

Discover Islam

SPIRITUALITY IN ISLAM

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Spirituality in Islam

What is spirituality?—or *rabbaniyat*, to use the Qur’anic term. It is the elevation of the human condition to a plane on which the mind is focused on the higher, non-material realities of a godly existence. The opposite of spirituality is materialism, a course followed all too often in this world. One who takes this course, giving all his attention to worldly things, or to put it another way, who centres his attention on mere appearances, is regarded as being materialistic. Conversely, one who rises above material things or appearances, who finds his focus of interest in non-material things, is regarded as being spiritual or godly. The latter is one who obeys the injunction of the Qur’an: “Be devoted servants of God” (3:79) or, alternatively, “O people, be godly servants of Allah.”

To understand what constitutes materialism, imagine that you come across a palatial house, or see an attractive car being driven along the street. If a strong desire is kindled within you to have such things in your possession, that is a clear indication that materialism is a major motivating factor in your

life. One who sees the same things, but remains unaffected by the notions of luxury that they convey, and therefore feels no desire to acquire them, lives in a more rarefied sphere in which materialism plays no part. He sees no attraction in the lesser world of material appearances, being engrossed in the higher realities of the supremely spiritual life. The truly non-material person is never influenced by superficialities: his soul exists at too profound a level of spirituality.

This is true, and without any exaggeration. Those who live for worldly pleasures believe that gratification cannot be had except from material things. But this thinking is due to sheer ignorance. Worldly pleasure being the only thing they have experienced, they imagine that for enjoyment they must depend solely on material things. Had they experienced spiritual pleasure, they would certainly have forgotten material pleasure. The pleasure to be derived from material things is limited in nature and very short-lived. Whereas spiritual pleasure may be eternally savoured.

Eating tasty food certainly gives us a sense of enjoyment. But it is only when the experience of eating such food results in an outpouring of thanksgiving to God that our pleasure knows no bounds. Travelling in a modern car is also enjoyable,

but the pleasure which comes from a deep perception of reality,—i.e. the apprehension of the indescribably unique power of God as manifested in the world in the form of cars, aeroplanes and all the other modern amenities created for man's comfort—is far superior to that which one experiences while travelling in a luxurious automobile.

The materialistic person can find pleasure only in something which he or she actually experiences. But the spiritual person lives on a higher plane. For him, even seeing things in another's possession occasions an outpouring from the innermost recesses of his heart of his gratefulness to God. Another's material pleasure transforms itself into a spiritual pleasure for him as well. A materially-minded person sees only the creature, while a spiritually-inclined person sees the splendour of the Creator through the creature. And it is obvious that the spiritual riches accruing from the discovery of the Creator cannot be gained in the discovery of mere objects of creation.

Furthermore, in the spiritual world there is no great difference between comfort and deprivation. What one gains from experiences of material pleasure is of far less value than what one gains from experiences of deprivation. The tears of pain flowing from an aching heart gives far greater satisfaction than the laughter of happiness. The greatest source of pleasure

is in the remembrance of God. It is this reality which finds expression in the following verse of the Qur'an:

“It is only in the remembrance of God that hearts are comforted.” (13:28)

Here comfort means not just the temporary solace to be found in everyday convenience, but the real comfort with its implications of peace of mind that can stem only from God Almighty. Man by nature is an idealistic creature. Anything short of ideal can attract only fitful attention from him, whereas true and lasting comfort can be achieved only through the Perfect Being.

Existing at the level of materialism is like descending into animality. Materialism is, in other words, a form of shallowness. The real man is one who discovers the secret of living on the elevated plane of spirituality. If in materialism there is the pleasure of laughter, in spirituality there is the pleasure of pain. If materialism is to live a life of limitations, spirituality is to live in limitlessness.

The Universe—A Source of Divine Inspiration

The universe has been fashioned by God in a way that it may become a source of spiritual inspiration for man. According to the Qur'an, it is the quality of *tawassum* (15:75) that enables one to find inspiration

in the universe. What is *tawassum*? It is the ability to understand the signs of nature. That is, to observe the phenomena of the universe in order to draw lessons from them and receive spiritual nourishment from physical events.

Tawassum is, in a sense, a matter of conversion, on a parallel with grass entering the body of the cow and through a natural process being transformed into milk. Similarly, the truly religious person is like a divine industry. He is able to convert physical events into spiritual lessons. He extracts spiritual nourishment from material things.

The distinguishing feature of the wise people described in the Qur'an is that, they continuously derive such sustenance from their environment, thus maintaining their intellectual and spiritual well-being. This is elaborated upon in the Qur'an as follows:

“In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are signs for men of understanding; those that remember God when standing, sitting, and lying down, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth (saying): ‘Lord, You have not created these in vain. Glory be to You! Save us from the torment of the fire, Lord.’”
(3:191)

A Personal Experience

It was Thursday morning, 17th June 1999. I was in Manchester, England, staying in the house of an Arab Brother Alaref Ahmad. While I was sitting in my room on the upper floor, I heard a gentle knock on the door. When I opened it, I found a child of about five years of age. It was Qanita, the first-born daughter of Brother Alaref. She asked all innocence and gentleness, “Do you need anything?” (turidu haja). Perhaps it was her mother who had sent her, and although this was a simple question, I was quite overwhelmed by this innocent voice; to the extent that I could not utter a single word in reply. This was a normal incident, but in my mind, it became transformed into a supra-normal event. Children are like the flowers of God and little angels. I felt as if God Himself had sent me an angel to discover and meet my needs.

At this moment, a famous hadith came to mind:

“Your Lord descends to this worldly haven every day, looks at His servants and says, ‘Is there anyone who has a need and asks Me, that I may give it to him?’” (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 758).

‘Do you need anything?’ was a short question that came from an innocent soul, but it was enough to

cause a great revolution in my inner being; referred to by modern scholars as ‘brainstorming.’

For a while, I felt that I could see the whole of the Universe on the screen of my mind. This was a great spiritual experience which could not be expressed in human words. In the beginning, it seemed as though God, through a little angel, was saying, “O my servant, do you need anything?” Then, the matter extended to include the whole Universe with its Heavens and its Earth.

In fact, it was only a little girl at the door of my room, asking, “Do you need anything?” but in its extended sense, it was as if the whole Universe was asking the same question.

The vast Heaven was saying, “Do you need a shelter? Here I am to provide you with one, because God has ordered me to do so.” The gleaming sun was saying, “Do you need light? I am here to supply it and transform your darkness into light.” The majestic mountains were announcing, “Would you like to be on the highest level in all humanity? I am here at your service to help you attain that high position.” The flowing water in the river-beds was murmuring, “Do you want to have a spiritual bath to purify your soul? I am here to offer you that.” And the gusting wind was asking, “Do you want to tour the Universe to

see the wondrous signs of God? Here is my back for you to ride on to embark on such a Divine journey.” The trees were whispering, “Would you like to have a personality as radiant as ours? We are here to make your wish a reality.” The fruits on their branches and the crops in their husks were declaring, “If you crave nourishment for your intellectual and spiritual life, we are here to provide you with it.”

While this reel was playing in my mind, I heard birds chirping, “O servant of God! Here is good news for you: If you have a need, then God has made the whole Universe to serve your needs. God is so generous that He has created the whole of the Universe to be at your service, day and night. In addition to this, if you show thankfulness to God, He will give you what is greater than all of this — Eternal Paradise in which there will be “...neither fear nor grievance” (6:48).

Then, the following Qur’anic verse came to mind: “And He gave you all that you asked for” (14.34). This means that whatever is needed for Man to live a good life on this Earth has been prepared in advance by God, directly and indirectly. Horses, for instance, were directly created; whereas aeroplanes were provided indirectly. The travelling of the voice through the air is an example of direct provision, while its transmission by means of electronic equipment is

a form of indirect provision. Perhaps, this is what is meant by the following Qur'anic verse: "And (He has created) horses, mules and donkeys for you to ride, and as an adornment. And He has created (other) things which are beyond your knowledge" (16:8).

God Almighty says, "O you who believe! Eat of the good things that We have provided for you. And be grateful to Allah, if it is Him you worship" (2:172). This means that God Almighty has created everything, imaginable and unimaginable; great and small, in the most perfect form. Then, He gave all this free to Man. The only price to be paid for these endless blessings is thankfulness; it is Man's recognition, from the depths of his heart, that God is the Giver and Man the receiver.

The Qur'an mentions as examples of God's beneficiaries the people of Saba.' God Almighty gave them a sign in the, "two Gardens to the right hand and to the left; (and it was said to them:) 'Eat of the provision of your Lord, and be grateful to Him: fair is your land and Oft-Forgiving is your Lord'"(34:15). This means that if Man pays the price — that is, gratitude—then not only will he be allowed to avail of these blessings, but more importantly, he will also be rewarded with eternal Paradise, which is a perfect version of this present imperfect world of God.

God Almighty bestowed upon Man all these material things which man needs if he is to live a good life on this Earth. All these things are silently conveying the following message: “O Man! Are you seeking something greater than all this? Do you want spiritual peace in addition to material peace? Do you want a world of perfection after this imperfect world? Would you like to taste the blessings of God in the world of eternity after you have tasted them in this ephemeral world? Do you wish to have all these comforts as a blessing in the world to come, after you have had them as a trial in this transient world? Would you like to realize your full potential after experiencing the limitation of your capacities in this present world?”

God created a perfect and complete world as an eternal abode for Man. Then, He wanted to know who was worthy of inhabiting that eternal world. For this purpose, He created the time-bound and imperfect abode in which we are now living. This life, therefore, is only a test. Man is constantly under the observation of his Lord. With every utterance and movement, Man is writing his own eternal destiny. One who, during his pre-death period proves himself through his conduct deserving of that world will, in his post-death-period, be rewarded with admission into it. Others, however, will be flung into the

Universal junkyard, that is Hell, condemned for all eternity. So, they will lose both worlds, the present incomplete world as well as the next, perfect and everlasting world.

God has revealed Himself in two books—the Qur'an and the Universe. The Qur'an is a literal version of God's word, while the Universe, or nature, is a practical demonstration of it. These two are the basic sources of spiritual inspiration for a man who seeks to live a life according to the divine scheme.

This dual source of divine inspiration is mentioned in the Qur'an in the following verse: "God is He who raised the Heavens without visible supports, then He ascended the Throne. He has compelled the sun and the moon to be of service, each pursuing an appointed course; He controls the affairs (of the Universe); He makes plain His revelations, so that you may be certain of the meeting with your Lord" (13:2). So, the Qur'an is like a guidebook. It prepares the mind so that one may properly understand the Universe and live in it as desired by God.

So, a *mu'min* (true believer) has precisely that kind of prepared mind. When he sees the Universe with its various parts functioning in an absolutely coherent manner, he will spontaneously say: "There is no god but the one God!" and when he examines it, he will

find that there are so many complex happenings in its vastness. Nevertheless, he finds that every part of the universe is highly predictable. With this discovery, he realizes that it is as if God was suggesting that he himself should have a predictable character. When he observes that the various parts of the Universe function with absolute harmony, he realises that, in like manner, he should live in complete harmony with society; without hatred for or malice towards anyone. When he sees the events of the universe always proceeding towards a meaningful result, he realises that man's life, too, must have a meaningful end. Thus he exclaims: "O our Lord! You have not created (all) this without purpose. Glory be to You! Give us salvation from the torment of Hellfire!" (3:191).

In brief, the universe is a manifestation of the Attributes of Almighty God. Hence, it is a source of spiritual nourishment for those who want to lead a divine life on earth. For them, the whole universe becomes a great means of their reaching spiritual perfection. This spiritual development continues incessantly throughout their earthly life. As the ultimate result of this life-long developmental process, they attain that degree of spirituality which the Qur'an calls the '*Rabbani soul*.' It is such as these who, in the life Hereafter, will be told by their most compassionate Lord: "Dwell in Paradise; you shall

have no fear, nor shall you grieve.” (7:49)

There is nothing mysterious about spirituality in Islam. It is rather the direct result of the kind of intellectual development that takes place when a believer ponders over the Creator and His creation: he gains something in the process that may be termed spirituality. The source, therefore, of Islamic spirituality is perusal and reflection rather than any sort of mysterious exercise.

That is why the Qur’an rejects asceticism (monasticism), referring to it as a *bid’ah* (innovation) in religion which God did not prescribe for people. (57:27)

From the Qur’an we learn that, in the very creation of the universe, the signs of God lie hidden all around us. A person who is in a state of keen awareness when he reflects upon the things of the world comes to see the Creator in the creatures. The meaning of the creation of the Universe is laid bare before him. Ultimately, the universe becomes a permanent source of spiritual inspiration. He is continuously nourished by it during his worldly experience, and his observation of the universe awakens in him latent divine qualities.

The result of this observation and contemplation of the universe does not result in his shunning normal life. Far from withdrawing from the world, he lives

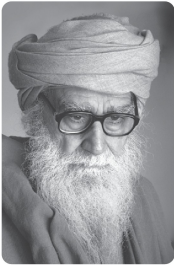
in it, participating in all its activities; yet despite his involvement, he remains aloof. That is to say, although he fulfills all his duties and responsibilities, his heart is not attached to worldly affairs. He appears to live in the world, but he stands apart from it. Thanks to this state of his heart, he acquires tremendous spiritual gains. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ says of such individuals:

“God plants wisdom in the heart of one who shows disinclination for the world.”

There is life for man in spirituality: this is indeed the real life for man.

Discover Islam

In this series, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan presents the fundamental teachings of Islam in a simple way. The series provides the general reader with an accurate and comprehensive picture of Islam—the true religion of submission to God.



Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021) was an Islamic scholar, spiritual guide and an Ambassador of Peace. Having received international recognition for his work, the Maulana authored over 200 books and recorded thousands of lectures giving the rational interpretation of Islamic concepts, prophetic wisdom and the spiritual meaning of Quran and Islam in the contemporary style. His English translation of the Quran is widely appreciated as simple, clear and in contemporary style. He founded *Centre for Peace and Spirituality International* in 2001 to re-engineer

the minds of people towards God-oriented living and present Islam in the modern idiom based as it is on peace, non-violence and spirituality.

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