بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

## [Community/Ummah as a Moral and Ethical Principle](#)

Allah says in the Holy Qu'ran in Surah al-Baqarah:

> **And thus We made you a community of the center that you might testify against the people, and that the Messenger might testify against you. And We did not make a change in the direction in which you face for prayer except to know who followed the Messenger, or who turned heel and rejected his guidance. And it was a difficult test except for those whom Allah had guided, and Allah would not permit that your faith be in vain. Truly, Allah is gentle, and the Bestower of mercy to people.**

Also in Surah al-Imran, Allah said:

> **And you are the best community that has been brought forth for the good of humanity. You enjoin goodness and you forbid evil, and you believe in Allah.**

Again in Surah at-Tawbah, Allah reveals to us:

> **And the believing men and the believing women are protectors of each other. They enjoin the right and forbid the evil, and they stand for the *salat* and pay the *zakat*, and they obey Allah and His Messenger. For these Allah will have mercy on them.**

Do you see a theme coming? Yes? I'm going to ask you what it is.

> **O you who believe! Let not one folk ridicule another folk; perhaps, they may be better than them. Nor let women ridicule other women; perhaps, they may be better than them.  And do not insult one another, and do not call each other by offensive nicknames.  It is an evil thing to be called by a lewd name after coming to faith. Those who do not turn in repentance to Allah, they are repressors of themselves and others.**

Finally, Allah says in Surah al-Saaf:

> **Truly, Allah loves those who fight in His way in ranks as though they were a solid structure.**

Any idea what the topic is today? (I hear love and community and caring for each other).  You're close. Certainly, one of the core aims of Qur'an is to establish a just and equitable social order, as we have been talking about.  And each individual in society, working through its institutions, has a role to play in this process.  We can only understand the potential to be good people individually, Allah is telling us, if we work together collectively, and if we create the circumstances and conditions that support and promote and encourage well being and betterment for everyone.  So Allah tells us there shouldn't be any tension between people, between the individual and their society, since both should share a common goal.  It sounds reasonable, until you look around the world.

The basic proposition in Al Qur'an is that not any of us can be an island unto ourselves.  You can imagine living on a desert island, but it's not a realistic model on how groups can live unless there are an awful lot of desert islands.  The fact is we exist in social intercourse with one another, our family, our neighbors, our

community, our country.  All of our memories about our school life and our work
place, or *masajid,* churches, synagogues and temples, associations, clubs, schools we
have joined and attended, and the friends we find there, these places are full of
people.  You have some relationship with them.  The real issue, since we are forced
to be with other people, is how do we make the best possible world for ourselves in
relationship to other people? What that does is help us to understand that what is
required of us is to do good by others, so that there is a chance they may be fair to
us.

As we've already talked about over the last few *durūs*, there are many aspects of a
community and society, pluralism and diversity, political and economic differences.
One thing we can be assured of is you can't get away from other people.  You can
avoid specific people, but not all of them.  We have to learn how to deal rightly,
justly, equitably, and with dignity and respect, because this is the essential goodness
and righteousness Allah Swt expects from us.   In fact, it's probably the greater outer
form of worship/*ibada*, not just putting one's head down on the ground or following
certain rituals, but how one gets along with others.

Of course, in the Qur'an we use the word "*ummah*" for this community of people, and
of course this word is misunderstood if not abused in the world we live in today.
For people who are extremists, it is some kind of monolithic entity ruled by the
*khalifa*.  Some Muslims say you can't trust even the Muslims of one nation against
another nation.  They don't understand what the *ummah* is.  The *ummah* is not a
group of people; it is a moral and ethical principle and concept.  Allah says in Qur'an:

> **There is no secret conversation between three people where He is not
> the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth; nor between less
> or more than that, that He is not with them, whoever they may be.**

So whether you are a Christian and you think Jesus is present, and the Church is the Body of Christ, or a Muslim and you think Allah Swt is present, the essential moral and ethical cement that holds everything together is Allah / God. Whether it's Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or any religion, they all agree that the experience of Allah Swt is to be found in how we interact with one another and have relationships, in the connection between people, and how people become a community of believers.

Perhaps the most important implication of this *ummah* is not that Muslims are a global community, but that Muslims should be defined by *how* they became a global community in relationship to each other and other communities.  The *ummah* exists through the efforts we make through our minds and actions to live up to and live out moral concepts and principles of Islam found in Qur'an.  The *ummah* is not just a single cultural entity as we know.  It has many nations, tribes, colors, and tongues, and two genders.  What unites this *ummah* is a common moral, ethical, spiritual purpose. If it is lacking, no matter how you define the *ummah*, it won't be a true *ummah*.

This community doesn't follow the lead of any one group, Allah tells us.  "*The Arab is not better than the non-Arab, nor the black better than the white, or the brown better than the non-brown.*"  Nor is it going to be led by the Salafi, the Wahabi, the Iqwa Muslimin, the Hizbul Tahrir, or any one group.  But the true *ummah* seeks to achieve the moral and ethical ends through and within the diversity of all those different groups. As a concept and as a practice in action and thought, it should be an affirmation of the diversity within that unity. There may be many ways to achieve the goals, so long as the means and the ends are consistent with the moral guidance of the Prophet Mohammed (sal) and the Qur'an.  No one way is better than another; though given the time and place, one way may be more effective than another.

As a practice, the *ummah* exists as far as Muslims follow the Qur'an.  Muslims have already seen and are described as the middle community, which I read to you today, the balanced *ummah*.  By following the laws of equity and establishing justice, dignity, and compassion for all, [Muslims are] to become the best *ummah* singled out by Allah.  Or [the ummah is described as] a community that means the believers are brothers and sisters (as I read to you at the beginning). Or that the believing men and women are friends and allies to one another (as I read to you at the beginning). Collectively, they are like a building reinforced by brick or lead.  Individually, members in the community have responsibilities.  Some are mentioned.  One group may be better than another, and no one, man or woman, should jeer at another.  Do not speak ill of one another.  Do not use offensive names to one another.

The best individuals in the *ummah* are those who are the most pious and fearing and who have *taqwa*.  It is this concept of *taqwa* that really relates to the society. Most Muslims perhaps think that *taqwa* is acquired through prayer and devotion, or reading the Qur'an and engaging in extra worship in the middle of the night. But *taqwa* has other dimensions:  it is about strengthening our relationship with Allah. It must also manifest itself through our human relationships, not just our prayerful relationship with Allah, but our relationship with all of Allah's creations.  As we struggle and strive as individuals to appreciate the attributes and qualities of Allah Swt, so too we have to try in our own limited ways to reflect those qualities to everyone, which is what Allah Swt created us to do.

This *taqwa* is a sign of how you treat those who are less fortunate, how you love and care for others, how you display humility and respect, how you interact with the environment, how you participate in physically and ethically building moral and dynamic communities.  It's not something that you acquire;  it's not something you

can sell. It's something that is inside of us that can be recognized and brought forth in the community of believers.  The power of the community is not just a group of people, but also brings out in people their righteousness and goodness, and challenges us.  Whether it's the social activities that blind Muslims together, what makes a good *ummah* is *maruf* and *munkar* – that it enjoins good, and forbids evil. Of course, this is a very difficult injunction and used often for not such good reasons. Many people who are self-appointed moralists, who will look over everybody's every move from an Islamic point of view, use that quote a lot.  But it is not a gift to the oppressors or the tyrants or the opinionated.  We don't need the moral police harassing people for supposed moral shortcomings, whether in Saudi Arabia or Iran or anywhere.

The injunction has a principle; and the principle of 'doing good' and 'preventing bad' is that both individuals and society work in harmony to promote virtue, to cling firmly together to the rope of Allah – together. That means we have to focus not only on individual acts of goodness, but work in such a way that we can try to ensure that the institutions in the organizations of society are created for the purpose of giving everyone the best opportunity and the best service.  'Doing good' is not just hiring people to keep them in jobs.  [It is to] not give them over to nepotism and corruption, but to fulfill individual's purposes and potentials, helping individuals flourish in those institutions, because those institutions encourage right behavior, right action, and righteousness.

It's really about building an edifice of peace and tolerance, and insisting upon and demanding good governance. All the necessary to build *taqwa* in a society are found in this mentality.  It is to be reasonable, to make informed choices about society, about laws, about policy, about science, about art, everything, technology, to deal with the ethical questions, and also to include participation for everyone in that

society in some way.  No individual or group can attribute absolute power to themselves to determine the affairs of other members of the community, but the affairs of the community should be determined by mutual consultation. This is the way of the Prophet (sal), and the way a Muslim community should act, unifying all these efforts, recognizing that both the individual and the community are accountable before Allah.  Allah will judge what individuals will do within the community, and how the community itself behaves as a collective.

The most basic social unit in which the Qur'an focuses its attention is the family. The family it envisions is not a nuclear family consisting only of the husband, wife, and children. It also includes the parents, grandparents, all the cousins, and even extends to the neighbors and friends. **"Be good to your parents, your relatives, your orphans, and to the neighbors near and far,"** Allah said. Again and again Qur'an asks the believers to be kind to their parents, and look after them in their old age.  Mothers in particular are singled out. Living with other people requires that we respect their individuality and freedom to be themselves, so we are required to respect each other's privacy.  This injunction is given in a very specific form, where believers are asked not to enter other people's houses until you have asked permission to do so.  But entering a house should be an example of principle, not violating the privacy of others.  It's not about just entering a house; it's not to violate privacy.

Muslims are instructed not to annoy, slander, or defame one another.  Those who undeservedly insult believing men and women, we are told, have committed a flagrant sin. When the believers hear a lie, they should think well of their own people and declare, 'This is obviously a lie."  This is what the Qur'an emphasizes: mutual trust, family, individual responsibility, *taqwa*, and community building to

avoid what it calls *fitna*.  The believers support one another because if they don't, there will be persecution in the land, oppression, greater corruption.

*Fitna* has a lot of different meanings to it, including temptation and sedition, persecution, treachery, dissension, and corruption.  We all have a responsibility working to ensure that this *fitna* does not occur in our society, in our family, in our community.  Where *fitna* exists, it inevitably will undermine the moral and ethical basis of society and lead it toward its own destruction.  That includes destroying the physical environment, not just some kind of internal destruction.  How we live together is not only a measure of our humanity, but a measure of our *iman*/ faith, and our consciousness of Allah.  Finding the right balance between "myself" and the common brotherhood/sisterhood is a way we can preserve our life, our standards, and the guidance of Qur'an.

The Qur'an argues that an egalitarian society based on mutual trust where an individual and the community work hand in hand for the same goals is the best way. We do that here internally, and we do that intentionally externally.  This is a warning  as well as an admonition and a reflection.  If you don't participate, for whatever good reason, you don't benefit.  Worse than that, you help to undermine the community itself.  When making decisions, as tempting as X may be, you may not have the ability to do X if you undermine Y.  That holds for all of us, children and adults. It's never too late to reflect upon choices, availability, and opportunity.

We live in a time where this idea of individualism has become a religion, to the point where children themselves feel that they can speak ill or go against or be curt with their own family and parents, whose only existence is for their benefit and their good.  Hopefully, by the time of their late teens, they learn how silly and unnecessary that is.  Hopefully, they begin to realize that though you may find

something in your parents that annoys you in the way they talk to you, or look at you, or make you do things, you never question their love.  And you begin to realize that the world is filled with many, many different types of people.

On the complete other hand, there can be such synergy within families that such questions never arise.  It is not usual, but it can be.  Because we live in a time of rampant individualism, it's like in the mother's milk.  We find people an impediment to the realization of our own personal desires.  "Everybody's in my way.  Everybody's keeping me from doing what I want to do." This is a very recent way of thinking. The distinction between the rich and the poor, the gap between the wealthy and the rest of the people, becomes even more extreme.  Envy, jealousy pushes that same individualistic kind of mentality: "Trying to get the best that I can for myself."

At the center and core of social and political life there is ongoing disagreement about individual and collective services and principles.  What do you sustain, and what do you nurture?   How do you sustain it, and what do you nurture it with?  The truth is whatever stands between human beings and their communication is an impediment (brings out his smart phone).  Just because it becomes part of our life, our day, and our way of gaining information and knowledge,    and replaces communication, we are undermining the foundation of our community and our society.

The Qur'an tells us that we all have a responsibility to contribute to the basic services for everyone.  We have an obligation to make individual contributions if we have the means to provide for those in need, whether in *zakat* or as *thawab*.  The core of the argument should be shifted to how we find the proper balance and move toward eradicating need, rather than debating individual rights that would release

those with all the wealth from a state of obligation to their fellow citizens, which of course is at the core of a lot of the arguments going on today in Washington and other parts of the world. It is not just the word "greed" or the word "inequity;" it is the principle by which you live. The children are not too young to listen and think about this, and the adults are not too old to change.

This is the core of community and *ummah*, from an Islamic / Sufic, moral, ethical, Christian, Judaic point of view. You can't run away from it just by changing the name of your religion. You can't run away from it by becoming an agnostic or an atheist, because you are still going to be among people; and what's going to be expected is some sense of collective responsibility, and some actions that reflect it, whether it's in the home taking some responsibility, or in the greater society and community, and taking responsibility and coming forward. This is the core of the *ummah*.

Know that though this is an Islamic message, it is a message for all humanity and has been given by all the prophets. It's been given by all the good people. This is not a message of Sartrean existentialism where all people are "hell." This is the reality of life; we have the responsibility to address it and discuss it with one another, and to come to the skills where we can discuss things with people who don't hear what we are saying, who we don't agree with, or we think they don't hear what we're saying – even the "Venus – Mars" stuff, perception. *Asalaamu aleikum.*