

Community Building in Islam, Part 5

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This article studies status of rationality, knowledge and experience in an Islamic community.

This series is based on a nine-session course conducted by the author on Community Building at the Islamic Centre of England in London in 2009.

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This series is based on a nine-session course conducted by the author on Community Building at the Islamic Centre of England in London in 2009.

Abstract

Having a shared identity working towards a joint cause is vital for a healthy community. In doing so, a community must share specific qualities in order to be successful. This series of papers offers a glimpse into the importance of community-building and Prophet Muhammad's efforts to implement it.

Character traits such as truthfulness, trustworthiness, justice, unity, moderation, humbleness, enjoining good and forbidding wrong, and maintaining a healthy balance in working for this world to eventually lead to a blissful hereafter were illustrated. Another important quality of a successful community is their implementation of justice, also one of the principles of Shi'i Islam.

The previous article expanded on Allah's justice in the Qur'an, early controversy on the meaning of Allah's justice, the Shi'a view of justice, the necessity for establishing social justice, having just leaders, and examples of justice observed by the Ahlul Bayt. This article studies status of rationality, knowledge and experience in an Islamic community.

We have been studying the different qualities necessary for an Islamic Community and have said that an Islamic Community is firstly a community which is balanced and moderate. Then we spoke about the importance of an Islamic Community being truthful, or committed to observing the truth in every aspect; and being committed to justice, whether on a personal, individual, or community level.

The need for rationality in an Islamic Community

As individuals need to make decisions, perform good actions, plan for the future, and establish good relationships within and out of their social circles, likewise every community needs to do the same. These processes of decision-making must be directed by reason. This is of utmost importance both for every individual Muslim and for every Muslim Community.

Arguments presented against rationality

We are aware that there are always individuals, groups, and even societies who blindly follow traditional customs and habits without assessing or evaluating them. The Qur'an speaks of the prophets and messengers of Allah who attempted to instruct others to change their lifestyles for the better; they were none the less faced with rebellion, a common argument being that they did not want to do so because it went against their customs, as these practices were that of their parents and ancestors.

Their objections were as simple as that. They rejected the new teachings because they went against the way they had been brought up and the way in which they were accustomed to doing things:

Rather, they say, "Indeed, we found our fathers upon a religion, and we are in their footsteps [rightly] guided. (43:23)

Sometimes they used to say to the prophets that what they taught them were totally new and unheard and therefore they did not want to follow them because it was different from what they were used to:

We have not heard of this in the latest religion. This is not but a fabrication. (38:7)

However, contrary to this, sometimes other people would say that these teachings were old-fashioned. They called them "the myths of the earliest people." This expression has been repeated many times in the Qur'an. For example, the verse 8:31 reads as follows:

And when Our verses are recited to them, they say, "We have heard. If we willed, we could say [something] like this. This is not but myths of the earliest peoples." (8:31)

They said that the teachings related to earlier generations and so had nothing to do with their present situation.

Thus, some people used various arguments in an attempt to prove the Prophet's ideas wrong. Either

they wanted to follow their usual customs so they did not want to accept new ideas, or they did not want to follow historical ideas from the past.

Sometimes they would also claim to want to follow their own particular famous and great personalities. This is why, on the Day of Judgement, some people will be full of regret and will admit to Allah that the reason they went astray was because they followed their own great personalities.

And they will say, "Our Lord, indeed we obeyed our masters and our dignitaries, and they led us astray from the [right] way. (33:67)

Thus are the various arguments an irrational community may use when refusing to accept the truth or to adopt new ways of thinking or behaving, whereas the Qur'an tells us that we must always follow the requirements of reason by believing and acting only on that which can be proved rationally and can be backed up by rational arguments. This concept is hugely important not only for individuals but for the community as a whole.

The Qur'an, Sunnah and Reason

In Islamic jurisprudence, especially in the school of the Ahlul Bayt, in addition to the Qur'an and Sunnah, there is also an emphasis on reason or intellect being one of the sources. Consensus is also mentioned but after careful examination, it can be reduced to the Sunnah, so there are three sources: the Qur'an, Sunnah, and reason.

However, the Sunnah is nothing other than explanation and exemplification of the Qur'an, and therefore is further elaboration of the Qur'an. Thus in the end there are two major sources: a) revelation, given to us in the form of the Qur'an and further expanded and exemplified in the Sunnah, and b) reason.

This does not only apply to jurisprudence (fiqh) or Islamic law, but rather it applies to every aspect of Islamic thought. These two sources must be referred to in order to understand Islamic Theology, Islamic Morality and Spirituality, and Islamic Economics. There is nothing other than these two, and everything is based on either one or both of them.

There are certain issues that can only be understood by reference to revelation, only understood through reason, or understood using both methods. For example, the need for resurrection: for people being answerable to Allah for what they have done and then receiving reward or punishment can be understood by both using reason and by referring to the Qur'an. However, the topics of Allah's existence or truth of religion should be understood through reason. It is not possible to beg the question by arguing for the truth of religion by referring to Scripture.

However, there are certain things which can only be understood by referring to revelation, including further details of what is going to happen on the Day of Judgment or about certain practical laws such as how many prayers should be performed every day and how many units are in each prayer. Such issues

must be understood by referring to revelation through the Qur'an or as exemplified in Sunnah.

Reason as a divine hujjah (proof)

In a hadith from Imam Kazim (a), we read:

Truly, God has two proofs (hujjah): the external one, that is, the Prophets, Messengers and Imams, and then the external one, that is, reason (al-'aql).

This means that God has two ways of communicating His Will to us, because here 'hujjah' means something that can help us to understand the Will of God. In the beginning of Ziyarat Al-e Yaseen we address Imam al-Mahdi (atf) by saying:

هتداراللد و لله لاسلا

Peace be upon you, O hujjah of God and the sign of His will.

This is one of the best definitions of 'hujjah' that I know of. A 'hujjah' is a sign for understanding the Will of Allah. Whether a 'hujjah' is someone or something that helps us understand what God wants from us, that is, what is the God's will. Thus, when God provides us with a hujjah, later on He will ask us if we followed the instructions and directions which were given to us by His Hujjah. We will be answerable to Him.

Moreover, if we follow a hujjah, on the Day of Judgement we can say to Allah that we spoke or acted in a certain way due to that hujjah. Thus, a hujjah has a dual function. Allah can question us based on a hujjah and we can also defend ourselves, if we have followed a hujjah from God.

External and internal hujjah

These two types of hujjah are understandable from the following verse:

***And they will say, 'Had we listened or applied reason, we would not have been among inmates of the Blaze.'* (67: 10)**

This verse indicates that the people who have failed to please Allah and secure their way to Heaven would say that if they had listened to the prophets or if they had reasoned by correctly using their rational and mental capacities, they would not be amongst the people of Hell on that day.

Thus, the reason that they ended in Hell was because they did not listen to the external hujjah and did not refer to the internal hujjah i.e. their own reason. Therefore, we either have to listen to the prophets and revelation, or we are to think for ourselves and discover the truth.

Prophets are a form of external intellect

Some scholars have suggested to call the prophets 'the external intellect' and to call reason 'the internal prophet.' This means that if we could imagine our reason or intellect being crystallised and embodied as a person that would become like a prophet. On the other hand, if it were possible to internalize the prophets inside us that would be our reason.

Thus, in a sense, every one of us has a prophet inside us who is commissioned by Allah to guide us. This is the best way of solving any question of conflict between reason and revelation and thus indeed we do not believe that there is any such conflict between them, as they are in harmony with one another.

Muslim community should be run according to revelation and intellect

Therefore we have these two proofs which provide us with two ways of coming to understand right and wrong. As a community, we must base our decisions on these two proofs rather than emotions or fashions or personal opinions particularly in relation to religious affairs.

Unfortunately, in many cases, we find that in our communities some people primarily attempt to utilise our emotions. For example, when they want to plan a function, their greatest concern is to make people emotionally engaged and satisfied, rather than attempting to develop them intellectually.

The role of emotions should not be denied, but emotions ought to be used to help engage people in order to then proceed to educate them. Emotions in the end have a short term effect. Sometimes people come to a meeting and are affected emotionally, but after a few minutes or hours, that effect disappears.

Furthermore, sometimes unfortunately we bombard people with emotional factors and then in the end they become quite confused and do not know what to believe, what to say, or what to do. They become concerned with baseless matters that have no foundation in reality such as superstitions and some dreams.

In our communities, we need to plan everything, including our education system, our publications and our functions in masjids or Islamic centres, in such a way that they serve to promote rationality in the community and the commitment of the community towards revelation.

The role of the heart

People sometimes ask about the role of the heart and referring to it. For example, in many cases we feel in our heart that something is good or bad, right or wrong. Is there any reference to this in the Qur'an? Can people refer to their heart? The answer is both yes and no, which means that this is not a proof.

Allah has made our heart in a way that it is sensitive to truth and falsehood, and to good and evil. There is no doubt about this. However, the heart is very much subject to change and alteration.

A sound heart

If we are in the default situation and have our heart in the format and condition in which Allah gave it to us when we are born, then we can certainly listen to it, because Allah has created the heart in a way that when it is engaged with something good, it has tranquility and peace. However, when the heart is thinking or engaged in something bad, it becomes disturbed.

It has been narrated that a person called Wabisah went to Prophet Muhammad to ask him about the meaning of 'birr' or 'good'. The Prophet told him, 'You have come to ask about righteousness.' He said, 'Yes.' The Prophet (peace be upon him) said,

'Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels at ease and the heart feels tranquil. And wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and causes uneasiness in the breast, even though people have repeatedly given their legal opinion [in its favour].'

'Good' is that which brings peace and tranquillity to the heart. For example, if we imagine telling the truth or helping people, our heart becomes full of peace and joy. However, if we consider annoying or hurting people, telling lies or betraying people, our heart becomes worried and disturbed.

This is why machines can be made to detect if someone is lying because these machines can detect whether your blood pressure is increasing or not, or whether your heart beats more quickly or not.^{[1](#)}

Thus, we are advised that when we want to know whether something is right or not, we should examine and ask our heart. Even if other people give us their own opinions, we should still ask our hearts.

An unhealthy and distorted heart

The opposite of a sound heart is that which is degraded or distorted by the performance of sins. If we commit sins and insist on continuously committing them, then gradually our hearts would lose its capacity for understanding right from wrong. The heart becomes indifferent and loses its sensitivity.

We commit wrong and do not feel bad about it; likewise, we do good and do not feel good. Indeed, if someone insists on increasingly committing wrong, then the heart becomes quite different and functions in an incorrect way. In some hadiths, we find an expression for hearts which is very profound and that is "mankus" which means upside down.^{[2](#)}

When this happens, you may do something good but would feel terrible. For example, we may give charity or go to study and we feel bad. On the other hand, we may do haram, such as backbiting, hurting and ridiculing people, and we enjoy it. This happens because the heart has now become 'upside down'.

This is why it is both possible and not possible to refer to one's heart. It all depends on whether one's heart is preserved in the same condition in which Allah created it, or whether we have unfortunately distorted and damaged it, and have turned it 'upside down'.

In a hadith in Kanzil Ummaal from Prophet Muhammad, which Allamah Tabatabai (r.a.) reports in his al-Mizan, in which the Prophet says that when a person commits murder for the first time, their heart becomes 'upside down'. Prior to this, they understood the ugliness of murder, but when they commit murder for the first time, their hearts become distorted.

After this, they would no longer understand the ugliness of murder. They would have a heart which is hard and tough, unable to understand its ugliness and indeed may even also end up enjoying it. There are people who are paid to kill others and can do so with ease, even thinking that they have become capable and professional, and eventually are proud of it.

Why? This is because they did not listen to the voice of their heart and to the conscience they have been given, and so gradually their hearts became distorted and completely transformed.

The heart is not a hujjah

Therefore, in Islamic literature and particularly in the Qur'an and Hadith, although we find emphasis placed on the role of the heart and on safeguarding it, we do not have any reference which says that the heart is a hujjah. Nowhere does it state that in addition to revelation and reason the heart is a hujjah to which we can refer, because, as we said before, the heart is subject to change.

If there is anything within the heart which is guaranteed to constantly function properly, then it is intellect ('aql) which in a sense is considered the mental or educational aspect of the heart. Otherwise, the heart by itself and separate from reason has no guaranteed function or role in understanding the truth.

Reason is a hujjah

The faculty of reason can still function properly in a corrupt person; it is possible for them to understand the truth. If a corrupt person really wants to find the truth, they can still use their reason, because reason always remains as a Hujjah, and a hujjah never betrays. A prophet always remains a prophet whether people listen to him or not or whether he is surrounded by good people or bad people.

It is the same with reason as reason always remains a hujjah whether a person listens to it or not. However, this is not so with the heart. This is why the Qur'an asks everyone, including the pagans and wrongdoers to think. If they think and follow their reason and intellect, even the pagans and their leaders would be able to judge between right and wrong for themselves because, again, a hujjah never betrays, misleads, or misguides.

This is true about both prophets and reason. However, the heart is very much subject to what we do and

what we are: our previous deeds and character.

Early debate about the extent of the scope of reason

Very early on in the history of Islam, a debate started amongst Muslims regarding how much weight and significance should be given to reason. There were some people from some schools of Islam who, although possibly having good intentions and maybe because they thought it to be a requirement of being loyal to religion, tried to reduce and limit the scope of reason by insisting that people should only follow the Qur'an and Sunnah and wanted nothing to do with reason.

In particular, they were confronted with key philosophical ideas coming from Greek thinkers, so they thought they should somehow safeguard Islam by not allowing these intellectual ideas in the form of philosophy and logic to enter the Islamic way of thinking.

Thus, philosophy was not introduced. Some of them, such as Ibn Hazm, even opposed logic. They thought that logic was invented by Greek thinkers who were not necessarily believers in God, and so logic was one of their fabrications and not something natural and God-given.

When it came to religious issues they thought we should only follow the Qur'an and the hadith, and if something is not mentioned in these sources, we are to remain silent and do not have any responsibility to delve into it; otherwise we may get involved in a heresy (bid'ah).

What is bid'ah?

Not only in the past there were people who used to consider philosophy and logic as being heretical, but also there are some today who rush in considering everything new as heretical. Many of us have had discussions with such people in which they keep repeating that one thing is 'bid'ah' and then another thing is 'bid'ah' and so on.

For example, they say that having a Parliament or judiciary system on the side of the government is all 'bid'ah' because at the time of the Prophet there was only the Prophet himself and his agents, with no separation between various parts of State.

If we use this argument, even having schools is 'bid'ah' because there was no such establishment as a school at the time of the Prophet; people used to simply gather in the masjid to learn. And therefore having a university, driving a car, paved streets, pipelines for healthy water are all kinds of 'bid'ah'. This is all based on short sightedness.

'Bid'ah' or heresy does not mean anything that is merely new. As mentioned before, this was the mentality of some during the Prophet's time. They claimed that his teachings were new to them and so they would not accept it. Such people now a days have adopted the mentality of the pagans of that era and currently present it under the guise of Islam by saying that anything new is 'bid'ah'.

This is exactly the kind of idea that the pagans used against the Prophet. Real heresy is not just something new; rather, it is that which is given religious significance without necessarily being 'religious' as such. For example, someone may use a car to drive to work, which is something relatively new.

However, then someone says that driving a car is an Islamic idea and we must drive a car as an Islamic requirement because it is 'wajib' (compulsory) or 'mustahabb' (recommended) in a literal sense. This is then something entirely different and we ought to be questioned about the reason for saying this.

In the past, people rode horses and camels; and in the future we may drive something else instead of driving a car. So we cannot say that driving a car is Islamic in the sense that it is an Islamic requirement like praying, fasting or going for Hajj. However, we can say that it is

Islamic in the sense that it is compatible with Islamic principles and with Islamic guidelines for our way of life. For example, Islam says that we should save time and that it is fine if we want to have a comfortable and convenient life. Then it is up to us whether we use a horse or donkey, or walk, drive, or use a plane. Islam says we must educate ourselves and our children.

Therefore, we want to have schools and universities, and maybe in the future we will have something even better. We have to learn and always try to improve ourselves. We are not saying that the schools we have today are Islamic in the sense that they are like praying and fasting, nor that the way in which we run our schools is exactly and perfectly based on Islam so that if someone does something other than this or different to it, they would be doing something 'haram'.

When we say that something is Islamic, it means that it is compatible with Islamic values as it is, but there is always a possibility for improvement and for reducing the deficiencies or shortcomings in it, and this is something which we should learn how to do.

An Islamic community benefits from human experience

In addition to using reason and revelation, an Islamic community also tries to benefit from human experience and that which people have achieved throughout history, not in understanding religious issues but in running their daily lives. To understand how to pray, fast, or perform the Hajj, we do not need to look at the experiences of other people.

However to understand how to organise an educational system in a community or how to run an economy or a political system or how to manage a transportation system, it is our Islamic responsibility to discover the best available techniques and skills in the world and benefit from them. We must not say everything is 'bid'ah' and not want anything to do with it, and merely understand what happened in early Muslim society.

On the contrary, Islam says that we must always continue to learn and add on to other people's experiences to our own. According to our hadiths, a wise and rational person adds other people's

understanding to their own understanding. If there is wisdom, we must search for, and benefit from it, even if it is in the hands of non-believers.[3](#)

Wisdom is something for which a mu'min is earnestly searching, and so wherever they find it, they adopt it and benefit from it. We must not deprive ourselves of the experiences of other people, whether they are believers or non-believers. We can even learn from our enemies, if they do something good and correct.

For example, there may be some people who are our enemies, but they have very good health care or educational systems. We should benefit from their skills and experience, because wisdom comes from Allah, no matter who is presenting it to us. Anything good comes from Allah, no matter who has it at that moment in time.

Therefore, we have to benefit from the scientific and experimental findings of humanity. It is neither possible nor wise to start everything from scratch. For example, if we have an Islamic community and we want to open an Islamic school, firstly we should enquire about what other communities are doing in their religious and educational undertakings; for example, regarding the financial aspect of running a school.

They have experience and so we should go and learn from them. We may accept what they are doing or change it but we cannot merely ignore it, thinking we know better or know everything, or that we simply search for the answers in the Qur'an and hadiths. The Qur'an and hadiths themselves advise us to observe people and other communities to take lessons from them.

We are even told to study the lives of people who have passed away and learn from them. Whether they have done good or bad, we should at least know about it; if they have done good, we can reproduce it, and if bad, we can learn to avoid it.

The importance of knowledge and knowledgeable people

An Islamic community is balanced, truthful, and just; it refers firstly to revelation and reason and then decides for itself in a rational way while taking into account the scientific achievements of humanity and the experiences of other communities so as to achieve the best possible way of life.

However, this does not mean that there is no room for future improvement as there is always a need for improving ourselves, and we are not to disregard the best available to us. Knowledge and knowledgeable people are of utmost importance and significance to an Islamic community. This is very much related to the need for rationality.

The importance of good role models

Every community has people as their role models which are very much respected. It is quite possible to judge whether a community is in a safe and sound situation or not by looking at people it holds in high

esteem.

For example, in the Era of Ignorance, the best robbers and criminals were respected, and the tribes best at killing others and stealing their property were proud of themselves. There is even an Arabic poem in which the poet says:

“I wish instead of my tribe I belonged to another tribe that would be attacking and killing people, whether riding or on feet.”⁴ This was the mentality of people in the Era of Ignorance. Such a society was not safe and sound.

A society in which people are given special privilege or become role models just because they are rich or famous treated in a special way merely because they are rich regardless of their morals suffers serious problems.

We read in a hadith that whoever shows respect and humbleness to a rich person merely for their wealth, two-thirds of their faith has gone.⁵ If we show extraordinary respect to the rich and then mistreat the poor, it is a sign that our faith is very weak. In addition, a society in which actors, actresses, and sports personalities have the best position merely for their profession or fame is not a good society.

No one cares about their beliefs or morality. Islam is not against actors, actresses and sportsmen or women, but such people should not be adopted as role models unless they have a good, Islamic way of life and promote this publicly. We can encourage and support them, but not necessarily take them as our role models for their fame or earnings.

The status of knowledgeable people in an Islamic community

In an Islamic community, two groups of people have the best position: the pious and the knowledgeable. In Islam, these two qualities are the most important. Yes, it is valuable to a society to have a scientist such as a physicist, chemist, biologist, mathematician and so forth, even if they are non-religious.

Our communities and societies would develop if we show respect to scientists. The youth and even children would be encouraged to study hard to develop their community. However, if we always bring up rich people, then our youth would wonder why they should bother to study and instead would prefer to just hoard money. People who are involved in developing sciences are very important and influential.

Of course, religious sciences are also very important but not everyone should necessarily study them. Islam very much encourages every type of science. The Prophet said: ‘Seek knowledge even as far away as China.’⁶ At that time China was not a place for learning Islam. There was no Islamic seminary or Islamic university there so he meant other types of knowledge.

Of course, Islamic knowledge is something necessary for every Muslim up to a certain point, but every Muslim does not need to become an Ayatullah or a Muslim philosopher or theologian. What is most

important is that every Muslim must always seek knowledge and should not waste any opportunity for learning and adding to their knowledge.

In a beautiful example about Abu Rayhaan Bayuni, a famous Muslim mathematician and scholar of many other sciences, when he was dying, just before his death he was visited by one of his neighbours who was a jurist, and Abu Rayhaan started asking him something about fiqh (Islamic law), and in particular about inheritance.

Then this friend asked why he was asking him such a question when he was going to die at any time and so would not benefit from the answer. Abu Rayhaan replied: “Is it better to die while I know or while I do not know?” The Qur’an says: **“Are those who know and those who do not know the same? (39:9)”**

Piety should accompany knowledge

We must also show additional respect to the pious whose lives are full of good lessons for everyone. Such people must be respected. The Qur’an tells us that God has made us into different nations, different tribes, different colours and different races, so that we are able to know one another and we are able to identify each other using different colours and languages. But

“truly the most honoured ones in the Sight of Allah are the pious.” (49: 13).

In Islamic community, the two qualities of knowledge and piety are very important. Of course, it is also very important and even more beneficial if knowledge is accompanied by piety, and piety is accompanied by knowledge, though even knowledge by itself is valuable (39:9). However, knowledge would become a special gift if accompanied by piety.

Therefore, in our communities and societies we must encourage people to pursue knowledge and piety by giving special recognition to scientists and to pious people. Such communities and societies would have a very rapid and easy journey towards their ideals.

1. See e.g. al-Suyuti, Jalal al-Din, al-Durr al-Manthur, vol. 3, p. 11. The text is as follows:

﴿صِدْقٌ لِّوَسْوَ رَتَّة: لِّ اَقْتَصَابِ اَوْنَعْ

ه رَيِّ رَا بِ لَوَاوَةً اَذْه

2. For example, according to ahadith from the Prophet Mohammad, heart of man admits aspiration and fear unless he sheds blood unjustifiably. When he sheds blood unjustly his heart becomes upside down and very dark so that he does not recognize the good. Nor does he condemn the evil. (Tabataba’i, Sayyid Mohammad Husayn, Al-Mizan, vol. 10, translated by Sayyid Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran: 2010, WOFIC, cited from Kanz al-Ummaal, no. 39951)

3. For example, Imam Ali is quoted as saying:

﴿كَرْهُ لِّلْمَوَلَا وَهَرَجٌ لِّاَوْدُ

Take wisdom even from the polytheists! (Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 2, p. 97.)

4. The Arab poem refers to the saying of Qarit ibn Anif from Bani al-‘Anbar and reads as follows:

ابو اسرفه قالوا لوئش ... لوئ ر اذالموقهتلف

5. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, SharhNahj al-Balaghah, vol. 11, p. 233. Prophet Muhammad (s) is quoted as saying:

هذ د ائثبهنفلعضالوتنم

6. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 1, pp. 177 & 180.

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