the law and its spirit; between the spiritual and the material; between the rational and the intuitive; between rights and responsibilities; between working in this world and working for the next: *And those who, when they spend, are neither prodigal nor parsimonious, but keep between the two.*²⁹ The Qur’an also counsels: “*But seek the abode of the Afterlife in that which Allah has given you, and forget not your portion of the world, and be kind; even as Allah has been kind with you.*”³⁰ And it teaches: *Eat and drink, but not excessively. For Allah loves not the excessive.*³¹

We live in an age of grotesque excess. One-fifth of the earth’s people now consume over three-quarters of all the planet’s resources. Forests are being decimated, fossil fuels exploited, marine fisheries depleted, minerals strip-mined - and all at rates that are totally unsustainable. This excessive and gluttonous consumption now threatens the entire planet. The continuing destruction of the earth’s resources is matched only by an ever-growing inequality between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. If all the six-billion inhabitants of the planet were to consume the same amount as the people in the UK do now, we would need two more earths to provide the required resources: four, if we all lived like the average American. “The Earth,” said Gandhi, “caters for everyone’s need, not everyone’s greed.”

Yet it is precisely to guide humanity through this final, most turbulent phase of human history, that the Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace, was sent to us. A sturdy ship amidst violent storms and raging seas, the *Sunnab* is, as Imām Mālik explains, “like the Ark of Noah: whoever boards it is saved, whoever does not shall drown.”³²

The Muslim *ummab* is now at a critical juncture. It has only one real hope for success, and that is to reinstate the balance; the middle way, as defined by the *Sunnab*. But its true fruits can only flourish, and its beauty retrieved, when we begin to purify our hearts and fill them with humility, respect, tol-

erance and moderation. We need not drown out the zealots' rantings by shouting like mad-men ourselves, but drown them out we must with the moderation of the *Sunnab*. If the voice of moderation does not prevail, we will have a painful and agonising future, and the bitter irony will be that we would have allowed the zealots to veil the Prophetic beauty behind their extreme and intolerant mispractice of his *Sunnab*.

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END NOTES

1. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.5027.
2. Ibn Hishām, *Sirab*, 1:185, its chain is sound (*ḥasan*). Cf. Muhammad al-Ghazālī, *Fiqh al-Sirab*, ed. al-Albānī (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1976), 113.
3. Cited in Shalabi, *Islam: Religion of Life* (USA: Starlatch Press, 2001), 25-26.
4. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.746.
5. Qur'an 33:21.
6. Qur'an 68:4.
7. Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1997), 201.
8. Muslim, no.272.
9. Mālik, *Muwatta'*, no.1396. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Tamīd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1999), 10:525-6, says of the *ḥadīth*: "It is widespread, famous and well-known from the Prophet, upon whom be peace."
10. Qur'an 6:165. Similar to this is the verse [2:30]: *Recall the time when your Lord told the angels: "I am setting on the Earth a vicegerent."*
- Classical Qur'anic authorities have explained *khalīfah* to mean: (i) One generation succeeding another; a successor. This was the view of Ibn 'Abbās. (ii) Someone delegated to uphold the Divine laws, administer justice, and maintain balance on earth - in other words: a vicegerent. This was the opinion of Ibn Mas'ūd. Cf. al-Sam'ānī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭn, 1997), 1:63-64; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī & Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 52-53; Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, *al-Muharrar al-Wajīz*, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 71.
11. Qur'an 7:56.
12. In this and the following section, I have drawn upon Abdal Hakim Murad, *The Sunna as Primordality and Islamic Spirituality: the Forgotten Revolution*. Both can be found at www.masud.co.uk.
13. Qur'an 12:53.
14. Qur'an 3:159.
15. Qur'an 2:220.
16. Muslim, no.2594.
17. Muslim, no.1732.
18. Qur'an 20:43-44.
19. Qur'an 16:125.
20. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Qur'an al-'Azīm*, (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1987), 3:161.
21. *Aḥwā' al-Bayān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), 4:314.
22. Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, no.13052. The *ḥadīth* was graded as *ḥasan* by Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūṭ in his critical checking of the *Musnad*, 20:346.
23. Al-Bukhārī, no.39.

24. *Fatḥ al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1989), 1:127.

25. Qur’an 12:119.

26. Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, no.1874; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, no.425. Al-Suyūṭī graded it *ṣaḥīḥ*, as per al-Manāwī, *Fatḥ al-Qadir bi Sharḥ al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣagḥīr*, no.6292.

27. This maxim is often quoted as a prophetic *ḥadīth*, but its status as such is weak (*ḍa‘īf*). Cf. al-‘Irāqī, *al-Mughnī ‘an Ḥamli‘l-Asfār* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Tayriyyah, 1995), no.2716; al-Sakhāwī, *Maqāṣid al-Ḥasanah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2003), no.455. However, the statement is authentically ascribed to Wahb ibn Munabbih, an early sage and scholar of Islam, as recorded by Abu Ya‘lā, *Musnad*, no.6115. Cf. al-Albānī, *Hijāb Mar‘atu‘l-Muslimah*, (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1995), 30.

28. Cf. Qur’an 2:143.

29. Qur’an 25:67.

30. Qur’an 28:76-77.

31. Qur’an 7:31.

32. Cited in Ibn Taymiyyah *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā*, (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1991), 4:57.



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